

Chapter 3 Canceled Her Allowance

Willow's poise and elegance had been built with money and resources.

In contrast, Lauren had nothing.

The Bennett family neither gave her much love nor much money, yet they still blamed her for not being poised and elegant enough.

Even now, she didn't understand why they had brought her back.

Her only purpose in this family was to make Willow, the adopted daughter, seem more beloved.

There was a saying, "Those who are unloved are the outsiders." It fit her unexpectedly well.

Back then, their unfairness had made her sad. Now, she no longer cared.

She scanned the storage room. The only clothing she had to change into was her old blue-and-white high school uniform.

Five years ago, she had received an acceptance letter from Northcrest University, the top institution in Corwynale.

Yet, the Bennett family had only thrown a grand celebration for Willow's college entrance.

That banquet had gathered every elite figure in Hoverdale.

Eighteen-year-old Willow had stood in the center of it all, draped in a custom-made gown worth millions, wearing a diamond-studded crown, basking in the spotlight like a princess between her adoptive parents.

Meanwhile, Lauren had looked shabby and out of place, an ugly duckling among swans. Under the gaze of the entire crowd, she had been taken away by the police, spending the next five years in prison, losing the college life that should have been hers.

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Five minutes later, dressed in her uniform, Lauren headed toward the banquet hall of the Bennett Residence.

On the way, passing servants cast curious glances at her.

"Who's that? Why is she here in a high school uniform?"

"She's probably one of the hotel staff brought in for the event. Looks like a student working a summer job."

"Mr. David and Madam Alice treat Ms. Willow so well. They even invited the top chef from Lavette Grand Hotel just for her celebration."

"Exactly."

As one servant walked past Lauren, they didn't forget to remind her, "The banquet is about to begin. Go change into the standard uniform. You must be careful while serving. Tonight's guests are all important figures in Hoverdale."

With that, the servant left.

Lauren stood there, suddenly losing the desire to go to the banquet hall.

Elliot had told her that her parents had prepared a welcome banquet for her. But he hadn't mentioned that they had invited outsiders.

Being released from prison was nothing to celebrate.

*Did they really need to make such a spectacle out of it?*

Five years ago, she had been taken away in handcuffs in front of all of Hoverdale's elites.

Now, they wanted to gather those same people and publicly celebrate the return of a convict.

To her, this wasn't a welcome. It was a public humiliation, stripping away every last shred of dignity she had left.

A mix of bitterness and anger surged within her. She didn't want to stay here any longer.

She turned to leave.

But just then, Elliot appeared, his expression darkening the moment he saw what she was wearing.

He strode toward her, his voice sharp with irritation. "Didn't I tell you to change into a gown? Why did you come dressed like this? Do you have any idea what kind of occasion this is?"

Lauren opened her mouth to explain, but Elliot cut her off mercilessly.

"You looked like a mess when you got out of prison, and now that you're back, you want to put on a pitiful act in front of everyone? Do you want people to think the Bennett family has mistreated you? Lauren, your manipulative tricks are just as disgusting as ever. You're beyond saving."

As he spoke, he reached out to grab her, still cursing under his breath. "Go change. Stop embarrassing yourself!"

Lauren sidestepped him.

Elliot's hand caught nothing but air. His anger flared. "How dare you dodge me?"

Lauren lifted her gaze to meet his. He looked at her as if she were his worst enemy.

That look—disgusted, impatient, filled with contempt—she had endured it for three years in the Bennett family.

Every time their eyes met, it felt like invisible hands were tearing her heart apart. The tears she had once held back had only ever earned her a sneer of "stop acting."

Maybe she had gotten used to it.

Or maybe five years in prison had crushed her self-worth.

Now, even as she faced his deep-seated hatred, she felt nothing.

His opinions no longer had the power to affect her.

Lauren's expression remained calm, distant, unyielding. "I don't have a gown."

Elliot's fury grew. "If you don't have one, then buy one!"

Lauren took a deep breath. Elliot was too biased against her. No matter what she said, he wouldn't believe her.

She had tried explaining in the past.

But the more she explained, the more he accused her of lying. He had slandered her without restraint.

It was exhausting. She didn't want to explain anymore.

So she simply said, "I have no money."

Elliot's brows knitted together, his rage burning hotter. "For three years, you lived here without worrying about food or clothing. The company transfers 70,000 dollars to your account every month. Over three years, that totaled 2.5 million dollars. And you're telling me you couldn't afford a decent dress? You're doing this on purpose, trying to make people think our family mistreated you! Lauren, you can't be this selfish. We've already compensated you. Enough is enough. If you keep acting like this, it's just pathetic!"

Lauren had expected this. No matter what she said, she would never be believed.

She stared at him, unblinking.

For some reason, under her steady gaze, Elliot felt a brief pang of unease.

"What are you looking at me like that for? I didn't say anything wrong."

*He isn't wrong?*

Lauren let out a cold, silent laugh.

She hadn't wanted to make a scene.

But Elliot's aggressive accusations stirred something dark in her.

Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed people approaching.

Since they wanted a commotion, she would give them one.

She had already lost her dignity. She had nothing left to lose.

But Elliot, who cared so much about his reputation, couldn't handle being humiliated in public.

"I never received a single cent from your company. Not 70,000 dollars. Not even seven bucks. Mr. Elliot, if you want to accuse me, at least come up with a more believable lie."

Elliot's eyes darkened with even more disgust.

"You just won't give up, will you? Fine. Don't blame me for exposing you."

He pulled out his phone and called the company's finance department, putting the call on speaker.

"Check how much money the finance department has transferred to Lauren's account every month."

The person on the other end hesitated. "Lauren? You mean Ms. Bennett?"

"Yes."

"Mr. Elliot, if you're referring to Ms. Bennett, there's no need to check."

Elliot frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Well, we never transferred any money to Ms. Bennett's account."

Elliot froze.

"That's impossible," he said sharply.

*Lauren may not be well-liked, but she's still the daughter of the Bennett family. How could she not have an allowance?*

The night she was brought home, he had discussed it with his parents. To be fair, they had decided to give Lauren the same monthly allowance as Willow.

There was no way he had remembered it wrong.

"I personally gave the order."

"Mr. Elliot, you might not know this, but Madam Alice said that Ms. Bennett came from an orphanage and had poor judgment. She was afraid Ms. Bennett would fall in with the wrong crowd if she suddenly had that much money. Since Ms. Bennett was a high school student back then and had no major expenses, Madam Alice canceled her allowance."

Elliot's mind buzzed.

*No allowance... That means Lauren hasn't received a single penny in the entire three years she's lived with us.*

"Oh, and Madam Alice doubled Ms. Willow's allowance to 140,000 dollars a month. She was worried Ms. Willow would feel neglected, so the extra 70,000 dollars was meant to comfort her. You knew about that, right, Mr. Elliot?"

Elliot felt like someone had strangled him.

He had not known.