

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator

“Who said it was foolproof?”

Slate’s words were laced with bitterness. If Marcia hadn’t sworn up and down that everything would go smoothly, he never would’ve ended up tangled in her mess. And now he was paying the price.

Thinking about it made Marcia squirm. She’d heard from Frank what Rowan had done to Slate. That was exactly why she’d been avoiding Slate these past few days—hoping to duck the fallout. But clearly, the storm had found her anyway. Slate was set on blaming her for everything.

Marcia winced as Slate’s grip tightened in her hair, her mind scrambling for a way out. She forced a sullen apology. “I had no idea Mr. Murphy would show up that night. You can’t pin that on me...”

Suddenly, she rallied. “If you want to blame someone, blame Elissa. She’s the real culprit here.”

She jerked her chin toward Elissa’s car parked down the street, a sly smirk curling on her lips. “You got burned, but she’s just fine—off flaunting that pretty face of hers, stringing guys along as usual.”

In the distance, Cliff was climbing into Elissa's car. The two of them were headed off to celebrate their teacher's birthday.

"Shut up!" Slate snapped, slapping her hard across the cheek. "Don't think I don't see what you're up to—trying to use me to clear a path for yourself to become Mrs. Frank, aren't you?"

He didn't hold back, and the blow stung as much as the words.

Marcia sucked in a sharp breath, pain flashing across her features. "I'm only looking out for you. After everything you've been through for her, you should've ruined that face of hers. That way, she'd be **yours**—heart and soul."

A cold laugh escaped Slate. He grabbed her chin, eyes narrowing.

"Jealous, are you? Honestly, Marcia, you should be. You're not even a fraction as beautiful as she is. Not even her little toe."

He remembered those delicate, rosy toes—how many times had he dreamed of being crushed beneath those feet?

For the first time, Marcia realized Slate's obsession with Elissa ran deeper than lust. It was twisted—almost perverse.

But even as her cheeks burned with humiliation, Marcia knew better than to challenge Mr. Slate head-on. She steadied herself and shifted tactics, offering him a plan. “If you really want Elissa in your bed, it’s not impossible.”

“What did you say?”

“Mr. Slate, this time... there’s no need to force things.”

She leaned in, whispering her scheme into his ear.

“You’re sure?” Slate’s tone dripped with suspicion. “Marcia, if you screw me over again, I may not have Rowan’s power, but it wouldn’t be hard for me to get rid of you.”

Meanwhile, Elissa and Cliff arrived at their teacher’s house. Aaron and Jacqueline were already in the kitchen, putting the finishing touches on dinner. The main dishes were ready; Jacqueline was just sautéing a few side dishes.

Elissa set down the gift bag and breezed into the kitchen with a bright smile. “Happy birthday, Professor! Here’s to many more birthdays and good years ahead!”

Jacqueline snorted, tossing a pinch of salt into a pan. “He’s already ancient. If he keeps having birthdays, he’ll turn into some kind of

monster.”

Aaron grinned. “I don’t mind being a monster, as long as you’re my partner in crime.”

Cliff laughed. “Dinner hasn’t even started and you’re already making us jealous.”

“Our professor just loves showing off,” Elissa teased, washing her hands before helping Jacqueline.

She couldn’t cook, but she was quick and attentive, always handing Jacqueline the right spice or utensil at just the right moment.

Warmth and laughter filled the kitchen, the air thick with the scent of home-cooked food.

At the table, Cliff opened a bottle of red wine he’d brought, pouring glasses for everyone. After dinner, Aaron pulled out the chessboard and challenged Cliff to a game.

Elissa, with the lowest tolerance, was sprawled across the back of the sofa, watching them play. Jacqueline poured her a cup of tea. “Drink this. Your professor insisted I make it for you—it’ll help with the wine.”

“Thank you, Jacqueline.” Elissa’s head was spinning a little, but she took the cup with both hands, looking sweet and obedient.

Jacqueline gave her a gentle smile, then hesitated. “This year, Jonathan’s wife is due any day now—she can’t fly home with that baby belly. So it’ll just be me and Blaine visiting for the holidays.”

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Jonathan Blaine was the only child of the professor and Jacqueline.

Elissa sipped her still-warm tea. “Alright, then I’ll pick up some local specialties these next couple of days for you and the professor to take

back.”

Jacqueline reached over, gently smoothing Elissa’s hair. “And what about. you? Why don’t you come with **us**?”

At times, Jacqueline adored Elissa's sweet, considerate nature. Other times, it pained her to see the girl always so well-behaved.

Every year, they'd invite Elissa to spend the holidays with them.

But Elissa knew—Jonathan and his parents only got to be together during the holidays, so the most she'd ever do was stop by with New Year's greetings on the second day.

This year, though...

She and Frank had divorced. There wasn't even a housekeeper at home now—the holidays were bound to feel even lonelier.

Elissa smiled, lips curving. "I think I'll stay. I want to use the break to rest. and maybe rethink my research plan."

The current plan would likely work well enough, but the side effects. weren't up to her standards. She also hoped to push the treatment's effectiveness even further.

Jacqueline's worry shone through. "If you came, you wouldn't have to do anything. You can keep working if you want..."

“That’s enough,” Aaron cut in, understanding Elissa too well. He glanced at his wife. “You know exactly how she is. She’d just feel out of place. there. Why don’t you just-stock up on some holiday treats for her?”

“She’s got a sweet tooth. Make sure you fry plenty of meatballs and those little pastries she likes.”

Elissa fiddled with her nose, a little embarrassed. “Professor...”

Jacqueline laughed and agreed right away, giving Elissa a mock-stern look. “Now that’s something you’ll allow, right?”

“Absolutely,” Elissa said, no longer protesting. She wrapped her arms around Jacqueline’s and leaned her head against her shoulder. “Thank you, Jacqueline.”

She snuggled in, eyelids growing heavy, and soon drifted off to sleep.

Jacqueline noticed and smiled, exchanging a look with Aaron—her silent request for everyone to keep quiet.

Aaron grinned. “She’s been working around the clock on that project and had some wine, too. She could sleep through a thunderstorm right now,

trust me.”

“Of course, Jacqueline.”

Clife

made his move on the chessboard. “Elissa’s not much of a drinker. Just let her sleep on the couch.”

“Are you letting me win again?” Aaron raised his brows at Cliff’s move, mock-offended. “Do you really think that little of my chess skills?”

Thanks to the wine, Elissa slept deeply and undisturbed.

When she finally stirred, still a bit dazed, it took her a moment to realize where she was. She squinted—the living room was empty.

Outside, the sun was already setting, bathing the room in a soft, golden

haze.

Rubbing her eyes, Elissa sat up, still a little groggy. That's when she noticed someone else was there.

Rowan sat comfortably on the other end of the couch. At her movement, he cracked his eyelids. "You finally up?"

Why was he still here?

Elissa blinked, her voice soft. "Where is everyone?"

Always looking for others the moment she woke.

When she was little, after Rowan had first brought her to live with them, she'd been so desperate for a sense of belonging. Every time she woke from a nap and didn't see him, she'd clutch a pillow and cry, demanding. to see her "big brother."

Now, seeing him there, she looked almost disappointed.

Rowan's expression was cool, indifferent. "No idea."

“Oh.”

Only then did Elissa realize she was covered with his suit jacket. The thin throw Jacqueline had draped over her had slipped to the floor. Knowing Rowan’s neat-freak tendencies, he probably couldn’t stand the thought of retrieving something that had touched the ground.

Elissa stood, holding out his jacket. “Thank you, Mr. Murphy.”

“Don’t-” Rowan reached out, taking back the jacket, but fell silent as his eyes landed on a dark red stain.

Elissa followed his gaze—and in an instant, she was wide awake.

Her period had started.

And she’d stained his suit jacket.

She glanced down at the couch, relieved to see it was clean—she must

have pulled the jacket under herself in her sleep. She tried to twist

around and see how bad her dress was, but the angle made it impossible.

Rowan said quietly, “Turn around. I’ll check for you.”

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Elissa’s earlobes flushed such a deep red she thought she might just burst. Flustered, she stammered, “I-I’ll go to the restroom myself.”

“Wait a second.”

Rowan caught her gently by the wrist, drawing her closer. With practiced ease, he shrugged off his suit jacket and fastened it snugly around her waist, shielding the stain **on** her dress.

“Th-thank you.”

Their teachers could come back at any moment—this was definitely safer. Elissa’s face burned all the way to her cheeks. She turned away, but instead of heading straight for the restroom, she made a detour to the

car.

She always kept a change of clothes in the trunk, just in case, though she hadn’t expected to need it today.

Her sleep had been erratic lately, throwing her cycle off, but she’d checked her pulse yesterday and had a feeling this was coming. She’d tucked a pack of pads in her bag, just in case.

She cleaned up in the restroom and changed into fresh clothes. But when she stepped back out and met Rowan’s dark, fathomless eyes, she still

felt awkward.

She walked over, holding out his jacket. “Your jacket—I’ll wash it and-”

“This one’s pricier than the last.”

His words were blunt as ever.

Elissa wilted. Only she could get her period and lose a small fortune at the same time.

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She rubbed at her stomach, about to protest, when he gently plucked the jacket from her hands.

myself.”

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was unreadable. “Don’t worry about it. I’ll take care of this.

Elissa blurted out, “You’ll wash **it** yourself?”

In all nine years under the same roof, she'd never seen Rowan do his own laundry. And besides, you couldn't just toss a suit in the wash.

Rowan's hand stiffened for a split second as his eyes flicked to the faint stain on the fabric. He cleared his throat. "I'll take it back and have it

cleaned."

"Alright then."

Elissa nodded, just as their teacher and Cliff returned from the backyard.

Aaron set his fishing rod aside and held up his catch for Rowan to see. "Later, I'll make you a fish stew so good it'll knock your socks off. It's the least I can do after the hundred-year-old ginseng you brought me."

Rowan hung the jacket over his arm, his expression calm, and smiled. "Sounds like I'm in for a treat."

Elissa stared, surprised. "Hundred-year-old ginseng?"

She'd always kept track of rare herbs like that.

The only one on the market lately had been at the last auction.

Aaron laughed. "It's the one you were lamenting over at lunch today—the one you didn't win for my birthday."

Elissa looked at Rowan, /confusion written all over her face.

He'd paid a fortune **at** the auction for that ginseng. Wasn't it meant for Lorraine's father, to help him recover?

Aaron clapped Rowan on the shoulder. "How about a game of chess? Cliff always lets me win—it's no fun."

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Actually, it wasn't just Cliff.

Cliff deferred to him out of respect, but most people who played against Aaron either wanted medical advice or to curry favor, always trying to please him.

Only Rowan played him straight, making every match a fierce, exhilarating challenge—win or lose.

Rowan agreed easily. “Sure.”

Cliff scratched his head, grinning. “You two play; I’ll go help Jacqueline in the kitchen.”

“I’ll help too-” Elissa started, but Rowan called her back.

“It’s cold. Why don’t you make some tea?”

Aaron chimed in, “You can’t cook anyway, so don’t go making trouble.”

“Oh, alright.”

Elissa followed them inside, setting about brewing tea, her mind

wandering.

What exactly did Rowan mean when he said that just now?

Was it because it was cold, and since she had her period, she shouldn't be in the kitchen with cold water?

Or did he just want her to make him a hot drink to warm him up?

By the time dinner was over and they were leaving, the sky was pitch

black.

Elissa was just about to get in the car when she saw Rowan stride out, his long legs covering the ground in seconds. "Ian's already left. I'll ride with you."

"|—"

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Elissa's gaze flickered over the suit jacket draped across his arm, at twinge of guilt pricking at her. "Alright, **fine**," she murmured.

They'd both had a bit to drink. Cliff, who lived nearby, just called a cab and headed home, while Elissa booked a ride service for herself.

Maybe it was the deep sleep she'd had that afternoon, but now Elissa was wide awake, alert. Rowan, on the other hand, had just spent the evening humoring their mentor and had ended up drinking a few extra glasses. The moment he slid into the back seat, he leaned his head against the headrest and closed his eyes, feigning sleep. Elissa could smell the faint trace of alcohol on him, mingling with the subtle woody scent of his cologne.

She drank, sure, but she usually couldn't stand the smell of liquor on someone else. Strangely, tonight, it didn't bother her at all.

The car was quiet. Elissa turned and watched the blur of city lights through the window, unable to remember the last time she and Rowan had sat together like this—peaceful, almost comfortable.

It had been a long time.

So long, in fact, that she honestly couldn't recall when.

She'd been holding onto a grudge ever since—the hurt of not

understanding why Rowan had just walked away from her, left her behind without a word.

And Rowan, for his part, was probably still bitter too—bitter that three years ago, she’d pushed back against him, insisted on marrying Frank, and made him look like a fool in front of everyone.

Ever since they’d run into each other again in Berlin, things between them had been tense—always one wrong word away from an argument.

“That ginseng root was always meant for Mr. Blaine.”

Out of nowhere, Rowan’s voice broke the silence.

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He’d been drinking—his voice was rougher than usual, softer, stripped of its usual edge.

Elissa blinked, surprised he was bothering to explain this to her. She

turned to look at him. “I thought you bought **it** for Secretary Lynn’s father...”

She remembered what he'd said at the auction—that someone wanted it, and he'd have a hard time explaining himself if he didn't get it back.

Was that someone their mentor?

Rowan didn't move, still slouched against the headrest, his eyes half-shut and unreadable in the shifting streetlights. He spoke again, his tone unreadable. "What do I care about her father?"

Elissa was suddenly certain—his girlfriend, or whoever held his heart, definitely wasn't Lorraine. Otherwise, he'd at least pretend to care about the people close to her.

So who was it?

The question startled her the moment it surfaced—who Rowan actually cared about wasn't her concern.

"Alright," she said, nodding. "I didn't realize you knew our mentor's tastes.

so well."

For someone as cold and distant as Rowan, it was surprising he'd even consider what their mentor might like.

Even sitting, he was taller than her, and he looked down at her for a long moment, a faint frown forming between his brows. "Who told you I was thinking about Mr. Blaine's tastes?"

They almost never talked like this—Elissa felt herself relax, and blurted out, "Then whose tastes were you thinking about? Mine?"

She had wanted to buy the ginseng herself that night.

Rowan's dark eyes bored straight into her, his gaze lingering on her lips. His voice was low, the words almost a growl. "That's right. Yours."

Elissa's clear, bright eyes went wide with confusion. For a second, she couldn't breathe, her lips parting in shock. She was about to say something when the car suddenly swerved around a corner and screeched to a sudden stop by the curb.

The abrupt motion threw Elissa off balance—she tumbled against Rowan, landing right in his lap. Instinctively, his hand shot out and caught her by the waist.

She'd worn a skirt that day, and the sudden movement pulled it up just enough that his palm landed directly on the bare skin of her waist.

His hand was hot—scorchingly so—heat that shot straight through her chest and into every nerve ending.

“Sorry about that a car just ran a red light,” the driver said, snapping. Elissa back to reality.

Flustered, she tried to push herself up, bracing her hands against Rowan's thigh. In the confusion, her fingers brushed against something—through the fabric, it felt even warmer than his hand on her skin.

Rowan's breath came hard and heavy. His grip tightened around her waist, and, seizing the moment, he pulled her fully onto his lap, leaning in so close that his lips nearly grazed her ear. His voice was deep, dangerous. “Keep squirming, and I swear I'll show you exactly what a forbidden relationship feels like.”

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Elissa's mind went utterly blank, a dull ringing in her ears.

They were both adults—she didn't have firsthand experience, but in that instant, she understood exactly what her hand had brushed against.

Now she was trapped, straddled across his lap, unable to move.

There was fabric between them, yet it felt as if there was nothing at all—warmth and contact, skin to skin.

She looked up at Rowan, panic swimming in her eyes, on the verge of tears. “Rowan, I didn't mean to—”

Rowan's large hand gripped the back of her head, thumb pressing gently against her soft lips. His voice was low, deliberate. “What did you just call me?”

Elissa froze, heart pounding, and scrambled to correct herself. “Mr. Murphy.”

He watched her, every inch the man who commanded the room. “Try again.”

She felt like her whole body was aflame, desperate to get off his lap, too overwhelmed to protest further. “What do you want me to call you?”

His voice coaxed her, deep and measured. “What did you used to call me?”

Brother.

Of course, Elissa remembered. But now, the word felt impossibly intimate. She hesitated, her throat tight. “Just... let me go first.”

She tried to shift away, but his arm stayed firmly locked around her waist. Rowan was as unyielding as ever. “Say it first.”

Tears welled up in her eyes, shimmering. She blinked rapidly, cheeks

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burning, and forced herself to speak. “B-Brother.”

He sounded annoyed. “Since when did you start stammering?”

Her face crumpled in frustration and embarrassment. “Brother!” she blurted out, sharper this time.

The word hung between them, exactly like the tone she used as a

stubborn teenager, always challenging him but ultimately giving in to his authority.

He finally released his grip, and she scrambled off his lap, all but diving into her seat. She rolled down the window, hoping the cool night air would clear away the tension—and maybe drown out the frantic beating of her heart.

Too weird.

Rowan used to tease her all the time when they were younger, poking at her just to see her get riled up. But nothing like this had ever happened before.

Maybe he was just annoyed—annoyed that since they reunited, she hadn’t once called him “Brother.”

After all, this was Young Master Murphy. No one ever dared go up against him. He hated to lose.

Well, he’d won again.

Rowan watched her all but flee, clutching the window edge, not daring to look at him. His eyes were dark, unreadable.

He could still feel the softness of her waist lingering on his palm..

Later that night, the memory wouldn't let him sleep. He dreamed of gripping her waist, pulling her flush against him. He woke with a jolt, rubbing his brow in frustration before heading for a cold shower.

It didn't help.

Sleep eluded him, so he gave up, stepped out of his room, and dropped.

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onto the living room sofa. His hand closed around the jacket Elissa had borrowed earlier; her scent—faint jasmine—still clung to the fabric.

His gaze darkened, something primal stirring inside him. He ran his fingers over the jacket, creasing it again and again.

Across the hall-

Elissa couldn't sleep either. She clutched her pillow and went to find Tanya Foster.

Tanya was buried in paperwork, barely looking up. "Why aren't you in bed?"

Elissa frowned, feeling bad for her friend's relentless late nights. "You're still working?"

"I'm about to get promoted," Tanya replied, waving a stack of files, eyes shining with excitement. "If I win this case, I'll be head attorney. My salary's going to skyrocket."

She grinned. "If I keep this up, take on a few more cases, we'll be able to leave this place in no time. Two years, tops."

Tanya never forgot her promise—to leave Vistapeak City with Elissa.

Warmth spread in Elissa's chest. She poured Tanya a glass of milk. "Really? Our Tanya is amazing."

Tanya shrugged with a cocky smile, gulped the milk, and glanced over. “What about you? Trouble sleeping again?”

“Sort of.” Elissa forced a light smile. “I’ll finish my milk and head back. Don’t let me keep you. Get some rest when you’re done.”

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“You alright?” Tanya Foster asked, her voice tinged with concern.

“I’m fine,” Elissa replied breezily.

She downed a glass of milk in one go, then stood and headed for **her**

room.

Truthfully, if she had to say what was really bothering her, she wouldn’t know where to begin.

Back in the car, she'd assumed Rowan just wanted her to admit defeat and call him "big brother." That's all there was to it. Or so she'd thought.

But as she lay in bed that night, the more she replayed the whole thing in her mind, the more something felt off.

A strange thought had taken root in her heart, wild and persistent, refusing to be ignored.

But...

He's my brother.

Elissa couldn't help but wonder if she was just overthinking things.

Growing up, she'd delivered dozens—if not hundreds—of love letters to Rowan on behalf of other girls. The senders were always the school's most popular girls, or daughters from prominent families.

Rowan could have anyone he wanted. There was no way he'd be interested in someone like her—a married woman, at least on paper.

Besides, he'd told her last time that he wasn't single anymore.

Remembering this, Elissa finally managed a quiet sigh of relief. She was clearly just letting her imagination get the best of her.

The next morning, before heading to the clinic, Elissa drove Tanya Foster to the airport.

This was a crucial case for Tanya—one that could make or break her

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promotion—and she had to fly out of state to persuade a key witness.

When Elissa finished work at noon, she found herself cornered by Frank in the parking garage.

The snow hadn't fully melted; Frank stood next to her car in a long wool coat, tall and strikingly handsome, the very picture of a gentleman.

Elissa frowned, wondering what new game he and Marcia were playing. First Marcia, now Frank—taking turns ambushing her.

Still, Marcia's obsession with the Jade Pendant ran deeper than Elissa had expected. Maybe she could get some answers from Frank.

She strode over briskly. "Why not come by the clinic if you wanted to see me?"

"I didn't want to interfere with your work," Frank replied, unfailingly polite. "Have you eaten? There's a nice place nearby-"

"I'm good."

Elissa's shift had ended late, the cafeteria had closed, and she hadn't eaten yet. But there was zero reason to have dinner with Frank. "Why are you looking for me?"

Her chilly tone caught Frank off guard, leaving an odd ache in his chest.

Maybe husbands and wives really shouldn't live apart.

She hadn't always been like this. Elissa used to be obedient, always agreeable.

He made up his mind. “So, when are you moving back home? I happen to be free this afternoon—can help you pack.”

As he spoke, Frank reached out to ruffle her hair, as if to bridge the distance between them.

Elissa sidestepped, taking two steps back. “Frank, did you even listen to a word I said last time? I told you—whatever you do is your business, but stay out of mine.”

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“Things were fine the way they were, weren’t they?” Frank pressed. “Why not just go back to how we used to be?”

The way things used to be—living under the same roof, but essentially strangers. In Frank’s eyes, she’d never truly existed. If she’d died at home, he probably wouldn’t have noticed.

Frank’s brow furrowed. “I told you, the past was my fault. It won’t happen. again.”

“As for Marcia, I’ll end things with her soon. For good.”

He was almost certain now: Marcia had used the Jade Pendant to impersonate little Nine.

The thought alone made him want to strangle her on the spot.

But if he made a mistake, if he’d misunderstood, he couldn’t risk acting rashly. He was still waiting for Bernard’s final confirmation.

Besides, he needed to know how Marcia had gotten hold of the Jade Pendant in the first place.

Had she bullied little Nine? Had she hurt that tearful little girl who’d once said goodbye to him so pitifully?

Elissa stared at him, stunned, wondering if she’d heard him right. “What did you just say?”

She’d seen all too clearly how far Frank had gone for Marcia. And now he was saying he’d cut ties with her?

Frank knew how unbelievable that sounded. He pressed his lips together. “Believe what you want, but I mean it.”

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No surprise at all.

Frank looked straight at her. “Once I’ve sorted this out, I’ll help you move back.”

Now that Marcia was out of the picture, he was sure she’d be willing to return.

He didn’t wait for Elissa to reply. His car had already sped away, tires hissing on the wet pavement.

He was in a hurry—just like every other time Marcia had called him away.

Elissa, on the other hand, didn’t show a flicker of emotion. No shock, no disappointment. Nothing.

She drove to the lab and quickly lost herself in her research.

Maybe Lorraine’s warning last time had worked. Those two colleagues in the Traditional Medicine Unit—who’d always looked down on her—had been surprisingly cooperative lately, and their efficiency as a team had improved significantly.

That afternoon, for once, Elissa didn't go to the lab. Instead, she went shopping, picking up a few local specialties.

The next morning, before dawn had even broken, she picked up Aaron. and Jacqueline to drive them to the airport.

With the holidays approaching, the airport was packed. Traffic crawled along the overpass, and it took quite a while before Elissa finally dropped. them off at the terminal,

She'd just started the engine to head home when her phone rang..

Elissa answered. "Hello?"

"Hello, this is the Vistapeak Police Department. Are you Tanya Foster's next of kin?"

1/3

09:18

The voice on the other end was all business.

At the mention of Tanya Foster's name, Elissa's heart clenched. "Yes, I

am."

Tanya Foster's family had always favored her brother over her. Years ago, when she got into Vistapeak University, her family refused to let her go, claiming the money for tuition would be better spent on her brother's future wedding.

They figured she should get a job as soon as possible, start earning, and help her brother buy a house.

Over the years, Tanya had barely kept in touch with her family, except during the holidays.

Her emergency contact had always been Elissa.

"Here's the situation. Tanya Foster is currently in custody for allegedly inciting a witness to commit perjury. You'll need to bring her some fresh clothes as soon as possible."

For a moment, Elissa's mind went blank. But she didn't ask any questions. "Understood. I'm on my way now."

Outside, rain pattered steadily as her white SUV cut through the streets, leaving a long trail of water in its wake.

Back home, as she packed Tanya's things, Elissa made a call to Atwater

Manor.

The butler picked up.

While folding clothes, Elissa spoke. "Hi, Quentin, it's Elissa, Is my mother-in-law home?"

There was a brief pause before Carmela took over the call.

"What is it?" Her tone was icy.

With her bag packed and nerves fraying, Elissa forced herself to speak. "I-my friend's in trouble. Could you help me find out what's really going

09:16

on...?”

She knew exactly what kind of person Tanya Foster was. There was no way Tanya would ask anyone to lie in court.

If there was one thing Elissa understood after all these years, it was how tangled these cases could get. Most people couldn’t even begin to figure

them out.

Connections—that was the only shortcut to solving problems.

She needed to know the truth before she could decide what to do next.

“Elissa,”

Carmela cut her off with a sneer. “Now you know how to beg, hmm? That’s not the attitude you had when you demanded half a million dollars from us.”

Elissa’s nails dug into her palm as regret washed over her.

How could she have ever thought she could go toe-to-toe with Carmela?

She pictured Tanya sitting alone in that cell, desperate and afraid. Swallowing her pride, she took a steadying breath. “Carmela, I was young and foolish... I wasn’t thinking clearly. Please, don’t hold it against me...”

“Too late.”

Carmela laughed, cool and in control. “Elissa, I always said you were clever. You played the perfect good girl for years, just to marry into the Atwater family. But you really were naïve.”

“How could you dare to burn bridges with me when you had nothing to fall back on?”

09:18

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator

On her way to the police station, Elissa couldn't help but turn this question over and over in her mind.

Back at the Murphy family's house, she had forced herself to swallow her pride time and again, simply because she knew what the old woman was capable of. Elissa was almost certain the old matriarch despised her. The way the woman looked at her was as if she were already dead—yet for some reason, she never finished her off.

Elissa had no power, no status. She was in no position to fight back. If she wanted to survive, she had to play along. She had to endure.

But then there was the Atwater family.

Why hadn't she just kept her head down last time? Maybe it was because she thought she'd finally found Mrs. Atwater's weak spot and had a bargaining chip for once.

What had given her that courage? How had she dared?

When she finally reached the police station, the officers took the evidence she brought and promptly told her she could leave.

But there was no way Elissa was leaving just like that. “What’s going on. with Tanya Foster’s case?” she pressed. “Officer, she would never persuade someone to lie in court. There must be a mistake.”

The officer hesitated, then said, “Orders from above. This is a serious case, and until it’s settled, no one’s allowed to see her.”

Something about that set off alarm bells in Elissa’s mind. What kind of situation warranted orders coming down from on high?

She bit her lip, about to ask more, but her phone rang again.

When she saw the caller ID, a sudden realization struck her. She thanked the officer quickly and hurried outside to answer, her voice cold and direct: “Hello? Did you set Tanya Foster up?”

“Well, well,”

Slate’s voice was as lazy and mocking as ever. “Hit a nerve, did I?”

Any lingering doubt vanished. Elissa’s voice grew sharp. “What are you. after?”

“I want you to beg me.”

Slate sounded positively gleeful on the other end.

“Slate-” Rain was pouring down now, but Elissa didn’t even bother with an umbrella. She strode toward her car, speaking so quickly her words tumbled out. “Why did you drag Tanya Foster into this? You’ll ruin her life

with this!”

Back in college, Tanya had worked herself to the bone to get ahead. She’d only pushed herself harder after graduation. If this charge stuck, her entire career would be over.

“Save your breath.”

Slate was born at the finish line where most people never even get to start. He didn’t care about any of this. “Elissa, I’m done forcing you. This time, I want you to come to me on your own. I want you to crawl into my bed, willingly.”

Elissa’s hands shook with rage and panic. Her eyes burned with unshed tears as she spat, “In your dreams!”

She was sure Slate hadn't come up with this plan on his own—he simply wasn't that clever. This had Marcia's fingerprints all over it.

Steeling herself, Elissa started the car and headed straight for Greenwood Manor.

If Carmela wouldn't help, she'd go to Frank.

Slate piped up again, calm as ever. "We'll see if I'm dreaming soon.

enough, won't we? Elissa, you have until sunrise. If I don't see you before then, Tanya Foster's going to prison."

09:19

He hung up.

Elissa floored the gas pedal. When she reached Greenwood Manor, she barely managed to throw the car into park before she leapt out, not even bothering to shut off the engine.

Lucy, seeing the car pull into the drive, hurried to open the door. She looked surprised to find Elissa, breathless and anxious, standing at the threshold. “Mrs. Atwater, what brings you back so suddenly?”

“Where’s Frank?” Elissa demanded, desperation thick in her voice—as if she were clutching at her last hope.

Lucy shook her head. “He’s not here. The young master hasn’t been home much these days.”

So this was what Frank had meant when he said Marcia was moving out. He was helping her move—leaving with her.

3/3

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator

Elissa didn’t care about any of that. She pressed on, “So where did Marcia move to?”

Lucy hesitated, clearly uncomfortable. “I honestly don’t know.”

A pit formed in Elissa’s stomach as she slid into the car, dialing Frank’s number as she pulled the door shut.

No answer.

A new WhatsApp message popped up from Slate.

It was a hotel room number.

Don't waste your time, sweetheart. Frank's not interested in talking to you.

Outside a secluded manor at the edge of town.

A black Maybach rolled slowly through the gates. The driver stepped out, unfurled a large black umbrella, and opened the rear door.

Frank emerged, tall and imposing, every trace of warmth gone from his features. His storm-dark eyes promised trouble.

Bernard hurried to greet him. "Mr. Atwater."

“She willing to talk yet?” Frank’s voice was ice-cold—nothing like his usual calm.

Bernard kept pace as they crossed the drive. “Ms. Carson insists she’ll only speak to you. In person.”

A glint of steel flickered in Frank’s gaze. He smoothed his cufflinks and strode into the basement.

The woman he’d once cherished—protected, indulged—was now locked in an empty, echoing room.

Marcia saw him through the bars and lunged for the door, but the iron gate held her back. She shook it desperately, tears streaming down her face as she pleaded, “Frank, please, I know I was wrong! Let me out, please...”

Once, Frank couldn’t stand to see her cry.

Whenever she wept, he’d remember a little girl, clutching her father’s hand and darting into traffic—fearless, determined to save him. His heart

would always soften.

Even after she'd lost that childhood innocence, he kept forgiving her, kept lowering his standards for her sake.

But she was never really his little Nine.

Years ago, after his father's funeral in Vistapeak City, Frank and his mother had made a trip out to Cresthaven with the family butler.

But even then, he was too late.

He'd tracked down the little girl's address, only for the neighbors to tell him her parents had died in an accident.

She'd vanished without a trace.

For years, Frank pulled every string he could, searching for her. Then one day, he spotted a jade pendant at Marcia's throat.

And yet, after everything, he still had nothing.

All those wasted years with Marcia, while his little Nine could be suffering somewhere—if she was even alive.

The thought snapped something inside him. Frank stormed forward, kicked the heavy door open, and seized Marcia by the throat, slamming her against the wall.

His knuckles went white, his voice colder than death. “I’m asking you one last time. The jade pendant—how did you get it?”

His gaze was razor-sharp, catching every flicker of emotion on Marcia’s

79-19

face.

Her back ached from the impact, and as she looked up at him, she didn’t doubt for a second—if she lied, he’d kill her without hesitation.

Terror rose inside her.

How had the gentle, refined man she knew turned into this?

Was it really just because she pretended to be this so-called little Nine? Did all their years together mean nothing to him now?

Why? What did that wretched girl have that she didn't?

Jealousy and resentment twisted inside her. Staring at Frank, Marcial suddenly laughed—a chilling, reckless sound. “I stole it!” she spat. “I tore it from the girl you love most in this world!”