

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator

Chapter 1

For years, Elissa Drummond had been Frank Atwater's little shadow.

At twenty-one, she finally got her wish and married him.

The reason was simple: Elissa was obedient, sensible, and always knew her place.

She could get his family off his back about settling down.

And, when the time came, she'd know how to step aside for the woman he truly loved.

Three years into their marriage, Elissa had played the role of the perfect, understanding wife to perfection.

Until the night Frank's older brother died unexpectedly, and Frank—her ever self-controlled, dignified husband—shielded his sister-in-law from the family's rage and took a slap meant for her. That night, Elissa realized her part in this marriage had come to its final act: it was time to make space.

The man she'd blocked for three years suddenly called her.

"When are you coming back?"

Elissa ignored the question. Instead, she messaged her lawyer friend, asking her to draw up divorce papers as soon as possible.

When the call ended, it was nearly three in the morning. Elissa sat in her car, staring out at the lights still blazing in Atwater Manor.

From the hospital to the old estate, the Atwater family's grief over losing their eldest son had only one target for their anger.

-Marcia Carson.

And Frank, her husband, who had spent three years acting the dignified gentleman, had never *once* stopped protecting his sister-in-law.

The red mark from the slap at the hospital stood out sharply against his handsome face.

Everyone present had been shocked by his actions.

Everyone except Elissa. She hadn't been surprised in the slightest.

Three days earlier, on their wedding anniversary, Elissa had planned a surprise for Frank. She'd caught a last-minute flight to the city where he was on business. But when she arrived, she overheard him talking with two of his friends.

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"Frank, man, you can't just disappear every year on your anniversary. Seriously, you don't think you owe little Elissa better than that?"

Frank, usually so poised and gentle, sounded almost weary. "You think I want to? If I didn't, she'd never believe I haven't touched her all these years."

"Who-"

His friend, indignant on Elissa's behalf, suddenly caught on. His tone turned sharp, mocking. "You mean Marcia? Frank, you're out of your mind. What if Marcia's pregnant with her second kid and you're still hung up on her?"

He changed tack. "And aren't you worried about Rowan coming after you for treating Elissa like this?"

"He won't," Frank replied, rubbing his fingers together. "He and Elissa haven't spoken since our wedding. She blocked him everywhere three years ago."

Outside the private room, Elissa walked away calmly, though her fingers trembled imperceptibly at her side.

She'd always known Frank had someone else in his heart.

She'd tried to find out who, asking everyone she could, but no one ever told her.

She'd imagined all sorts of possibilities.

Never-never-had she considered it might be Marcia.

The same Marcia she'd called "sister" for three years.

It was humiliating beyond words.

When Elissa left the club, a torrential rain was falling. She didn't even feel it, letting herself get soaked to the skin.

That night, she caught a red-eye back to Vistapeak City.

She fell ill the moment she got home.

Feverish for two days straight, she'd only just recovered when the news came: Frank's brother, Spencer Atwater, had died in an accident.

Seven days later, Spencer's funeral was held in Vistapeak City.

Exhausted from sleepless nights at the manor, Elissa felt like a ghost trailing her own body as she left the cemetery after the service.

The driver waited by the gate.

Elissa got in and closed her eyes. “Ridge, let’s go home.”

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“Not back to the manor?”

“No.”

The funeral was over, but the Atwater family drama was far from finished.

Spencer had been the eldest son and the family’s golden boy since childhood.

His death was sudden—a skydiving accident. Marcia had convinced him to go, the equipment malfunctioned, and he fell to his death.

By the time they got him to the hospital, there was nothing to be done.

Just the grim business of stitching up the body.

The family's anger toward Marcia was still simmering.

Elissa had no desire *to* watch her husband defend another woman anymore. She had her own affairs to settle.

But as soon as the car started, the back door was yanked open.

Frank climbed in, dressed in a bespoke black suit. He looked tense, his striking features drawn and troubled. "Elissa, are you heading home?"

"Yeah."

No sooner had she answered than she noticed Marcia beside him, holding the hand of a small boy.

Marcia's son with Spencer-Hickey Atwater-just four years old, chubby-cheeked and

solemn.

Elissa wasn't sure what Frank was getting at, until Hickey scrambled into the car, all arms and legs, and announced, "Aunt Elissa, can you take me and Mommy home with you?"

Elissa frowned slightly, glancing at Frank for confirmation.

He pressed his lips together. "My parents are still furious. Let Marcia and Hickey stay with us for a while."

He seemed worried she'd say no, so he added, "Didn't you say you wanted kids? Think of this as practice-taking care of Hickey."

Elissa almost laughed out loud.

But this wasn't the time or place for laughter.

So Frank would send Marcia and her son home with her, while he returned alone to face the family's wrath.

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Responsible, in his own way.

Back at the house, it was clear Frank had called ahead. Edna, the housekeeper, had already prepared a guest room.

Elissa couldn't have been more relieved. After a quick shower, she collapsed into bed and slept like the dead.

When she woke again, it was nine at night.

No sooner had she picked up her phone than her best friend called.

"I've drafted the divorce agreement like you asked. Want me to send it over?"

“Thanks, Tanya.”

Elissa’s voice was soft from sleep. “No need to send it. Just call a courier.”

“You’re really in a hurry—are you sure about this?”

Tanya Foster had handled too many divorces not to worry this was just a moment of anger. “Frank might not be a good husband, but in some ways-”

Elissa turned on the light and sat up, her mind clearer than ever. “I’m sure, Tanya. He jerks off to pictures of other women.”

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A sharp buzzing filled Tanya Foster’s mind.

She never expected Elissa—usually so reserved—to spit out those words.

But what shocked her even more was Frank. That scumbag had found a whole new way

to humiliate someone.

Tanya muttered a curse under her breath. “Forget the courier—I’ll bring it to you myself. I’ll drop it off and head straight back to work.”

There was no way a bike courier could outrun her car.

After she hung up, Elissa was stunned at her own bluntness. Maybe that anger had just been stuck in her chest for too long, making everything inside her feel jammed and suffocating.

It was just like that night at the club, when Frank told her—calm as could be—that he’d never touched her. Who would believe it? Married three years, and still a virgin.

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At first, she wondered if something was wrong with him. But then she’d caught him—more than once—in his study, clutching a photo album and taking care of himself. The low, muffled sounds he made were like one slap after another across her face.

Once, when Frank realized she'd seen, he drew her into his arms, pressing his face into her neck, whispering, "Little Elissa, I'm sorry. I just can't bear the thought of hurting you. I can only... look at your pictures..."

The saddest part? She'd believed him. She'd even blushed.

But the night she rushed back to Vistapeak City, burning with fever, she forced herself upright, crept into his study, *and broke* open the locked cabinet.

She found the album.

Every page was Marcia, Lively, captivating, radiant Marcia. Every smile, every glance, Frank had cherished them all.

Elissa felt like the punchline to a cruel joke.

Drifting back in memory, she recalled following Frank around like a shadow—but really, it was just because her brother was always with him. Over time, she started to think marrying him would be wonderful. Frank had always been patient and gentle, the most considerate of all her brother's friends, never forgetting to bring her a little gift.

It was this perfect gentleman who would rather pleasure himself over photos of his sister-in-law than touch the wife who slept beside him.

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Elissa never imagined Tanya would arrive so quickly.

She'd barely finished washing up when the doorbell rang—Tanya's urgency made it seem like, if city hall hadn't already closed, she'd drag Elissa and Frank there to finalize the paperwork right then and there.

Elissa finally felt a bit of relief as she took the agreement in her hands, only for a sharp crash to echo from upstairs.

Before she could react, Edna hurried down, looking distressed and hesitating. "Ma'am..."

"What is it?"

"The family photo you kept in your bedroom... Hickey broke it."

Elissa thought it was only the frame. But when Edna handed her several torn pieces, she went pale.

She'd lost her parents in an accident when she was five. That photo was all she had left of them—her only real keepsake.

Clutching the shredded photograph, Elissa marched upstairs, her jaw set.

At that moment, Marcia stepped from Elissa's room, her son in her arms.

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Chapter 3

Elissa fixed her with a frosty stare. "This is my room, you know."

"Uncle Frank said this is my home now." Hickey, emboldened, puffed up his chest and shouted, "Uncle Frank also said he'll take care of me and Mom, just like a real dad!"-

Elissa glanced at Marcia, noting she had no intention of correcting her son. Suddenly, a cold smile tugged at her lips.

She crouched down to meet Hickey's eyes. "Do you know what Santa Claus will do to you this Christmas?"

The boy jutted out his chin. "He'll bring me lots of candy!"

"No, that's not right." Elissa shook her head, her smile chilling. "He's going to chop off the hands you used to tear up my photo, bake them in the oven, and feed them to the

Christmas monsters.'

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Hickey's mouth fell open.

He was still just a child. The threat hit its mark; he threw his arms around Marcia and

burst into tears.

Marcia's face hardened. She glared at Elissa, her voice low and sharp. "He's only a child. Was that really necessary?"

“If *you* can’t teach *your* own kid, what else do you know, besides flirting with danger for fun?” Elissa shot back, then turned on her heel and headed for her room.

Late that night, a black Maybach glided into the driveway.

Elissa stood at her window, watching as Frank stepped out of the car. Instantly, Hickey ran to him, Marcia at his side, clinging *to* his hand—like they were a picture-perfect family.

It was a long time before the front door finally opened with a soft click.

Frank strode into her room, sleeves rolled up, the top button of his shirt undone. His eyes were sharp. “Did you scare Hickey?”

“Yes,” Elissa replied coolly, nodding at the shredded photograph on her nightstand. “He tore up my family *photo*.”

Frank blinked, caught off guard. He realized he hadn’t bothered to get the full story.

He reached out, intending to ruffle her hair, but she dodged him, her face set. He took the hint, let his voice soften. “That was my mistake. I’ll apologize for Hickey. Is there anything

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I can do to make it up to you? Anything at all?”

Elissa’s lips curled in a faint smile. “Anything?”

Frank nodded, meaning it. “Of course.”

She didn’t hesitate. “Then I want these two things.” She handed him a pair of documents. she’d prepared in advance.

He glanced at the first—property papers—and signed his name without hesitation. The second, he flipped straight to the signature line and scrawled his name as well. When it came to money, Frank never quibbled.

Relieved, he let out a breath and pulled Elissa close, his arm slipping easily around her waist. “Little Elissa, how did your brother raise you to be so sweet and sensible?”

Elissa stiffened, discomfort prickling under her skin. She was about to push him away

when the half-closed door rattled with a knock.

Frank glanced over, immediately letting go and putting distance between them when he saw who it was.

Elissa froze for a heartbeat, then understood. Of course he'd keep his distance. He'd managed to go three years of marriage without ever sharing a bed with her, all to prove his loyalty to the woman he truly loved. Now that they all lived under one roof, he had to be extra careful.

Marcia's voice was weary. "Frankie, Hickey's fussing. He wants you to tuck him in."

"I'll be right there," Frank replied, then turned to Elissa. "You're not mad, are you?"

"No," she said, her tone light.

As soon as he was gone, Elissa pulled out the second document—a divorce agreement.

She really was sweet and sensible. She'd even prepared her own divorce papers and politely handed them to him herself.

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Chapter 4

The next morning, Elissa's internal clock woke her up before dawn. When she drew back the curtains, the world outside had vanished beneath a shroud of white. Not a word about snow in last night's forecast—yet here it was, the first snowfall of the year, thick and silent.

Even through the glass, she could feel the chill seeping in.-

She changed into a warm knit dress and was still brushing her teeth when a loud crash echoed down the hall. Another followed, then a torrent of clattering and banging. The racket was so intense, for a moment she wondered if a demolition crew had arrived by mistake.

“Elissa, what on earth is going on out there...” She twisted her hair into a messy bun, opened the bedroom door, and froze mid-sentence.

Demolition crew? Try a tornado. Or an invading army.

The house, normally spotless and orderly, had been turned upside down. A sofa cushion—one that belonged downstairs—was now outside her door, smeared with an ominous brown stain. The vase that once stood on the console table lay in shards on the floor. And the million-dollar oil painting that hung in the hallway? Slashed, defaced, ruined beyond repair.

It was almost impressive, in a horrifying way.

Edna, their housekeeper, was nearly in tears as she trailed after Hickey. “Please, darling, don’t touch that! That’s the lady’s favorite tea set—

Crash.

Too late. The china shattered across the tiles.

Hickey, the pint-sized tyrant, stuck out his tongue and huffed, “I’ll play with what I want! Uncle said this is my house now. You’re just the help, so who are you to boss me around?”

He looked up—and met Elissa’s icy gaze. Instinctively, he ducked his head.

That awful woman! She'd scared him so badly last night that he'd dreamed of being chased by Santa Claus and monsters all night long. He had to get rid of her. Mom said, as long as that woman left, Uncle would be theirs alone.

Elissa's voice was calm. "Go ahead, Hickey. Play all you want."

"Really?" He stared at her, suspicious.

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After all the things he'd broken—her favorite things, no less—she wasn't even angry?

Elissa leaned against the upstairs railing, glancing down at Marcia, who sat in the living room below pretending not to hear a thing. She smiled. "Of course. But leave the watercolor hanging in the sitting room alone. That one's my favorite."

Whether Marcia had put Hickey up to this or the brat thought it up himself, Elissa couldn't be sure. But it didn't matter.

She wasn't one to let things slide. Someone once taught her: if you're bullied, hit back

tenfold.

Hickey's eyes flashed. "Okay!"

He darted off, already plotting his next bit of mischief.

Edna watched him go, helpless. "You and Mr. Ethan both spoil that child far *too* much..."

"It's fine," Elissa assured her. "Let him be. He's the Atwater family's only grandson—his happiness comes first. Besides, Marcia never stops him, does she? We have to respect her parenting style. If anything goes wrong, neither you nor I could bear the blame."

Edna sighed. "You're too soft, that's your problem. Makes people think they can walk all over you."

Elissa only smiled. "Do we have any spare gift boxes in the house?"

"What kind?"

“Anything that’ll hold something the size of a sheet of paper.”.

“There *are* some in the storage room. I’ll fetch one for you.”

Once she had the box, Elissa locked herself in her room. She placed the signed divorce papers inside, then fussed over a ribbon, tying it into a perfect bow.

Suddenly, a violent crash thundered up from downstairs. Elissa didn’t so much as flinch. She just tightened the bow and nodded, pleased with her handiwork.

Beautiful. Absolutely perfect.

Moments later, someone pounded on her door. Edna sounded frantic. “Elissa, you need to come downstairs! That boy’s ruined Mr. Atwater’s last painting!”

Elissa shot to her feet, her face pale. “What did you say? The one in the sitting room?”

Edna nodded miserably.

Elissa hurried down the stairs, so fast she twisted her ankle on the last step.

Hickey stood by the wreckage, chin up, daring her to do something about it.

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She turned to Edna. "Did you call the main house?"

"Not yet."

"Then do it. Now."

The words were barely out when Hickey launched himself at her, screaming, "No! Don't you dare! You're not allowed to tattle, you witch!"

Caught off guard by the force of his little body, Elissa stumbled and fell hard, pain shooting up her spine.

"Elissa, are you hurt?" Marcia rushed over, helping her up with a pinched smile. "He's just a child. I've spoiled him, I know, but kids roughhouse. Don't take it to heart."

Elissa, holding her lower back, stared at the ruined painting—a gaping hole smashed through it. She gave a cold laugh. “So you think letting your son destroy other people’s property is just part of your parenting style?”

Marcia’s eyes filled with tears. “I just took my eyes off him for one moment, and now you’re blaming me for everything?”

“Oh, one moment?” Elissa looked around at the chaos. “So when, exactly, were you watching him? He’s only been up an hour and half the house is wrecked.”

“Elissa!” With nobody else around, Marcia dropped her sweet façade. “Do you have to make a scene over a stupid painting? You’re really going to call the family about this? Do you think Grandma will punish me over some worthless picture-”

“Correction,” Elissa cut in, her voice low. “That’s not just a picture. It was Mr. Atwater’s last painting before he died.”

As she finished speaking, a black sedan rolled into the driveway.

The family from the main house had arrived.

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Chapter 5

Marcia's face went rigid in an instant.

She stared out at the familiar car pulling up outside, panic welling up inside her.

Her carefully lined eyes shot daggers at Elissa. "You did this on purpose, didn't you? This was your plan all along, wasn't it?!"

"Sister-in-law, what are you talking about? I was just upstairs putting together a gift for Frank. How can you blame me for this..." Elissa's eyes shimmered with unshed tears, looking every bit the picture of wounded innocence.

It was obvious she felt deeply wronged.

Quentin, the Spencer family's butler, walked in just in time to witness the tense scene. His gaze swept over the living room, which was in complete disarray, and his frown deepened as he turned to Marcia.

“Mrs. Spencer, the matriarch asked me to deliver a message. Since she failed to properly guide her grandson, she’ll have to start with you instead.”

Marcia’s lips parted slightly. “What?”

Quentin gestured toward the door with polite firmness. “She asks that you go out to the courtyard and kneel for three hours.”

“Quentin-” Elissa started, but Quentin cut her off with gentle authority. “Mrs. Frank, there’s *no* need to plead. You’ve had a hard time with the funeral arrangements for the master recently. Please take care of your health.”

young

Elissa fell silent, but not because she’d been about to plead for Marcia. She’d only wanted to ask if the old lady’s health had improved—she needed to pick the right time to bring up

the divorce.

No matter who managed Atwater Group, the family’s private matters were always decided by the matriarch at the old estate.

So even if Marcia was seething inside, she had no choice but to step outside and kneel in the freezing cold.

Honestly, she deserved it.

Elissa didn't spare her so much as a glance as she turned to head upstairs.

Edna hesitated awkwardly. "Ma'am, what about that painting?"

"Don't worry about it," Elissa replied coolly. "Someone will come by to collect it. Once it's restored, it'll be brought back."

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She wasn't about to tell anyone that the painting hanging on the wall was a fake. The real one was safely displayed at a friend's gallery, untouched and pristine.

After all, the old man's biggest wish before he died was for his artwork to be seen by more people. Letting it gather dust at home would have been a waste.

Just as Elissa put her foot on the stairs, Hickey snapped, “You wicked woman!”

His voice shook with anger. “I already called my uncle. When he gets back, you’re finished!”

“I’ll be waiting,” Elissa answered evenly.

“He’s going to divorce you! You’ll be nothing but a washed-up castoff—nobody will ever want you!”

Elissa laughed softly. “He won’t listen to you.”

Frank and Marcia still needed her as their cover. The moment the marriage ended, the two of them—an unmarried man and a widowed woman—would be living under the same

roof.

Marcia’s reputation would be ruined for good.

Frank would never let that happen.

Frank returned far sooner than expected.

Marcia had barely been kneeling outside for twenty minutes when he arrived.

He strode up the walk, tall and imposing in a black wool coat, the picture of calm authority. The moment he stepped out of the car, he rushed to Marcia's side, scooping her up and carrying her straight into the house.

He set her gently on the couch and, without hesitation, began tending to her frostbitten knees, the worry in his eyes impossible *to* hide. "Are you out of your mind? You just do whatever you're told—even this?"

"Grandma gave the order. What choice did I have?" Marcia's fingers clung to his sleeve. Her eyes were red, her voice trembling. "Frankie, can't you please just divorce her? She's terrifying..."

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Chapter 6

Frank's brow furrowed slightly. "You mean Elissa?"

"That's right."

Marcia bit her lower lip. “Do you know why Hickey ruined Grandpa’s last painting? It was because she deliberately egged him on.”

“Mom’s right!” Hickey pouted, his lashes wet with tears. “Uncle, Aunt Elissa tried to scare me again today. She told me that a monster who’d eat my arm was hiding inside that painting. That’s why I-”

“That’s impossible.”

Frank cut him off, reaching out to ruffle Hickey’s hair with gentle affection. “Hickey, are you sure you didn’t mishear? Your Aunt Elissa is the kindest one in our family. She already told you last night she wasn’t mad at you anymore. She wouldn’t try to frighten you

again.”

“And besides, Grandpa adored her when he was alive. She’d never mess around with his paintings.”

He directed those last words at Marcia.

Marcia stared at him in disbelief. “Are you saying Hickey and I are making this slander her?”

up to

“Frank! You’ve changed so much!”

The accusation made something hot flare in Frank’s chest, but as he met her disappointed gaze, he forced himself to stay calm. “Marcia, I haven’t changed—not one bit.”

She fixed him with a cold look. “Can you honestly say you’ve never felt anything for Elissa? That you’ve never touched her, not even once?”

Frank had always believed he had a clear conscience before her. But faced with this question, the words caught in his throat.

His back stiffened, lashes lowered. “I haven’t touched her.”

If anyone owed Elissa an apology, it was him.

—“I haven’t touched her.”

Elissa was just coming downstairs, one hand pressed to her lower back, the other holding a gift box, when she heard those words—plain, unvarnished, with no room for doubt.

She gave a small, self-mocking smile, then kept walking. “Frank, tomorrow night is the

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Murphy family dinner. Grandma asked if you’re free to join us.”

Matriarch Paige Murphy, an old friend of Elissa’s late parents, had taken her in after they passed away. To outsiders, Elissa was practically one of the Murphys herself. Even after she married into the Atwater family, the Murphys maintained close business ties with them.

After her question, Frank—maybe still feeling guilty from earlier—agreed right away. “Sure. I’ll pick you up tomorrow and we’ll go together.”

“Okay.”

Elissa glanced at the gift box, then at the mother and son sitting beside Frank, and wisely held her tongue, heading for the door.

Tanya Foster had just won her big court case that day and wanted to take Elissa shopping to celebrate. But when she heard about Elissa’s limp, she switched plans—dinner only, no walking.

“Elissa.”

Frank spoke her name before he could stop himself. “What’s that you’re holding?”

She turned, lifting the box with a small shake. “A present.”

“A present? Is it someone’s birthday today?”

“It’s for our third wedding anniversary. I was going to give it to you.”

“Elissa, I’m sorry-”

“It’s fine. You’ve been busy, it’s normal to forget.”

She looked at him with that same clear, unwavering gaze as always, and handed him the box. Her voice was soft, almost gentle. “Anyway, your birthday’s in a couple of weeks. You can count it as an early gift.”

“Frank, happy birthday—early.”

And quietly, to herself: Here’s to me, too. Happy divorce.

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Tip: You can use left, right, A and D keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

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Frank took the gift box, and for a brief moment, it felt as if something had grazed his heart—so light and quick he could barely name the sensation.

It didn't hurt, exactly. Still, his breath caught in his chest.

The bow on the box was tied with meticulous care, every loop and tail perfectly in place.

It was obvious how much thought she'd poured into this gift—how long she must've spent preparing it.

And yet, he was nothing but a bastard, harboring selfish feelings he could never admit.

Before he could say anything, Elissa had already slipped into the entryway. She pulled on a pale beige wool coat and wrapped a scarf around her neck, hiding all but her striking, dark eyes behind its folds.

Then, she headed out the door.

Something about the way she walked seemed off.

Frank was just about to call after her when Marcia, beside him, sucked in a sharp breath through her teeth. “God, that hurts!”

He snapped back to the present, turning to help her sit down again. “Your knee acting up? Let me take you to the hospital.”

“I don’t want to go.”

Marcia pressed her lips together, glancing pointedly at the box in his hands. “And you claim you’re not falling for her. You’re treating that present like it’s made of gold.”

He fell silent, frowning. “Marcia, I already owe her more than I can ever repay.”

Her eyes widened, tears spilling freely down her cheeks. “And what about me, Frank? What am I to you? Are you just going to let her walk all over me and Hickey?”

“I told you, Elissa isn’t that kind of person.”

“Enough!” Marcia’s voice shook, raw with emotion. “Can’t you hear yourself? Every word out of your mouth is just you defending her!”

With that, Marcia stood, tears streaming, and pulled Hickey upstairs with her.

Frank stood there, stunned, then let out a weary sigh.

He didn’t even know what he was thinking anymore.

He only knew he couldn’t stand to hear a single bad word spoken about her.

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A thin, scattered snow had fallen for two days straight.

That morning, Elissa worked a shift at the Traditional *Medicine* Center; in the afternoon, a group of foreign doctors—drawn by her reputation—came *to* learn acupuncture from her mentor. When he was called away unexpectedly, he handed the responsibility over to

Elissa.

She finished work at five, hurried home to change, and took a few minutes to brush on a touch of makeup.

She had a natural beauty—bright eyes, perfect teeth—and even the smallest effort made her impossible to ignore.

As she came downstairs, she noticed the house was unusually quiet. Since she'd returned, the mother and son pair had been uncharacteristically well-behaved.

“Elissa.”

She had just pulled on her knee-high boots when she heard Marcia's voice behind her, honeyed with a mocking edge. “Tell me, do you think he'll choose you or me?”

Elissa paused, then smiled. “Sorry, Marcia, I'm not sure I follow.”

“Oh, don't play coy. Are you hoping for some scandalous love triangle in the Atwater family?”

“Marcia!” The accusation was so blatant it made Marcia grit her teeth in fury.

Unbothered, Elissa draped her cashmere cape over her shoulders and smiled. “I really *don’t* have time for this. Frank’s waiting for me.”

Following her gaze through the floor-to-ceiling windows, Marcia saw Frank’s car idling in the driveway.

The sight *made* her blood boil.

She’d agreed *to* let Frank marry that wretched woman only because she seemed meek and easy *to control*—now she’d turned into a rabbit with teeth, ready to bite at any

moment.

Elissa slipped into the car and glanced at Frank. “I didn’t keep you waiting, did I?”

“No, I just got here.” He squeezed her hand gently, then glanced down at her skirt—a flash of smooth, pale skin catching his eye.

He frowned. “Aren’t *you* cold, wearing so little?”

She just smiled, lips curving with mischief. “We’ll either be in the car or at the old house.

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There’s heating everywhere.”

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Chapter 8

During her shifts at the clinic, Elissa would tirelessly remind her patients to keep

themselves warm, repeating the advice as often as necessary. But when it came *to* her own health, she was far more indifferent.

Frank could only shake his head at her nonchalance. “What are *you* going *to do* if you catch a cold or a fever?”

“I’ll just take some medicine,” she replied breezily.

She knew from experience that a simple cold was easy enough to treat—a dose or two of medicine and she’d be mostly fine. It had always been that way *for* the past three years.

She certainly didn’t expect Frank to take care of her.

In fact, she didn’t expect anyone to.

Frank watched her dismiss her own wellbeing and felt a vague discomfort settle in his chest. “You make it sound like your husband doesn’t care about you at all.”

She paused, caught off guard. “Did you open the present I gave you yesterday?”

“Not yet,” he answered in his usual even tone. “It’s for my birthday, isn’t it? I figured I’d save it for then.”

“...Alright,” she murmured.

That actually gave her plenty of time to prepare.

They rarely had much to talk about, and after that, the car fell into silence.

Frank glanced over at Elissa, who simply gazed out of the window at the rush of traffic, *her* expression unreadable, her posture quietly reserved. She looked harmless, gentle

even.

He couldn't understand why Marcia disliked her so much.

Frank's lips twitched as he tried *to* think of something to say, but just then, his phone rang.

"Mr. Atwater, Ms. Carson has *gone* on a blind date," said the voice on the other end, calm and measured.

Elissa heard every word.

The air inside the car instantly grew tight and stifling. Elissa could feel the storm brewing inside Frank as he fought *to* restrain his anger.

He was always composed, rarely showing any trace of temper.

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“Send me the location,” he said, his voice cold and low.

After hanging up, Frank looked over at Elissa, his expression *once* again calm, but his words left no room for negotiation. “Elissa, something urgent has come up. I can’t go with you to the family dinner tonight.”

What urgent matter? Elissa didn’t bother to question him. There was *no* point in making herself look even more pitiful.

“I understand.”

She lowered her gaze. “Ridge, could you pull over up ahead?”

The car eased to a stop.

Frank didn't move. Elissa looked at him in confusion. "Frank, *you should* get going. We can't stay parked here."

"...Alright."

He hesitated for a moment, but seeing the softness in her expression, he found himself at a loss for words. So, he simply got out of the car.

11

The Murphy family's monthly dinner was nothing like the lively, harmonious gatherings of other old families.

Counting Frank, there were only five people. To put it mildly, the atmosphere was quiet—quiet enough to rival a wake. Honestly, it felt a lot like one.

As soon as Elissa stepped into the old house, the butler led her toward the dining room.

“Miss Elissa, the matriarch has been waiting for you since this morning. She’s been looking forward *to* your return.”

“Thank you,” Elissa replied softly, her hands unconsciously tightening in front of her.

Inside the *dining* room, Matriarch Paige Murphy sat at the head of the table. To her left sat her eldest and second daughters.

Elissa entered and greeted them one by one, following the family’s tradition.

“Grandmother. Aunt Margaret. Aunt Sylvia.”

The two aunts responded with lukewarm acknowledgment. Matriarch Paige, however, peered over Elissa’s shoulder and frowned deeply when she saw she was alone, the lines on her face etched sharply. “Where’s Frank?”

Elissa answered honestly. “He had an urgent matter come up and had to leave.”

The next moment, a furious shout rang out, accompanied by the sound of a teacup shattering on the table.

13:29

“Out! Kneel in the hallway!”

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator

Chapter 9

Elissa limped more severely as she left Murphy Manor.

For the past three years, as long as Frank didn't come home with her, the day always ended with the same brutal family punishment.

She wasn't surprised anymore.

Frank never realized that every time he tried to prove his love to the woman he truly cared about, he was only pushing Elissa further to the edge.

The Murphy family had no use for a woman who couldn't even hold her own husband's

heart.

Butler Murphy sighed. “Why do you always have to be so honest? You could have made up some excuse, told the matriarch a harsher story, and at least spared yourself this kind of beating.”

“Butler Murphy.”

Elissa’s delicate face was calm and obedient, showing not a trace of resentment. “Grandmother raised me. I could lie to anyone, but never to her.”

He sighed again.

Something genuine flickered in Butler Murphy’s kindly eyes as he glanced at her reddened palms, raw from the cane. “Don’t waste time—get yourself to the hospital, quickly.”

“All right.”

Elissa nodded, saying nothing more.

Ridge had been sent home hours ago.

Every step Elissa took was agony.

As a child, she'd always suspected her grandmother was the reincarnation of the Evil Queen from Snow White.

Old Mrs. Atwater would, at worst, make Marcia kneel in the garden for a while.

But the Murphy matriarch? She'd have the maids escort Elissa outside and force her to kneel on a gravel path,

At first, in this weather, the cold was almost bearable. The snow gave a bit of comfort, numbing her knees.

But as she knelt there, the snow melted, and all that was left were jagged stones digging mercilessly into her skin.

Once she was numb with cold, a servant would come out with a cane and strike her

palms.

That was the worst part—when her skin was frozen, every blow cut deeper, splitting flesh.

Murphy Manor stood on a mountainside road, surrounded by woods and water—beautiful, but isolated.

It took all of Elissa's effort to book a rideshare in the middle of the night, and with the snow coming down, the driver refused to come farther than the base of the hill.

Every step down that icy slope was torture.

Despite the winter cold, sweat dampened her back from the pain.

In the distance, a black stretch Bentley crept along the slick, snowy road.

The driver, sharp-eyed, sped up a little. “Sir, I think that’s Miss Elissa up ahead.”

In the back seat, a man lounged with his long legs crossed, his face chiseled and shadowed in the dim night. There was a cold, commanding aura about him.

He didn’t even open his eyes, only replied with a faint, “Mm.”

Impossible to tell what he was thinking.

The assistant in the front seat couldn’t hold back. “Sir, aren’t we going to do something for

Miss Elissa?”

“And you want to?”

The man’s low, resonant voice was edged with frost.

The assistant fell silent.

After a long pause, the man finally looked through the windshield, his eyes narrowing as he watched Elissa's staggering figure. "Find out where Frank is tonight."

"I already checked—he's probably with Marcia, all loved up."

The assistant's answer was quick, and he added, "Sir, Miss Elissa has likely been kneeling out there for hours. She's not going to last much longer."

Just as he finished speaking, they saw Elissa collapse face-first into the snow.

"See, I told you—"

Bang!

The car door slammed as the man got out, face cold and hard, striding over to scoop the unconscious girl into his cashmere coat.

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The assistant scrambled out, opened the back door. “Should we go to the hospital, sir?”

“Take her home first.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Have the doctor waiting.”

“Already called.”

The driver, sensing the tension, quietly turned the heat up.

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator

Chapter 10

The overhead lights cast a soft glow inside the car. When the man's gaze swept over her knees, something cold and sharp flickered in his dark eyes, but his voice remained as detached as ever. "You didn't hold back, did you?"

His assistant muttered, "When has Matriarch Paige Murphy ever gone easy on anyone..."

"Slate Murphy's coming back into the country soon, right?"

"Yes, sir."

"Get everything ready."

"To what extent?"

The man shot him a lazy glance, but his eyes were icy, his brows drawn in a way that made his temper clear. "What do you think?"

When Elissa woke, her body felt limp and drained of strength.

But she wasn't in pain, not really.

Her palms and knees, which should have been swollen and throbbing, hardly hurt at all. They just *looked* a little alarming.

Even her tailbone, *sore* for two days straight, felt lighter now, as if someone had taken the weight off.

Still, she shouldn't be *here*. That much she knew.

Elissa frowned, reaching for her phone *to* call the hotel front desk and figure out what had happened. As she moved, she caught the faintest trace of sandalwood clinging to her

skin.

For a moment, she felt disoriented.

When she came to, she forced a wry smile and grabbed a familiar tube of custom-made ointment from the nightstand. Without another glance back, she checked out and left.

At home, the atmosphere felt unusually harmonious.

It was as if all the friction from the past two days had sprung from her presence alone.

“Elissa, you’re back!”

Marcia beamed, her greeting dripping with sweetness.

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Obviously, Frank had done a stellar job of putting her in a good mood last night.

Elissa ignored her, not in the mood to play along.

Marcia, unwilling to let things go so easily, strode forward, tucking her hair behind her ear to show off a dazzling pair of pink diamond earrings.

Collector’s grade–rare pink diamonds.

Elissa had coveted that set of jewelry for ages.

After a long time circulating through private collections, it finally reappeared at auction, and Frank had promised he'd buy it for her.

He'd told her she looked best in pale pink, that it would suit her perfectly.

No doubt, he'd said the same to Marcia when he gave them to her.

Marcia didn't miss the flicker of disappointment on Elissa's face. Tilting her head, she smiled prettily. "Grandma used to say you know a thing or two about jewelry. Take a look for me—aren't these earrings gorgeous? Frankie spent over a million dollars on them.

Worth it?"

"They're alright."

Elissa forced a smile, swallowing the bitterness. "Oh, and just so you remember, Frank and I are still legally married. Half of that million is marital property."

"If I recall correctly, the exact amount was one point two million."

She tapped at her phone. “So, Marcia, please wire six hundred thousand to this account before midnight tonight. Otherwise, I’ll just have to explain it all to Grandma.”

No sooner had she said it than Marcia’s phone buzzed—a WhatsApp message. She

checked it. It was the bank account number.

She saw red.

That witch! Always using the old lady as leverage!

Six hundred thousand!

The Atwater family hadn’t even divided up the inheritance yet. With Spencer gone, her share barely added *up to* half a million!

Elissa couldn’t care less whether Marcia had the money.

After a shower, she started decluttering, sorting through her things and tossing out anything she didn't need. It would make leaving that much easier when the time came.

She grabbed the trash bin and dumped things in without hesitation. She'd never been one

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to waver.

She even packed up her wedding dress, asking Edna to help carry it downstairs to throw

out.

That's when Frank came home and walked in on the scene.

He noticed the crumpled mess of white tulle and satin in the trash bag, unease creeping across his face. "Why are you getting rid of your wedding dress?"

Elissa met his eyes without flinching, her voice calm. “Throwing it out.”

Useless things, after all, are meant to be thrown away.