

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator

Chapter 11

Hearing her calm, unremarkable voice, Frank felt a sharp pang in his chest, as if something had pricked his heart.

He frowned. “Why do you suddenly want to throw it out? *You* used to treasure that wedding dress.”

Elissa didn’t deny it.

For the past three years, she’d always made sure it had a special place in her closet, hanging in its own space. Every year, she’d send it out to be cleaned and cared for.

But she’d cherished it because she believed that, in life, you only get married once—so of course the dress should be kept as a memory.

Now, they were getting divorced. A

For all she knew, Frank would bring his new love home as soon as she was out the door.

That wedding dress, just like her, had become something unnecessary in this house.

Elissa forced a small smile. "It's ruined. I only just noticed—a big tear right down the side."

"That's still no reason to just toss it out."

Frank watched her try *to* smile, thinking she was reluctant to let go. "Look, I'll call the bridal shop and have someone pick it up. Maybe they can fix it—"

"No," she cut him off, shaking her head and meeting his eyes. "Some things, once broken, can't be repaired."

She wasn't talking about the dress.

She was talking about hearts. About this marriage.

Without waiting for Frank to answer, she turned and walked inside.

As he watched her limp up the steps, Frank finally remembered—he hurried after her. “Hey, are you still hurt? It’s been days; why are you still limping?”

There’s a saying about this: when you lose a child, the milk dries up.

That was how it was.

But she needed his guilt.

Elissa lowered her gaze and answered honestly, “It was almost healed. But last night, when I went back to the Murphy estate, I had to kneel out in the snow for four hours.”

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“What did you say?”

Frank stared at her, shocked. His eyes darted to her swollen, reddened hands, pupils narrowing. “Your hands—what happened to your hands?”

She blinked. "I was beaten."

Her tone was as flat and ordinary as if she were talking about someone else, not a hint of complaint.

He frowned deeper. "Why would you have to kneel that long, and-"

He couldn't finish the thought.

Elissa was supposed to be half a daughter to the Murphys. How could she come back from a visit looking like this?

She tilted her head up, meeting his gaze. For a split second, she remembered a much younger version of herself, full of hope and longing to marry him.

She really had wanted to grow old with Frank.

For a long moment, she said nothing, pushing down the ache in her chest. At last, under the weight of his questioning, she managed a smile. "Because you didn't come with me."

He swallowed hard, pushing back a wave of irritation. “Don’t try to laugh it off. Doesn’t it hurt?”

“It does.”

Elissa nodded. “But I’m used to it.”

“Used to it?”

“Yes.”

She pressed her palms together, her voice so calm it could have been about someone else’s pain. “Whenever you don’t come back with me, this is what happens.”

In truth, it was more than that.

For as long as she could remember, any little thing that displeased Frank’s grandmother

would end like this.

That spot in the garden paved with small stones—it had been designed just for her.

She'd only been living with the Murphys a year—six years old when she learned how to kneel just right to satisfy the old woman. Knees, shins, the tops of her feet—all had to line up, pressed perfectly against the sharp stones.

Frank crouched down and gently lifted the hem of her dress. Her knee was swollen and

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bruised, the skin discolored in ugly shades of purple and blue.

Her calves were no better—covered in welts and bruises.

The marks were all the more jarring against her pale, delicate skin.

Compared to Marcia's slightly reddened knees from a couple of days ago, this was a world apart.

Rage boiled up inside Frank. Without thinking, he swept her up and carried her to the sofa, his expression stormy. "Why didn't you call me when this happened?"

The Atwaters and the Murphys had once been equals.

But in recent years, after Rowan Murphy took over the family, his ruthless reforms had pulled them far ahead.

Still, Frank's wife was not someone to be bullied like this.

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Elissa's eyes were clear as glass, her voice feigning innocence. "Didn't *you* say there was something urgent when you left? I figured it must be important, so I didn't want to bother

you.”

Frank fell silent, caught off guard by her words.

For a split second, he wondered: if stopping Marcia from going on that date meant Elissa would get hurt like this, would he still have done it?

His hesitation was written all over his face as he glanced up, meeting her gentle, obedient expression.

A heaviness settled in his chest. He grabbed the first aid kit, and as he dabbed antiseptic on her wounds, he asked quietly, “Why didn’t you ever tell me about being hurt before?”

Elissa didn’t answer.

She had truly wanted to be Mrs. Frank Atwater, to make a good home with him. She’d believed—maybe naively—he’d make a good partner. In everyone’s eyes, the Murphy family was her family, after all. Who would complain to their husband about how terribly their own family treated them? She wasn’t that foolish, nor did she ever believe she was especially cherished by Frank.

She'd always known he didn't really love her. Only recently had she realized he never loved her at all.

But she'd never planned to live her life relying on anyone's affection.

Her hands rested on her knees, picking absently at her fingertips. Her voice was quiet, almost apologetic. "I just didn't want to put you in the middle between me and the Murphys."

"After all, Atwater Group still needs to wor

with them."

She couldn't tell him the truth. So she lied, but it was the only thing she could say with any sincerity.

Frank listened, his throat tight with guilt. Her thoughtfulness shouldn't be the reason he kept hurting her.

He took a deep breath, forcing down the ache in his chest, and gently ruffled Elissa's hair, his tone soft and coaxing. "I'm sorry. I really messed up this time. I even forgot our anniversary the other day. Little Elissa, is there anything you want? I'll get you anything."

A house, a car, jewelry, designer bags—he'd always been generous with those things.

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Elissa thought for a moment, her answer barely above a whisper. "Then, I hope you'll like the birthday gift I got you."

"That's it? That's all you want?"

She nodded lightly.

At twenty, Elissa's birthday wish had been to marry Frank. At twenty-four, all she wanted was to leave him—cleanly, without regret.

When her eyes met Frank's sincere gaze, she felt a twinge of guilt, for the first time.

But before she could say anything else, Frank's phone rang. The ringtone was different from his usual one-personalized. She glanced at the screen. Marcia.

Frank answered. Whatever was said on the other end made his expression turn serious. He shot to his feet. "Is it bad? Why didn't you call a driver? How did you even twist your

ankle?"

"Send me your location. I'll be there right away!"

He hung up, ready to leave, but he'd only tended to half of Elissa's wounds. The cotton swab in his hand, still damp with antiseptic, left him momentarily torn.

Elissa reached out and took the swab from him, her voice calm and reassuring, as if offering him an easy way out. "I can do the rest myself. If you have something to take care of, go ahead."

People always said that the squeaky wheel gets the grease. But Elissa's life was different. Whenever she cried or complained, it never brought comfort-only more punishment.

Still, she believed that one day, she'd buy her own "candy." As much as she wanted.

“...Alright.” Frank let out a breath, relieved, then added almost defensively, “It’s Marcia. She’s hurt, and she’s got the kid with her. I should go check on them.”

With that, he turned and hurried out.

Almost without thinking, Elissa called after him, “Frank—how come I’ve never heard you

call her ‘sister-in-law’?”

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A sudden jolt ran through the man’s chest, stopping him dead in his tracks.

Frank met her clear, unwavering gaze and, almost involuntarily, called her name. “Elissa...”

Elissa broke into a sudden, gentle smile, her voice airy and light. “Relax, Frank. Why are you so tense? I know you and Marcia have known each other for ages. It’s only natural you’re used to calling her by name.”

As the black Mercedes glided out of the driveway, Elissa slowly sank *into* the couch.

She hadn't expected herself to act so rashly.

She'd grown used to playing the part of the sweet, agreeable wife. All she needed was to leverage Frank's guilt and get through this divorce smoothly.

So why had she gone and asked such a pointless, self-defeating question?

Tilting her head back, she stared up at the ceiling, her eyes dry and aching.

Before she could untangle her thoughts, her phone rang. Tanya Foster's name flashed across the screen. "Elissa, feel like grabbing a drink tonight?"

"Sure," Elissa replied quickly, then hesitated for a beat. "But it'll have to be a bit later. I've got a wellness livestream to host—it'll be over around ten."

It was a gig for the Traditional Medicine Center—not her main job, but she'd agreed to fill in for a coworker once when they had a family emergency.

At first, she'd planned to turn it down, considering both the Murphy and Atwater families and their expectations. But after her colleague showed her how to use the beauty filter, even her own mother might not recognize her on camera.

Elissa was easy *on* the eyes and spoke softly, making her streams an unexpected hit.

Before long, the clinic started scheduling her to host more and more sessions.

"Alright, I'll swing by after my shift and pick you up. Timing should work out."

"Sounds good."

A few more minutes of idle chat with Tanya, and Elissa felt her mood lighten.

She retreated to her room *to* review the evening's talking points one more time.

If she was honest, the best thing about marrying Frank was the freedom it gave her.

Frank didn't care what she did.

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The Murphy family tried to keep her from flying too high, but now that she was officially Frank's wife, they couldn't monitor her every move. They had to consider the Atwaters,

after all.

So Elissa devoted herself to honing her medical skills, moonlighting at the Traditional

Medicine Center whenever her schedule allowed.

Three years of steady work had left her with a respectable savings account.

At ten sharp, her livestream ended.

Elissa was in high spirits as she headed downstairs, just as Tanya pulled up outside.

Once she slid into the passenger seat, Tanya arched a brow. “You seem awfully chipper. The divorce going smoothly?”

“Not bad,” Elissa replied, lips curling up in a sly smile. “Definitely worth a celebratory drink.”

They reached the bar right at its busiest hour, but Tanya knew the owner and had reserved them a spot.

By the time Tanya returned from the restroom, Elissa already had a drink in hand.

Tanya grinned. “Does Frank even know you drink?”

“Of course not,” Elissa replied, tilting her head, a faint dimple appearing at the corner of her smile. “Just like I never knew who he was really in love with...”

“Kiss her! Kiss her!”

“C’mon, don’t be shy!”

“Go for it, Marcia!”

The shouts and laughter spilling from the dance floor cut Elissa off mid-sentence. She glanced over, and the smile on her lips froze.

Tanya followed her gaze and her face darkened. “Is that Frank?”

There, in the center of the dance floor, Frank’s sharp, striking features stood out beneath the shifting lights. He had his arms wrapped around a woman in a red dress—beautiful, captivating.

The man who was always so composed, so restrained, now watched her with a softness in his eyes Elissa had never seen.

When Tanya got a good look at the woman’s face, her jaw dropped. She looked as if her entire worldview had just imploded. “His mystery woman... is Marcia?”

Elissa drained the rest of her drink in one go, her voice rough. “I never would have

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guessed, either.”

As she finished speaking, Marcia suddenly rose onto her toes and kissed Frank, who instinctively slid his arm around her waist.

A picture-perfect couple.

“Wow!”

“Marcia, you’ve got moves!”

“Frank’s not going home tonight, is he?”

Despite being older than Elissa, the group egging them on had always called her “little sis-in-law,” teasing her with noisy excitement.

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Chapter 14

Tanya Foster shot to her feet so suddenly that Elissa had to grab her arm to hold her back. “Don’t go over there.”

“Do you think I’m an idiot?”

Ignoring her, Tanya snapped a few pictures, then tugged Elissa up with her. “I know your have your own plans, but this place is filthy. Let’s move somewhere cleaner.”

Elissa was the classic lightweight who couldn’t resist a drink.

After two rounds of cocktails, she didn’t wake up until the afternoon the next day. Her head throbbed and her eyes were puffy, making it hard *to* focus.

So when she saw that massive deposit in her online banking app, she honestly thought she was seeing things.

Six hundred thousand.

Elissa rubbed her eyes, and when she confirmed the transfer came from Marcia, the memories of last night slowly resurfaced.

She’d really sent it.

Clearly, Marcia was genuinely intimidated by Old Mrs. Atwater.

But considering how close Marcia and Frank had been last night, Elissa was almost certain the *money* had actually come from Frank.

Marital assets.

Which meant half of it was rightfully hers.

Feeling no guilt whatsoever, Elissa grabbed her phone and headed downstairs, making herself a glass of honey water.

When Edna saw how pale she looked, she came over, concerned. “Mrs. Atwater, do you want something to eat? I just made some herbal soup, and there’s some bird’s nest as well. Or I could make you some chicken noodle soup to settle your stomach.”

Year round, through every season, Elissa always prepared different herbal recipes for Edna to cook, tailored to her and Frank’s health needs.

Elissa’s stomach was still churning, and she had no appetite. “Bird’s nest, please.”

She glanced around the house, her tone casual. “Frank and Marcia didn’t come home last night?”

“It seems not,” Edna replied, not thinking too much of it as she headed to the kitchen to

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prepare the bird’s nest.

Knowing Elissa liked her sweets, Edna added a little extra rock sugar.

Just then, Hickey came barreling out of the living room, hands on his hips, making faces. at Elissa. “Uncle Frank and my mom were together last night! You’re not going *to* be my aunt for much longer. You’re a terrible person—you don’t deserve Uncle Frank!”

He ended by jabbing a chubby finger at her, glaring.

“Mhm.” Elissa nodded thoughtfully, gently brushing his little hand aside.
“But *do you* know what that makes you, after your mom marries Uncle Frank?”

“What?”

“Dead weight.”

She bent down and stroked his cheek affectionately, her voice soft and sweet. “Let me explain, sweetheart. It means you’ll be a burden. Pretty soon, your mom and Uncle Frank will have a new little brother or sister for you, and then nobody will like you anymore.”

“Excited? My little burden.”

“Waaah...”

Hickey burst into loud, dramatic sobs. Tears rolled down his cheeks as he grabbed his tablet and tried to video call Marcia.

No answer.

He glared at Elissa, furious, and hit the call button again, still crying. “Waaah! It’s not true! They won’t have another kid!”

Like he was desperate to prove her wrong.

He tried several more times, but still no answer.

Elissa smiled. “*See?* What did I say? They don’t love you anymore.”

And honestly, she wasn’t even lying to the poor kid. With the way things went down last night, there was a good chance Marcia was already pregnant with his new sibling.

“No! Waaah...”

Hickey wiped away his tears with a stubborn little arm, but the wailing didn’t stop.

Elissa carried her honey water to the dining room and sat down.

Her phone buzzed with a message from Tanya Foster—a forwarded entertainment news story.

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Edna came out of the kitchen just then, bird's nest in hand, startled by Hickey's sobs. "What's gotten into the little rascal? He's crying like the world's ending..."

Elissa turned her phone toward Edna. "Maybe he just saw the news and found out his mom's now the other woman. It's pretty rough."

Edna caught a glimpse of the headline and photo, and her jaw dropped.

-President Atwater: Late-Night Kiss With Mystery Woman at Downtown Bar!

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Edna didn't have time to comfort Hickey, who was still wailing. She anxiously searched Elissa's face. "Are you all right, Mrs. Atwater? The internet can be so toxic these

days—those photos could easily be doctored. Whatever it is, just wait until Frank gets home and talk to him face to face."

Elissa gave a faint nod.

She uncovered the porcelain bowl and sipped her nourishing soup in silence.

True or fake.

She'd seen it herself last night.

There was nothing left to ask.

It was then Edna noticed Elissa's eyes—so puffy, it was almost shocking.

After some hesitation, Edna slipped away to her room and called the old estate. “Yes, ma'am. I think Mrs. Frank saw the news first thing this morning. She didn't come down for lunch, and her eyes were swollen from crying...”

The Atwater household had never paid much attention to tabloid gossip.

But once the news reached them, the place erupted.

The young brother-in-law and the widowed sister-in-law!

How could the Atwaters ever show their faces again?

The matriarch was *so* enraged she took two heart pills in a row, but they did nothing—she still fainted from the fury.

Atwater Manor descended into chaos.

By comparison, Elissa seemed almost serene.

She finished her soup calmly, then, under Edna's sympathetic gaze, climbed the stairs with her swollen eyes.

Her bedroom door had barely closed when Tanya Foster's name flashed up, a voice call coming through.

"I swear to you, it wasn't me."

Tanya sounded desperate to clear her name. “Just look at the angle of those photos—it’s obvious they’re not the ones I took.”

“I know.”

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Elissa walked into the bathroom, set her phone on speaker atop the sink, and pulled a gel

eye mask from the mini fridge. “You wouldn’t have posted them so quickly. You’d have squeezed Frank for hush money first.”

Elissa had already checked downstairs.

The story broke last night; it just took a couple hours to really catch fire online.

And the pattern? All too natural.

Eighteen out of twenty says it was one of Frank’s business rivals.

Tanya's voice rose, half laughing, half exasperated. "Excuse me, I'm a lawyer, remember? I don't go around blackmailing people for a living."

"Mm-hmm, right, right," Elissa replied absently, teasing, "You'd just call it a reasonable management fee for marital infidelity evidence."

"-You are ridiculous."

Tanya burst out laughing, but quickly grew serious. "But really, someone was in a hurry to make this public. Isn't this going to mess up your plan? And what kind of grudge is this, anyway?"

She joked, "Maybe it's a crime of passion? Someone in love with Marcia?"

"No," Elissa shook her head, draping the cool mask over her eyes. Her reply was muffled, "I don't know. But as long as it doesn't get in my way, I don't care what their problem is."

If she were the one to confront Frank and Marcia in person, she'd just look petty and oversensitive.

But now that things had exploded in public, it was different.

Now, she was the victim.

That evening, Edna prepared all of Elissa's favorite dishes.

But Elissa, still feeling off from her hangover, barely touched her food. She only managed a few bites of rice and hardly touched the rest.

Edna sighed and tried to comfort her. "Don't be too upset, dear. The old matriarch was so angry she landed in the hospital—she'll make sure justice is done for you. And Mrs. Atwater asked me to pass on her support. Once her mother's stable, she'll come by to see you herself."

"Grandma's in the hospital?" Elissa frowned. "Why didn't anyone tell me?"

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"Everyone just feels so guilty..." Edna collected the dishes as she spoke. "And you're already so upset; don't worry about her for now."

“...Upset?”

Elissa stared, a little bewildered.

She had known about Frank and Marcia for some time now. What was left to be upset

about?

Edna saw her silence and assumed she was too heartbroken to speak.

After all, how many women who marry into old-money families don't end up swallowing their pain?

Elissa met Edna's sympathetic gaze but said nothing in her own defense.

She was still Mrs. Frank.

Her husband's affair was splashed all over the tabloids. Of course she should be the one

most devastated.

Elissa glanced at the time and stood up. “I’m going to the hospital to see Grandma.”

She’d just reached the foyer when headlights swept across the drive. A familiar black Maybach rolled in.

Before she could even change her shoes, Frank strode inside, his presence sharp and

stormy.

Lullaby 16

Chapter 16

When he stood before her, the sharpness in his eyes softened, replaced by a tangle of unreadable emotions.

“You’re back,” he said quietly.

Elissa took a small step back, her voice gentle as always. “Have you eaten? Edna made dinner...”

“Elissa.”

He cut her off, carefully choosing his words, his tone clouded and uncertain. "What's going on online isn't what it looks like. I can explain."

"Okay."

Elissa nodded without hesitation, her voice calm. "I believe you."

Frank froze.

He'd always known Elissa was easygoing, but this time, he'd prepared himself for anything.

Before he came home, his so-called friends had warned him he was done for.

No matter how mild-tempered a woman might be, no wife would tolerate her husband cheating.

Yet Elissa was unmoved.

No tears. No arguments.

It was strange.

A sense of unease swept over Frank. Her effortless trust didn't feel right.

He frowned, and a word crept into his mind.

-Indifference.

Elissa didn't care whether he had cheated or not.

Didn't care if he'd kissed another woman.

Her face betrayed nothing, just as it always did. She slipped on a jacket. "I'm going to the hospital to see Grandma,"

"Elissa..."

Frank couldn't shake the feeling that something precious was slipping further and further

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from him.

Almost involuntarily, he reached out and caught her slender wrist, probing gently, "You're not the least bit angry?"

Elissa paused, a little surprised.

For a moment, she wondered if being Mrs. Frank Atwater was really all it was cracked up to be.

She'd thought her reaction would be a relief for Frank.

But he wasn't satisfied.

He wanted her to be angry.

Frank waited anxiously for her answer, but she only looked at him coolly.

She spoke slowly, "If I got angry, would you really cut ties with your sister-in-law?"

Frank's expression grew awkward, but he still replied, "Elissa, believe it or not, there's nothing going on between us."

"After the birthday party, I'll ask her to move out."

"And you?"

Elissa asked quietly.

Frank's brows knit in frustration. "What are you talking about? Of course I'll still live here-with us."

He seemed to want to emphasize his point, speaking intently. "Elissa, I'm your husband."

"Frank."

But Elissa just gave a faint smile. "I wasn't asking about your address. I meant your heart."

He was caught off guard. In that moment, Elissa gently pulled her hand free, grabbed her keys, and left.

By the time she got to the hospital, Mrs. Atwater was already asleep.

With nowhere else to go, Elissa wandered the city in her car, aimless and adrift.

Like someone with no home to return to.

No-she corrected herself.

She never really had a home.

It was nearly midnight when Elissa finally made her way back.

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The house was silent. Edna had left the hallway light on for her.

As she passed by the study on the second floor, she noticed light leaking out from under the door.

Muffled voices, tense and low. Marcia was crying.

Elissa looked away, pretending not to notice. She went to her room and took a long, hot shower.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, she began to dry her hair. Suddenly, the mattress dipped behind her, and a large hand gently took the hair dryer from her grasp.

Elissa froze, uncertain what to do.

To outsiders, she and Frank were the perfect couple—polite, harmonious, never so much as a raised voice.

But no one knew the truth: there had hardly ever been any intimacy between them.

Frank always kept his distance.

She'd been slow to realize, never quite understanding the difference between being busy and being absent.

She'd thought Frank was simply overwhelmed with work, too busy to pay attention to his new wife—so busy he spent most nights in the study.

Now, Frank's fingers moved deftly through her hair, drying it for her.

Elissa stood abruptly, sidestepping his touch, and turned to face him. The words slipped out before she could stop them. "Is there something you want to tell me?"

She couldn't help how blunt she sounded.

Frank's behavior tonight was so out of character.

"Elissa..."

Frank switched off the hair dryer. He hesitated, then finally spoke. “I need you to help clarify things online.”

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

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But she simply couldn't bring herself to rebel.

She wanted a divorce, but she couldn't afford to fall out with Frank.

Her fingertips dug anxiously at her palm as she met Frank's gaze. “How am I supposed to clear this up? The photos are already out there.”

Frank looked worn out, probably exhausted from Marcia's endless drama. “But they didn't get a clear shot of Marcia's face.”

Elissa felt as though a heavy, waterlogged sponge was wedged in her chest. Her voice came out rough: “So you want me to lie to everyone online—tell them I'm the woman in those photos?”

She put it bluntly, because she honestly hadn't expected Frank to make such an outrageous suggestion.

She'd thought, at most, he'd ask her to issue a statement, say it was all a misunderstanding, maybe that the woman in the pictures was just a friend.

Frank pressed his lips together, his tone cold and rational. "I can't think of a better way. This will cool things off quickly. For Atwater Group—and everyone involved—it's the best outcome."

Everyone.

Elissa's fingers tightened *around* the edge of the comforter.

He meant Marcia, of course.

Frank always managed to protect Marcia, no matter what.

Only Elissa ever got thrown under the bus without a second thought.

A brittle, almost embarrassed smile flickered across her face, "Fine."

“I’ll do it.”

Frank never really gave her a choice, and Elissa knew it.

His voice was cool, detached. “I know this isn’t fair to you, Elissa. Consider this my way of making it up to you.”

“Tomorrow, meet up with Tanya Foster. Go shopping. Buy whatever you want.”

He slid a check toward her as he spoke.

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When Elissa didn’t move, he placed it on her pillow himself.

Then, without another word, he left the room, moving quickly—like *he* couldn’t stand to spend another second away from his real love.

Only after he was gone did Elissa pick up the check.

Seven zeroes.

A full two million dollars.

A bargain.

For Frank, it was a steal—two million for a smooth, risk-free PR fix.

For her, well, maybe it was a bargain too.

Elissa opened her social media, switched accounts, and typed out a simple statement.

[No more guessing, everyone—the woman in the photos is me. Just a little harmless fun between husband and wife.]

The money was hers.

She tucked the check away, turned off the lights, and tried to sleep.

But when she closed her eyes, all she could see was herself at seven years old.

Kneeling in punishment on the gravel drive at Murphy Manor.

Back then, when the old matriarch ordered the staff to strike her, a thirteen-year-old boy wearing a black armband had stepped in and shielded her, unwavering.

He'd said, "If you *don't* like her, she'll move into my wing from now on."

Then he'd *taken* her hand and led her away, grumbling about her lack of backbone, how she always got herself into trouble.

To this day, she could still recall how straight and thin his back was as he stood in front of her, shielding her from harm.

In the darkness, Elissa suddenly raised a hand and covered her eyes.

Her palm came away wet with tears.

Her little “clarification” gave Marcia several days to revel in triumph.

Marcia couldn’t even be bothered to antagonize her anymore.

After all, Frank had made his choice crystal clear.

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Look at that her husband was kissing another woman, and she’d been forced to help

cover it up.

Anyone could see who mattered more.

Elissa didn’t have the heart to watch Marcia gloat. She holed up in her room, quietly sorting through the things she could take with her.

She didn’t have many clothes.

What took the most effort was packing up her shelves of professional books.

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Most people found traditional medicine painfully dull, but Elissa never tired of it.

There was no way she'd ever abandon that wall of books—no matter what anyone said.

So she went to the storage room, pulled out a few cardboard boxes, and began packing her books. She planned to leave them at Tanya Foster's place for now.

After all, Frank barely noticed her existence these days.

If her room was missing a few things, he'd never notice.

She was in the middle of packing, absorbed in her task, when her phone rang.

The caller ID flashed: Old Man.

Her mentor.

Four years ago, Elissa had been on the verge of joining Vistapeak Medical Center—the nation’s top traditional medicine hospital.

To be accepted at such a prestigious institution in her early twenties spoke volumes about her talent and potential. The future ahead had seemed limitless.

But then, Matriarch Paige Murphy had effortlessly sabotaged her career. No one dared

hire her.

Her mentor had been the one to tell her, “Don’t worry. Don’t lose hope.” He’d quietly snuck her into her senior, Cliff Riley’s, traditional medicine clinic, keeping it secret from everyone

else.

As soon as Elissa picked up, Aaron Blaine’s cheerful voice came through. “Elissa, you free these days?”

“I am,” Elissa replied with a small laugh. “Are you and Jacqueline heading off on vacation again? Need me to look after your plants?”

Aaron chuckled. “Come on, do I really only call when I need a favor?”

He cleared his throat, sounding a little awkward. “Remember that group who came to the clinic to study acupuncture? Their Institute of Traditional Medicine is having its grand opening. Would you and Cliff go cut the ribbon for me?”

Elissa nodded. “I remember. Wasn’t their institute abroad?”

“Germany,” Aaron said, still smiling. “And as I recall, you studied German. Looks like you’re the chosen one.”

Elissa sighed. “When do we leave?”

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“In a week,” Aaron replied, though he sounded a bit sheepish. “...On the 31st.”

The 31st.

Frank's birthday.

Every year, on Frank's birthday, Elissa would leave her calendar clear, decorating their home, preparing a special dinner and a thoughtful gift.

But he had never once come home.

She'd always told herself he was busy with work.

Looking back now, it was almost laughable.

Birthdays, anniversaries—those were the days Frank needed to prove his devotion to Marcia, not her.

If that was what he wanted, she'd do them both a favor and bow out gracefully.

Elissa didn't hesitate. "I'll go."

Aaron sounded surprised, but didn't press her for reasons—perhaps afraid she'd change her mind. "Great, I'll have Cliff book the tickets right away."

Cliff was efficient as always. Within minutes, Elissa received her flight details.

The 31st. Ten a.m.

Later that day, Tanya Foster dropped by to help her move her things. Four big boxes of medical books—enough to fill Tanya's trunk to the brim.

When Tanya closed the trunk, she brushed dust from her hands and glanced at Elissa. "Did Frank sign the divorce papers?"

Elissa nodded. "He did."

Tanya muttered a curse under her breath, clearly annoyed. "He really wants this divorce so badly?"

"It's not that," Elissa answered calmly. "He doesn't know they're divorce papers."

“You’re not worried he’ll back out?”

Tanya warned her, “You *know*, signing the papers is just one step. Unless he actually goes with

you to finalize it at the courthouse, you’re still legally married.”

“Then I’ll file a lawsuit,” Elissa said quietly, her gaze lowered, as if lost in thought.
“Besides, he’ll agree.”

13:31

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator

Chapter 19

Tanya Foster couldn’t quite follow Elissa’s line of thinking. “Why not? Frank’s divorce is bound to shake things up for Atwater Group.”

After all, when the CEO of a publicly traded company gets divorced, rumors about share transfers and all sorts of speculation fly. The stock price always takes a hit.

Elissa just smiled, the corners of her lips curving up. “You’ll understand soon enough.”

“Alright then, as long as you have a plan, I can relax. If things get ugly with Frank, I can step in for you,” Tanya offered.

Elissa shook her head, her smile calm. “Don’t worry. Frank’s not that petty.”

If that scandal hadn’t blown up online, she would’ve been on the back foot. But now, the control was hers. Frank, if only to protect Marcia’s reputation, would agree to the divorce. Things wouldn’t need to get ugly.

Tanya glanced at her watch—she still had to meet a client. She gave Elissa a few last pieces of advice, then headed for the door. Just before leaving, she remembered something, reached over to the passenger seat, and handed Elissa a small gift. “Merry Christmas, darling! I have to run!”

Elissa grinned. “Merry Christmas, Tanya. Drive safe!”

She watched Tanya’s car disappear down the street before hugging the gift to her chest and heading inside.

Edna was just setting dinner on the table. “Dinner’s ready, Mrs. Atwater.”

“Thank you, Edna.”

Elissa had barely answered when she bumped into Marcia coming downstairs with Hickey. The two of them were decked out in matching holiday outfits, their posture radiating the same haughty air. The way they looked at Elissa, it was as if she were some pitiful loser.

Hickey wrenched his hand free from Marcia’s grip, bounded down the last few steps, and tossed his head at Elissa. “Nah nah, Uncle Frank’s taking me and Mom out for dinner, and *you* have to stay here all alone! Poor thing!”

He glanced gleefully toward the driveway, then tugged at Marcia’s sleeve. “Come on, Mom! Uncle Frank’s here!”

“Sorry, Elissa.”

Marcia’s voice was apologetic, but her stance was all lady of the manor. “Hickey insisted

Frankie spend Christmas with him, so you'll have to celebrate on your own—I hope you're not too upset.”

“It's fine,” Elissa replied with an easy smile. “When I was a kid, a priest once told me I'd live a long life, with plenty more Christmases to come.”

With that, she sauntered away, utterly unbothered.

Marcia was caught off guard, then realized the implication—and nearly choked on her own indignation.

What the hell was that supposed to mean? Was Elissa hinting that she, Marcia, wouldn't live to see the next holiday? That Elissa would outlast her?

Furious, Marcia was about to march over and confront her when she spotted Frank stepping out of his car, his gaze fixed in their direction.

Marcia swallowed her anger, pasted on a smile, and hurried over. “Frankie, let's go!”

Frank didn't respond right away.

She hesitated, then realized he was distracted—his eyes hadn't left Elissa.

Marcia's nails dug into her palm. Her voice turned brittle. "Frankie, you're not starting to have feelings for her, are you?"

Frank snapped out of it, frowning slightly. "What are you talking about?"

"You were staring at her just now!"

"Was I?"

He frowned, as if the question surprised him.

Marcia couldn't shake the feeling that Frank had changed somehow. Before, no matter what she said, he'd always reply thoughtfully. Even at family dinners, if she so much as joked about how he and Elissa seemed close, he'd instantly put half a foot of space

between himself and Elissa.

But now, he just responded with a halfhearted, “Was I?”

Marcia bristled. “You weren’t? I called your name, and you didn’t even hear me.”

“I was just thinking about work,” Frank said, his tone level.

Marcia finally relaxed and poked him in the side. “You better not fall for her. Don’t forget what you promised me when we were kids.”

Frank’s expression softened at the memory. “Don’t worry. I haven’t forgotten.”

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator

Elissa couldn’t bring herself to wonder how that little family of three was spending the holidays this year.

After dinner, she crouched in the yard with numb fingers, shaping a lopsided Santa *out* of the snow. By the time her hands were raw and red from the cold, she retreated inside for

a hot bath.

Edna, seeing it was snowing again, must have cranked the heat up *too* high.

Elissa couldn't even be bothered to dry her hair properly. She curled up against the headboard with a book, and before she knew it, she'd drifted off to sleep.

The next morning, Elissa woke with a start.

A sharp, jarring crash rang out—she couldn't tell if it came from downstairs or just outside

the door.

Probably just Hickey tearing the place apart again.

She was wide awake now. After washing up, she headed down to fix herself some

breakfast.

She'd barely reached the top of the stairs when Hickey sprang out of nowhere, hands on her hips, eyes blazing with fury. "Wicked witch! Why won't you just die!"

Elissa frowned, but before she could get a word out, Hickey barreled straight toward her.

This time, Elissa dodged quickly, but suddenly something yanked her hard from behind.

Her balance vanished. She tumbled down the stairs, every bone in her body slamming into the steps. Her forehead struck the stone landing; blood streamed down the side of her

face.

Elissa lay sprawled at the bottom, battered and breathless. Gritting her teeth against the pain, she slowly raised her head—Marcia was standing at the top of the stairs, a cryptic little smile *on* her lips.

"I'm not moving out," Marcia whispered. "You can forget about it."

It was Marcia who'd grabbed her from behind.

Edna, hearing the commotion, rushed in and froze in horror, while Elissa, struggling to stay

conscious, forced out, “Call an ambulance.”

“Y–yes! Right away!”

Edna fumbled with her phone, hands shaking as she dialed 911.

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By the time she managed to give the address, Elissa’s world had already faded to black.

Pain.

Pain so deep it felt like she was coming apart.

When Elissa finally surfaced again, that was the only thing she knew.

Cold fluid dripped through the IV into her arm. The hospital room was empty.

But out on the balcony, voices were raised in heated argument.

Frank's tone was clipped, furious—she'd never heard him like this. "Have you lost your mind? I told you last night, this has nothing to do with Elissa. We just can't *live* under the same roof anymore!"

"I told you to take Hickey and leave. That was my decision—mine alone!"

"And even now, you're still defending her!"

Marcia didn't believe a word.

It had to be that bitch, whispering something in Frank's ear.

Last night, she'd gone out to celebrate Christmas, only to come home and hear Frank say he'd already found her a place to live. Told her to take Hickey and move out as soon as possible.

Frank, exasperated, snapped, “Even if that’s true, it’s no excuse for what you did to her! Don’t tell me Hickey pushed her—Marcia, maybe you can fool everyone else, but you can’t fool me.”

Marcia’s eyes were bloodshot as she shot back, “Fine! I pushed her—so what? You always take her side. Now you’re ready *to* kick me out for her!”

“And have *you* even thought about what comes next?”

Frank’s brow was drawn tight. “If Elissa presses charges, you’ll be facing assault! There’s no escaping it.”

Elissa, clutching her IV pole, had only meant to make a trip to the bathroom,

But those words *stopped* her cold. All the color drained from her cheeks.

When she pushed open the balcony *door*, both Frank and Marcia turned, caught off guard,

Elissa gripped the doorframe to steady herself, then looked at Frank. “Don’t worry. I won’t call the police.”

The pain etched across her face made Frank's heart twist, but what came out was, "What *do* you want? I'll make sure you're compensated."

13:31

He was her husband—yet lately, every word from his mouth was about compensating her for someone else's cruelty. Never defending her. Only restitution.

Elissa's clear eyes met his, her voice barely more than a whisper, "Anything I want?"

"Of course."

"Then I want her to get what she gave me. An eye for an eye."

Her voice was steady. Before Frank could react, Elissa raised the IV stand—and hurled it straight at Marcia.