

Chapter 5 Her Birthday Party

Lauren's life had already been ruined, and only then did Elliot remember to care about her academics. How ironic. She had spent ten years studying desperately, hoping to change her fate. Just as her efforts were about to bear fruit, she found that they were ultimately no match for power. With a single, offhand remark, the Bennett family sealed her fate, effortlessly casting her into the deepest depths of hell.

She could have had a bright future. From childhood to adulthood, she never had the advantage of a powerful family background. The only thing she could rely on was her extraordinary dedication to her studies. Her dream was to get into Northcrest University, then pursue a master's degree and a doctorate. She wanted to become a professor, to stand at the podium and use her knowledge to change the fate of those who, like her, worked tirelessly to succeed. But reality had slapped her in the face. She did not become the person she had wanted to be. Instead, she became a despised criminal, forever marked by a stain on her record. A stain that would affect three generations. Thinking of this, Lauren clenched her fists so tightly that her nails dug deep into her palms, but she felt nothing. "Hoverdale First High School." Lauren's voice was soft, almost gentle. Yet the four words, "Hoverdale First High School," weighed like a thousand-pound boulder, making David, Alice, and Elliot feel as though they could hardly breathe. Because Hoverdale First High School had the highest admission standards in all of Hoverdale. Unlike Brightvale High School, a prestigious private school where admission was secured with money, Hoverdale First High School only recognized scores, not wealth. Even among top students, she had consistently ranked first in her grade year after year. With her grades, getting into Northcrest University had been a certainty. "That's impossible. You're lying." Elliot's emotions were on edge. "Hoverdale First High School is in the suburbs, more than 20 miles from home. Back then, you rode that old bike every day..."

Mid-sentence, Elliot suddenly realized something. The rest of his words got stuck in his throat. Watching the color drain from Elliot's face, Lauren's lips curled in mockery. "I'd rather ride a bike than go to school with Willow. We never even attended the same school. I never ate breakfast with you because morning classes at Hoverdale First High School started at six. I had to wake up at four to bike for two hours just to get there. I never came home for lunch because there wasn't enough time to bike back. I didn't have money for food, so I just drank more water to hold on until evening. By the time I finally got home, you had already eaten. All that was left for me was cold leftovers, and even then, you mocked me, saying I had a lowly fate, that I preferred eating scraps over hot food, that I devoured leftovers like a starving ghost..." "Laurie, I'm sorry." Alice's tears fell like broken pearls, her sobs heart-wrenching. "I didn't know you suffered so much. It's all my fault."

"There's nothing for you to apologize for." Lauren looked at Alice's tear-streaked face, her heart as calm as still water. "I wasn't raised by you. It's understandable that you feel nothing for me. I've long been used to this. A little more suffering wouldn't have made a difference. Don't you agree, Madam Alice?" Alice's sobs hitched.

Laurie, I'm begging you. You're stronger than Willow; you can endure hardship. You took care of yourself just fine in the orphanage, so I believe you'll manage in prison too. Please, take the fall for Willow. A five-year-old memory came surging back. Alice looked stricken, clutching her chest as if she were about to faint. Lauren watched coldly as Alice swayed unsteadily. Her heart was full of contempt.

The place where Willow had pushed Elaine down the stairs had surveillance cameras. But after the incident, Alice had immediately erased the footage that could have proven Lauren's innocence. That was why Lauren had been unable to defend herself in court. "Enough!" Elliot snapped at Lauren, his voice cold. "Stop being so bitter. We neglected you and that was our oversight. But do you really bear no responsibility at all? You were jealous that Willow had a better life than you, so you bullied her and took revenge on us. Your heart is twisted, and no one likes you. Instead of reflecting on yourself, you blame us first." "Elliot, don't speak to your sister that way." Alice sniffled. "Mom, you're still defending her? She's just taking advantage of our guilt, pushing her limits. Otherwise, she wouldn't have framed Willow by shoving Elaine down the stairs and making her a vegetable. We already sent her to prison for five years, but she still holds a grudge, making a scene in front of all these guests."

Alice felt a pang of guilt. She quickly looked at Lauren, only to find Lauren staring back at her with a faint, knowing smile. Her heart clenched. She looked away, ashamed. "Enough, let's stop this." David frowned, his tone authoritative. "Laurie, why didn't you tell us you were coming home? If we had known, your mom and I would have prepared a dress for you." Lauren froze. "You didn't know I was being released today?" "Of course not. If we had, I would have sent a driver to pick you up. Laurie, how did you get home?" Lauren turned to Elliot, her gaze piercingly cold. "I came in Mr. Elliot's car. He told me you had prepared a welcome-home party for me." "A welcome-home party? Isn't today Ms. Willow's birthday party?" "Yes, the invitation I received clearly says it's Ms. Willow's birthday. When did it turn into her welcome-home celebration?" "Are they seriously throwing a party for a criminal? That's absurd."

Whispers spread through the crowd. Elliot's face stiffened with embarrassment. He wanted to explain, but no words came out. Lauren felt a wave of self-mockery. The joke was on her. David and Alice had remembered Willow's birthday but had completely forgotten her release date. As for the so-called welcome-home party Elliot mentioned, it was nothing more than a side note to Willow's grand celebration. A bitter ache spread in her heart. *What had I even been expecting?* Lauren no longer wished to play along with the Bennett family's pretense. She turned and left. Suddenly, a figure in white rushed toward her. Lauren tried to dodge, but with her limp, she couldn't move fast enough. *Bang!* The impact sent her crashing to the ground. A sharp pain shot through her elbow and leg. She furrowed her brows. Her already pale face turned even whiter. By the time she managed to suppress the pain and looked up, she saw David, Alice, and Elliot gathered around a girl in a custom-made white feather gown, fussing over her with concern. "Willow, are you okay? Does it hurt? Are you injured?" The girl's eyes brimmed with tears, her nose and cheeks tinged red, looking pitiful. "Dad, Mom, Elliot... it hurts..." Immediately, the Bennett family panicked and rushed to check on her. "Willow, where does it hurt? Did Lauren hurt you?" Without thinking, Elliot turned and shouted at Lauren, "Do you not watch where you're going?"