

Chapter 8 I Would Rather Die Out There

At the Bennett residence garage, Elliot sat in the car, reviewing the dashcam footage.

During the fifteen-minute drive home from the prison, Lauren had kept her hands on her lap, her body pressed against the car window, maintaining that posture the entire way. She hadn't even glanced at her dress, let alone touched it.

He thought of how they had framed her, how she had faced them with a cold, unyielding expression. A heavy pressure weighed on Elliot's chest, nearly drowning him in guilt and self-reproach.

His gaze was vacant as he stared ahead, his mind repeatedly replaying the look in Lauren's indifferent and resolute gaze.

In his memory, she had always been someone who loved to smile.

Every time he came home, she would greet him warmly, calling his name, bustling around to pour him coffee and serve him, saying, "Elliot, you must be tired from work."

But now, it was as if she had become a completely different person.

A headache pulsed behind his temples. Elliot closed his eyes and leaned back against the leather seat, exhausted.

He had no idea how much time had passed when a gentle voice suddenly drifted from afar.

"Marilyn, no need to walk me out. You should head back."

"Ms. Bennett, please be careful. Call me if you run into trouble."

Elliot's eyes snapped open. He immediately saw Lauren and Marilyn standing in front of the gate.

The two of them exchanged a few more words before Lauren turned to leave.

Seeing this, Elliot quickly got out of the car and shouted, "Lauren, where are you going?"

His voice exploded like thunder in the quiet courtyard. Marilyn shuddered in fright. "Mr. Elliot? Why are you here? Weren't you..."

Elliot shot her a cold glance, silencing her instantly. Then, he turned back to Lauren and ordered in a frosty tone,

"Lauren, stop right there."

But Lauren acted as if she hadn't heard him. She limped forward, step by step.

Her complete disregard made Elliot's heart tighten. A single thought surged into his mind, *Lauren is leaving the Bennett family.*

Panic seized him. He strode forward with long, urgent steps and grabbed her arm. "Are you deaf? I told you to stop, didn't you hear me?"

Lauren turned back, her expression shifting the moment she saw him.

She really hadn't heard him.

In her first year in prison, her left ear had gone completely deaf from repeated beatings. After enduring countless slaps over the years, even her right ear's hearing had deteriorated.

If someone wasn't speaking directly to her at close range, she could barely hear anything.

Lauren averted her gaze and stubbornly tried to pull her arm free. "Let go of me."

Seeing her so defiant, Elliot's guilt was instantly replaced by a nameless fury. "Are you done yet? Today is Willow's birthday. Wasn't the scene you caused at the party enough? Now you want to run away from home too? Why are you so unreasonable?"

With that, he ignored her resistance and forcefully dragged her back. "Come home with me. Now!"

His grip was like an iron vice, tightening by the second. Lauren felt a sharp, searing pain in her arm, as if her bones were about to snap.

Her chest swelled with grievance, her eyes welling with tears. She choked out, "I'm not going back. Let me go."

Her body swayed under his forceful tugging. Each step was a struggle. Her injured leg trembled, unable to bear the strain.

Marilyn, flustered, pleaded from the side, "Mr. Elliot, please, be gentle! Ms. Bennett is still hurt!"

Elliot flinched, a flicker of pain flashing through his eyes. His grip loosened slightly, but he still didn't let go.

He looked at Lauren, his brows furrowed. "Come home with me."

Lauren clenched her jaw and spat out, "I'd rather die out there than stay in your house."

Her defiance sent Elliot into a full-blown rage. His reason was swallowed by his fury.

In his anger, he kicked Lauren's leg. "Are you coming back or not?"

He had only intended to give her a small punishment.

But he never expected Lauren to let out a pained scream and collapse heavily onto the ground.

She clutched her injured leg with both hands, her body curling into a tight ball. Her face was as pale as a sheet, cold sweat pouring down her forehead. Tears gushed from her eyes like a broken dam. She could only let out agonized whimpers, unable to say a single word.

Watching her writhe in pain, Elliot felt a sharp, twisting ache in his chest. His voice wavered. "I barely kicked you... Stop acting pitiful."

But there was an unmistakable tremor and guilt in his tone.

Marilyn gasped in horror and crouched down. "Ms. Bennett! Ms. Bennett, are you okay?"

The bone-deep pain pulled Lauren back to three years ago, her second year in prison.

She no longer remembered what she had done to deserve the beating, but she could never forget the way those women had raised thick wooden clubs high above their heads and brought them down mercilessly onto her legs, their faces twisted with cruelty.

She had cried, begging for mercy. But they had continued their assault with manic fervor, breaking six clubs the thickness of a forearm before they finally stopped, only after they had shattered her leg.

The leader had yanked her hair and sneered, "Don't even think about complaining to the guards. Let me tell you something. You pissed off the wrong person. Someone wants us to take good care of you."

Lauren's eyes lost focus. Her body trembled violently, and she kept mumbling, "I was wrong. Please, I was wrong... Please..."

Her voice was filled with terror and despair, like a wounded animal whimpering in helpless agony.

Marilyn sobbed, panic-stricken. "Ms. Bennett, what's wrong?"

"It hurts... It hurts so much."

Those simple words stabbed into Elliot's chest like daggers. "I didn't use that much force. Why does it hurt?"

Marilyn ignored him and carefully rolled up Lauren's pant leg.

In an instant, the sight before them was unbearable.

Lauren's lower leg was grotesquely deformed. What had once been a straight bone was now twisted at an unnatural angle. Her skin was riddled with scars, some fresh and inflamed, others long healed but leaving behind ghastly marks. Years of torment had left her muscles atrophied, making her leg appear thin and frail, like a withered branch compared to a normal one.

Elliot's gaze was fixed on Lauren's mangled leg.

He stood frozen in place, as if he had been struck by a spell. His mind went blank, his entire body engulfed in a dizzying wave of shock.

"How... How did this happen?" His voice was barely a whisper. "She was fine before she went to prison. It's only been five years... How did she end up like this?"

As the realization sank in, words failed him.

It was a prison. A place for criminals.

Eighteen-year-old Lauren had been thrown into that hellhole. She couldn't possibly have lived well.

His heart shattered, piece by piece. His vision blurred with red.

Clenching his teeth, he swallowed the pain and rushed forward, sweeping Lauren into his arms. Without hesitation, he bolted toward the villa.

His footsteps were frantic, desperate.

But the moment he stepped into the living room, he suddenly froze.

He didn't even know where Lauren's room was.

He had paid so little attention to his own sister all these years.

Elliot closed his eyes for a brief moment. "Marilyn, where is Laurie's room?"

"Mr. Elliot, this way." Marilyn quickly led him forward.

Elliot followed closely behind her, but the further they walked, the deeper his frown became.

He had never realized there was such a remote corner in their home.

When Marilyn finally pushed open the door, what greeted Elliot was a narrow, damp, dimly lit storage room, packed with clutter and completely devoid of windows.

His pupils dilated in shock, his face filled with disbelief.

"Laurie lived here?"