

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator

So what if she'd once been his precious little darling?

Back then, he still let her do whatever she pleased—let her trample him. underfoot.

She remembered that brat vividly.

The entire orphanage was filled with kids at rock bottom, but that one girl—when she first arrived—stood out in her frilly dress, clinging timidly to the director's hand.

Her parents had just died, her eyes swollen like ripe plums.

She looked heartbreakingly delicate.

Marcia stood in the shadows, waiting for the director to leave before rushing over and yanking the hairclip off the girl's head.

You could tell at a glance she came from a life of comfort—she didn't even register Marcia's malice. Instead, she obediently reached up and took off her other hairclip, offering it over.

“Here, you can have this one too.”

Marcia slapped it out of her hand.

That was the first time Marcia realized, in the presence of a child so gently raised, how much she resembled a rat scurrying in the gutter.

Frank’s rage spiked like wildfire. His eyes went bloodshot, and his hand. tightened mercilessly around Marcia’s throat.

She’d bullied little Nine.

He wanted to kill her.

Marcia felt her breath slipping away, but the mocking smile never left her lips. Gasping, she forced out, “If you choke me to death, you’ll never find.

out where she is.’

“What did you say?”

For a moment, Frank’s self-control snapped back. He loosened his grip just enough, eyes boring into her. “You know where she is?”

Marcia didn’t bother playing coy. “I know where the family who adopted her lives.”

Frank’s excitement was impossible to hide. “Where?”

“Let go of me first.”

“Fine.”

Frank studied her, slowly releasing his grip, his hawk-like gaze fixed on her. “Don’t play games with me. You know how easy it would be for me to kill you.”

Marcia knew that all too well.

In this world of sharp social divides, no one was more aware than she was that, in the eyes of the rich and powerful, her life was worth nothing.

If they wanted her gone, they wouldn't even have to try.

Still, she refused to bow.

Once you've tasted luxury, it's hell to go back to scrambling for scraps. She wouldn't do it.

Besides, she couldn't trust Frank not to dispose of her the moment he got

what he wanted.

Meeting Frank's icy stare, Marcia dug her nails so hard into her palm that one snapped off. Only then did she find the courage to speak: "I'll tell you where they are, but you have to agree to one condition."

"What condition?"

"Divorce Elissa. Marry me."

Frank looked at her like she'd just told the world's darkest joke. He ran his tongue along his teeth, voice icy. "Marcia, do you really think you're in any position to bargain with me?"

"Suit yourself. You can keep me locked up here until you feel like talking. Maybe one day I'll tell you."

"Fine."

Marcia's heart plummeted, but she forced herself to stay calm. This was her last chance. "Then you'll never see her again. She's a cop's daughter, right?"

Frank, halfway to the door, jerked around to stare at her.

She knew she'd hit the mark.

Clenching her fists, Marcia pressed on. "When that family came to take her, I overheard the old lady talking to her companion. She said they'd make sure everything her parents did would come back on her a thousandfold."

"When that drug lord gets out of prison, he'll settle the score with the cop's daughter himself."

Frank's breathing tightened, suspicion warring with dread. "Are you sure?" He'd looked into the timeline of little Nine's parents' deaths.

It lined up exactly: the biggest drug bust Cresthaven PD had pulled off that decade. The whole ring got twenty years, no chance of parole due to the severity of the case.

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If what Marcia said was true, then at least... little Nine was still alive.

"Frank, at this point, I have no reason to lie to you."

And Marcia really wasn't lying.

Back then, when that little brat was taken away, everyone thought she'd been adopted by some wealthy family, destined for a life of comfort.

Only Marcia had been so delighted she could hardly sleep.

But it wasn't a life of comfort she was headed for—it was a death

sentence.

Marcia didn't miss the flash of tension and worry that crossed Frank's face. "You've heard about the kind of things those traffickers do, haven't you?"

"You can't bring yourself to divorce Elissa, but you're willing to risk the life of the Jade Pendant's owner? If you divorce Elissa, she'll just become a divorcée, but if you don't... Well, the owner of the Jade Pendant will probably die. Maybe she already has."

"I'll ask you one more time."

Frank tried to keep his emotions in check, his probing gaze fixed on Marcia. "Are you sure you know where the family who adopted her lives?" "I only know the city," Marcia admitted, not daring to lie.

A city was enough. With that, he could narrow things down quickly.

Frank lowered his eyes, deep in thought. When he looked back at her, his mind was made up. "So all I have to do is marry you, right?"

"Of course."

As long as she became Mrs. Frank, she'd have all the means she needed to keep that position for life.

Elissa sat in her car for a long while, only snapping out of her daze as dusk crept in. She finally started the engine and headed back to Vistapeak Gardens.

There was still time.

She would figure something out—she had to..

When she parked in front of her building, she checked the clock.

Less than three hours until her mentor and Jacqueline's flight landed.

Her mentor's connections were every bit as extensive as the Atwater family's. The thought settled her nerves a little. Shutting off the ignition, she grabbed her bag from the passenger seat and stepped out into the evening.

“Elissa-”

A familiar voice called out just as she was about to enter the building.

She turned, a beat slower than usual, and when she saw Frank standing beside his car in the shadows, looking as refined and composed as ever, she finally exhaled.

“When did you get here? Sorry, I was lost in thought and didn’t notice.

you...

As she spoke, she was already running through ways to bring up Tanya

Foster.

Honestly, knowing Frank’s personality, even if she came right out and asked, he’d probably help her.

But she couldn’t risk even the slightest chance.

Frank's gaze dropped to her, taking in the sheen of water on her skin, her damp hair clinging to her pale cheeks. Her eyes, always so clear, now held a trace of uncertainty, and her long lashes cast delicate shadows across her face.

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Frank had rarely seen her like this.

There was something about her, right now, that made him want to believe that if he pulled her into his arms and spoke gently to her, she'd come home with him without a word of protest.

Go back to being the gentle, understanding Mrs. Frank she'd always been. But seeing her this disheveled, it was as if his heart had been wrapped in a dense, suffocating net. The words he wanted to say stuck in his throat.

He took a moment to compose himself, then slipped off his jacket and draped it over her shoulders. "What happened to you? Why are you like this?"

"I..."

Elissa had already rehearsed her opening line. "I need your help with something."

“Good, I was looking for you too. You go first.”

“No, you go first.”

They spoke at the exact same time.

She pressed her lips together. “You go ahead.”

It would be easier for her to speak once he’d said his piece.

Frank went back to his car and fetched a clean, soft towel, gently drying her damp hair. His Adam’s apple bobbed as he struggled to speak. “Elissa...”

“Let’s get a divorce.”

He said it.

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For a split second, Elissa felt dazed, her eyelashes trembling..

Those words—she realized—wouldn't have surprised her at any other time. Yet, hearing them now caught her completely off guard.

“Don't worry,” Frank said, his voice soothing, “it's not a real divorce.”

He'd already made up his mind when he agreed to Marcia's request. Resting his hands gently on Elissa's shoulders, he bent his head closer. “We'll just pretend for a while. We don't even need to file any paperwork.”

Elissa gathered her scattered thoughts, her voice cool and steady. “A real divorce would be fine, too.”

As long as he was the one to bring it up, she wouldn't have to keep honoring that agreement with Carmela.

“No.” Frank refused instantly, the word hard and certain. Deep down, he believed that if they ever signed the papers, he'd lose her for good. He couldn't bear that thought.

Even now, he wasn't sure what he'd say to Elissa once the real "little Nine" was finally found. Maybe that girl was already married—if so, all he'd have to do was make sure she was provided for, keep her safe from those drug lords, and that would be enough.

The idea left him almost relieved, though he didn't have time to dwell on why. All he could do was grip Elissa's shoulders a little tighter, meeting her gaze with earnest eyes. He softened his tone. "Elissa, I just need you to go along with this. Just play the part for Marcia's sake, that's all."

Afraid she might misunderstand, Frank added seriously, "You have to believe me. I don't have a choice here. You're my wife—no one else. That's never going to change."

"Never."

Elissa looked a little stunned. It wasn't that she was hesitating to agree—it was that she didn't know what to choose. Between Frank and Carmela,

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there wasn't a shred of unspoken understanding. One wanted her to fake a divorce, the other wanted her to play the loving couple.

Frank, watching her lower her eyes in silence, grew anxious. "Come on, Elissa. Please? I'm begging you, okay?"

He was willing to beg, just to put her at ease.

Elissa suddenly looked up at him, her lips quirking in a half-smile. “Alright. I’ll do it.”

She agreed. But she didn’t mention that there was no need to pretend because, in truth, they were already divorced.

Frank let out a sigh of relief, and Elissa seized the chance to speak. “I

want to-”

She never finished. Frank’s phone rang again and, after answering, he hurried off, leaving her no opportunity to say another word.

Maybe it was for the best, Elissa thought bitterly as she watched him leave. This whole mess had Marcia’s fingerprints all over it. Frank was willing to fake a divorce for Marcia’s sake—there was no guarantee he’d ever choose to help her.

Anxious and distracted, Elissa took the elevator upstairs. As the doors slid open, Rowan caught sight of her—she looked lost, as if her soul had been sucked out. Max, his golden

retriever, wriggled free of the leash and bounded over, tail wagging, leaping into Elissa's arms.

"What did Frank say this time to upset you?" Rowan called out dryly. "You look like a ghost."

Elissa hoisted Max and stepped out of the elevator, doing her best to avoid Rowan's gaze. "He wants me to play along with a fake divorce," she said casually.

Ever since that night when things had grown awkward between them, she'd been unconsciously keeping her distance.

Rowan just smirked, as if nothing had changed. "You're so zen, even a monk would come to you for lessons."

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Elissa didn't have the energy to banter—her mind was too preoccupied

with Tanya Foster. After tousling Max's ears, she handed the leash back to Rowan and started toward her door.

"Something else is going on, isn't it?"

His voice, cool and clear, stopped her in her tracks.

She stiffened, unsure if she should say anything. If she could avoid it, she

didn't want to ask him for help. But the image of Tanya, alone and desperate, haunted her.

"Rowan," she said quietly, "can you help Tanya Foster? She's been accused of something she didn't do. They've taken her into custody..."

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Rowan's dark eyes fixed on her. "Frank didn't even agree to this?"

"I haven't brought it up with him yet."

“So why are you asking me first?”

Elissa fell silent, suddenly realizing she trusted Rowan more than she cared to admit. She’d blurted it out without even thinking.

Seeing the steady, indifferent look on Rowan’s face, Elissa pressed her palms together nervously. “If you don’t want to... then just forget it.”

There was no forcing Rowan into anything he didn’t want.

Back home, Elissa barely glanced away from the clock on the wall. She watched the hands crawl forward until her eyes burned and her nerves were about to snap. At the breaking point, she snatched up her phone and dialed Aaron’s number.

The call connected immediately.

Aaron picked up after barely a ring. Elissa’s voice trembled with both relief and anxiety. “Professor, did you pick up Jonathan? I actually need to trouble you with something-

“Elissa.” Aaron’s voice was strained, urgent. “Our flight landed early, so we decided to catch a cab instead. There was an accident on the

way-Jacqueline's hurt pretty badly. We're **on** our way to the hospital right now."

Elissa finally understood the meaning of "when it rains, it pours."

She shot up from the couch. "What about you? Are you okay? And Jacqueline—does she need—"

"I'm fine," Aaron interrupted gently, knowing her too well. "Don't panic. There's nothing you can do right now. By the time your visa's sorted, Jacqueline will probably be out of the hospital."

"But—"

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"Trust me. Wait until we're back home, then you can visit her. Don't worry

about us."

"Alright."

After a few deep breaths, Elissa knew she couldn't leave the country any time soon. "If you or Jacqueline need anything—please call me, any

time."

People liked to joke that Aaron was henpecked, but Elissa knew better. Jacqueline hardly ever nagged—Aaron just loved her fiercely.

This was the worst possible moment to bring up her own problems. Elissa had no choice but to hang up.

But then there was Tanya Foster...

Elissa had never felt so close to falling apart. She paced her living room, clutching her phone, mind racing through everyone she could call.

Was

Bradley? Probably not. He was a classic trust fund kid, but real power in the Murphy family in his older brother's hands. No one in Vistapeak City wanted to cross the Murphys.

The more she thought about it, the more obvious it became—Rowan was the only one who could really help.

At the front door, Elissa's nails dug crescents into her palm as she hesitated, torn between pride and desperation.

She knew she ought to go to him, but her thoughts were a tangled mess.

Her phone rang. Slate sounded impatient. "Still haven't decided?"

"If

you keep hesitating, Elissa, who knows what might happen to your best friend..." It was a veiled threat, his meaning clear.

"I've decided!" Elissa's voice came out tight, nearly a shout.

Slate chuckled darkly. "Then what are you waiting for—"

She hung up before he could finish.

She'd made up her mind.

She was going to ask Rowan for help.

No more wavering. Elissa strode across the hall, heart pounding, and rang Rowan's doorbell.

It was four in the morning. She'd resigned herself to the possibility that he wouldn't answer. But as soon as the bell sounded, the door swung open from the inside.

It was as if he'd been waiting for her all along.

Rowan stood there, shoulders draped in a dark robe, the entryway light casting sharp shadows across his face and making his features seem even more enigmatic. His jaw was set, eyes unreadable, watching her in silence. He didn't say a word—just waited for her to speak, his presence almost overwhelming.

Elissa's fingers trembled at her sides. She looked up at him, summoning every ounce of courage she had left.

“Rowan... you must care about me at least a little, right?”

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he knew all too well: when you're asking for help, you need to play the part. You need to offer something the other person actually wants.

Carmela was desperate for her to keep the divorce a secret, so that was easy—she could promise Carmela to keep quiet for as long as she

wanted.

As for Frank, his heart was never really in their sham of a marriage. She could cooperate, let him sneak around with Marcia without a fuss, give

him all the freedom he craved.

But Rowan...

Rowan was a different story.

She'd thought about this for a long time before coming here. **In** the end, the only thing she had left to gamble with was herself.

She was betting—betting that Rowan's attitude that night at the professor's birthday wasn't just her own wishful thinking. Betting that this young prince, who'd once whimsically “adopted” her as a little sister **for** nine years, had suddenly become interested in her in a way a man is interested in a woman.

Or, to put it bluntly, in a way that was purely physical.

She'd already had to fight tooth and nail just to marry Frank; she never deluded herself into thinking she could be Rowan's legitimate partner.

So, the moment she saw the flicker of surprise on his face, she lowered her eyes and spoke softly, obediently, “Rowan, I could be your lover. I'll do whatever you want.”

Just... please, help Tanya Foster. Please.”

She didn't even dare to look at his expression.

In those few seconds of silence, her heart was about to pound out of her chest, her fingertips trembling uncontrollably.

If she'd bet wrong, there was no telling how cruel Rowan's mockery might

1. be.

He could sneer that she was a frog trying to eat swan meat.

Or, with that superior, icy tone, ask her: What on earth made you think I'd ever be interested in someone like you?

But Tanya Foster was in trouble because of her—if she had to endure a little humiliation, so be it.

If she lost this gamble, she'd accept her fate.

Rowan's gaze drifted downward, taking in her shaking hands and bare feet. His brows furrowed, just for a moment, almost imperceptibly. "Come in."

With that, he opened the shoe cabinet, pulled out a brand-new pair of women's slippers, and tossed them onto the floor.

Elissa hesitated, unsure of what he meant, until his cold, brisk voice rang out again. “Go wash your feet.”

“...Alright.”

She almost forgot—he was a neat freak.

Her feet had just come straight from the elevator. Of course he couldn’t tolerate her bringing dirt into his immaculate home.

She bent down, slipped on the slippers, and stepped inside, careful not to let her dirty feet touch a single inch of his spotless floor.

The layout was the same as hers.

She walked straight to the guest bathroom, turned on the shower, and didn’t even wait for the water to warm up before dutifully washing her feet.

The sound of running water filled the quiet. The frosted glass door creaked open.

She'd just finished, setting the showerhead aside, when she looked up at

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him, nervous and uncertain. After a moment's hesitation, she finally asked, "Can you really help Tanya Foster?"

She already knew the answer—at least, she thought she did. But she needed to hear it from him, needed that certainty.

Rowan's long, clean fingers rested on the door handle. His tone was unreadable. "Is Tanya Foster really that important? Important enough. that you'd sell yourself for her?"

The last time Elissa had felt this humiliated, she was standing outside a private club in another city, moments before she decided to leave Frank—overhearing that his lover was her own sister-in-law.

No. This time was even worse.

But aside from Rowan, there was no one left she could turn to.

She curled her toes, eyes fixed on the floor, not knowing where else to look. “Yes. She’s very important.”

For eight years—eight long, lonely years after this man had abandoned her—Tanya Foster was the one person who stayed by her side.

Tanya had nothing either. But she never left Elissa, never gave up on her.

If Tanya hadn’t been so desperate to save up enough money for them both to leave Vistapeak City together, she never would have taken on such a dangerous case. She wouldn’t have given Slate the opening he needed.

“If I say no?” Rowan’s dark eyes searched her, as though he wanted to see, straight through her soul. “Who’s next? Who are you going to throw yourself at after me?”

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In a single sentence, Elissa's dignity was ground beneath Rowan's heel.

But

the truth was, it didn't matter anymore.

She could always double back-plead with Frank, or even Carmela. If she

had to put everything on the line, she would, as long as she could keep Tanya Foster safe.

Yet, staring into Rowan's fathomless eyes in that moment, Elissa's stubbornness flared up. No matter what, she refused to admit defeat.

She let out a self-deprecating laugh. "Maybe Frank. Or Slate, who knows? Hell, if some old man's interested, I'd even take that-"

Bang!

The bathroom door flew open, slamming so hard against the wall it cut

her off mid-sentence.

Rowan strode in, scooped her up without a word, and carried her straight to the living room sofa. He set her down, then headed back to the bathroom, returning with a soft, dry towel.

His face was unreadable, but the tension in the air made it clear he was

anything but pleased.

Elissa instinctively shrank back as he sat beside her, grasped both her ankles in one large hand, and rested her feet on his knee. He wrapped her feet in the towel, gently but firmly drying them off.

As his long, deft fingers moved across her skin, there was something unexpectedly comforting about it.

Maybe it was because when she was younger, he'd dried her feet like this countless times. Elissa found herself oddly at ease.

Once he'd finished, Rowan set the towel aside and glanced over at her, voice even and unhurried. "Is your period over?"

Elissa immediately tensed up, startled by how quickly he'd cut to the

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chase. She shook her head, flustered. "Not yet."

Without another word, Rowan unwrapped a sugar cube and dropped it into a glass of steaming water on the coffee table. He handed her the

cup.

She blinked, suddenly realizing she'd completely misunderstood **his** intentions. Taking the cup, she murmured, "Thank you."

"Drink it and get some sleep," Rowan said crisply, tossing a thin blanket over her legs before standing **up**.

Elissa hesitated, then asked, "What about Tanya Foster?"

“Worry about yourself,” he replied coolly.”

And just like that, he walked out to the balcony, phone in hand, sliding the soundproof door shut behind him.

That was his answer.

Staring at his tall, commanding figure, Elissa finally felt herself relax. She drank the sweet, hot water in quick gulps. As soon as she set the cup down, a wave of sleepiness crashed over her.

She stopped worrying about whether Rowan could get it done. Ever since she was a child, he’d always seemed capable of anything.

Still, Tanya Foster’s plight lingered in the back of her mind, and her sleep was restless. After what felt like only two hours, she woke, half-aware, nuzzling *into* the comforter. The familiar, smoky scent made her frown in

confusion.

She opened her eyes fully and looked around.

She was in Rowan's bed.

She'd asked for his help, and instead of agonizing over it, she'd fallen sound asleep. Embarrassed, she slipped out from beneath the covers. and padded into the living room. Dawn was just breaking outside.

The living room was empty.

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Almost on autopilot, she wandered into the kitchen—and stopped short. For the first time in her life, she saw Rowan, who never so much as boiled water, standing at the stove, making breakfast.

There was something almost domestic about it, his usual icy presence. softened as he stirred a pot of porridge.

Elissa moved closer, intending to speak, but then she realized Rowan was on the phone.

One hand held the phone to his ear, the other stirred the pot with a ceramic ladle to keep it from sticking. "Relax, I didn't stay up all night."

“Yes, yes, you’re right. Lack of sleep will kill me young. But let me remind you, if I die, no one’s going to look after you.”

His voice was gentle, uncharacteristically patient.

He was coaxing someone. Comforting them.

And that’s when a jarring truth crashed through Elissa’s foggy mind.

She’d almost forgotten—Rowan had a girlfriend.

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Ever since Elissa found out Lorraine wasn’t Rowan’s girlfriend, she’d unconsciously started ignoring the fact that he still had someone else in

his life.

Fine, so it wasn’t Lorraine. There was still someone else.

So what did that make her actions last night?

The thought made Elissa uneasy. Rowan heard her shift and glanced over his shoulder. He finished his call with a couple of calm, patient words before hanging up and turning to face her.

“Head clear yet?”

His tone was already back to its usual, measured calm.

Elissa hesitated, realizing he was talking about last night. Remembering again that he had a girlfriend, she found herself at a loss for words.

He must’ve already taken care of things with Tanya Foster.

If she backed out now, it would look like she was burning bridges—maybe even make Rowan annoyed enough to complicate things with Tanya Foster further.

But if she didn’t back out....

She stayed quiet, brow furrowed, and Rowan arched an eyebrow at her. “So, how long are you planning to sell yourself to me?”

“I...”

Elissa took a breath, deciding it was best to lay it out. “I remember your said you had a girlfriend.”

Rowan blinked, then quickly recalled what he’d told her in the parking garage that time.

He’d said it offhand, but she remembered it all this time.

He smiled faintly. “We broke up.”

Relief washed through Elissa, but before she could say anything, Rowan continued in his slow, deliberate way, “Even if we hadn’t, it’d still be fair.”

“I have a girlfriend, you’re married. Elissa, if I can be the other man, what are you so worried about?”

There was a sly, mocking note in his voice.

Elissa froze, suddenly realizing there was something else she’d been ignoring.

She knew she was divorced—but Rowan didn’t.

Maybe that was for the best. At least Rowan would keep their unspeakable relationship a secret for the sake of his own pride.

She stared at the floor. "So... how long do you want this to last?"

Rowan answered without hesitation, "Depends on my mood."

Typical him.

Elissa knew she had no grounds to negotiate. "Fine. Just let me know when you get bored."

"I have conditions."

His voice was cool and even.

Standing by the table, Elissa instinctively looked up. "What kind of conditions?"

"From now on-

Rowan braced one hand on the

table and leaned in, his dark gaze

catching hers, his words deliberate and clear. "You're not to let Frank touch you. Not even a finger."

Elissa wasn't surprised. She agreed without hesitation. "Alright."

Honestly, he didn't even need to say it. She and Frank had already been keeping their distance for a while now.

Rowan didn't say anything for a moment, that did surprise her. "That's

and

it? "

"That's it."

He looked away, his tone casual. "You washed up yet?"

"No. I was just about to-

She turned to leave, but his hand suddenly caught her wrist.

Rowan nodded toward the master bathroom. "There are new toiletries in

the drawer.”

“Oh. Okay.”

Elissa didn’t argue. She was already the mistress – no point in being coy about something like this.

After brushing her teeth and washing her face, she set her toothbrush on the counter. Her eyes drifted to Rowan’s black electric toothbrush.

Hers was white.

One black, one white.

Even their mugs–the one he used was deep blue, hers was a soft pink.

She hesitated, then set her toothbrush and mug neatly beside his.

Shuffling out in her slippers, Elissa paused for a moment when she saw the thick, cheesy omelet on the table.

When she was a kid, she’d hated boiled eggs, so omelets like these had been a breakfast staple–because she liked them.

Rowan never really cared for cheese, but he’d eat it anyway, frowning the whole time, and let the cook make breakfast to her taste.

Rowan acted like he hadn’t noticed her staring. He simply pulled out a chair and sat down. “Eat.”

But Elissa’s mind was still on Tanya Foster. “When can I go to the police station...”

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

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Rowan glanced at his silver watch. “They’re still handling the paperwork. Once you finish breakfast, go pick her up. The timing should work out.”

“Wait, you mean Tanya can come home today?”

Elissa’s eyes widened with a mix of disbelief and delight, the exhaustion of last night melting away. She looked at Rowan with a spark of hope.

She’d known he’d find a way to resolve things, but she hadn’t expected him to get Tanya Foster out this quickly.

Rowan pulled out a chair and sat down, sliding a bowl of warm soup in front of her. He tapped his fingers lightly on the table, his tone noncommittal. “Eat your breakfast first.”

“Alright.”

Elissa obediently sat beside him, picked up her spoon, and began sipping the soup.

The omelet was delicious too.

Eight years apart, living under different roofs, they’d both changed so much.

Rowan—he actually knew how to cook now.

After breakfast, Elissa headed straight for the police station to bring Tanya Foster home.

Rowan had already arranged everything. When she arrived, Murphy Group's top attorney was just finishing up the last of the paperwork.

It wasn't long before the police released her.

When Tanya Foster finally emerged, she looked more disheveled than Elissa had ever seen her.

Since starting her career, Tanya had always taken pride in her appearance—always the picture of a polished, brilliant young lawyer.

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But now, her flawless makeup was streaked and patchy, her glossy brown waves tangled and unkempt.

Elissa's eyes filled with tears the instant she saw her. She rushed over and threw her arms around Tanya, repeating, "I'm so sorry, Tanya. I'm so

sorry..."

Tanya shrugged it off, squeezing Elissa's hand as she gently pulled away. "Hey, I'm fine. Seriously. Let's just go home. I'm dying for a hot shower."

The more Tanya downplayed it, the guiltier Elissa felt.

On the drive back, Tanya easily noticed something was off. "If you feel that bad, why not just wire me a million or two to make up for it?"

"Okay."

They were stopped at a red light, and Elissa immediately reached for her phone to transfer the money.

Tanya burst out laughing and snatched the phone away. "Babe, do you even remember the first time we met?"

Elissa hesitated for a moment. When the light turned green, she pressed the gas and said softly, “Of course I do.”

“Well, by that logic, shouldn’t I be the one wiring you a few million?”

Tanya could never forget that day. If anything, the memory had only grown sharper over the years.

She’d grown up in Vistapeak City, but her family lived on the outskirts, crammed into a tiny apartment—four people squeezed into barely four hundred square feet, waiting for their building to be torn down.

Tanya had clawed her way into Vistapeak Academy—a place overflowing with overachievers and trust fund kids—by studying day and night for a scholarship.

She was pretty and matured early, but her clothes always looked worn, her white canvas sneakers yellowed, her bangs chopped unevenly by her own hand. She stood out as hopelessly uncool.

The boys stared at her; the girls, sharper and meaner, loved nothing more than tearing her down with cutting remarks.

She first met Elissa on a day when she'd finally snapped, exchanging insults with a pack of girls in the bathroom.

She must've pushed them too far, because they—wealthy, notorious. bullies—grabbed a filthy mop bucket and threatened to dump it over her.

That's when Elissa stepped out of a locked stall and, somehow, managed to trip one of them.

The filthy water ended up all over the ringleader, which only made things worse; the group turned on both of them, beating them soundly.

It wasn't the first time Tanya had taken a beating.

And, as it turned out, it wasn't Elissa's first time either.

But it was the first time Tanya hadn't faced it alone.

Elissa glanced over at Tanya and the two shared a wry smile. "Alright, let's

call it even."

“I noticed that lawyer back there—he’s from Murphy Group, isn’t he?”

Tanya recognized most of the prominent attorneys in town. “You asked Rowan for help, didn’t you?”

The question caught Elissa off guard. Her grip tightened on the wheel, and she nodded, a little too stiffly. “Yeah.”

“What’s got you so tense?”

Tanya didn’t miss the shift in her friend’s mood. “You didn’t do anything. crazy to get me out, did you?”

“No, of course not!”

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator

Elissa denied it without a second thought.

She had no idea how long Rowan's sudden interest in her would last. For all she knew, he could decide she was no longer needed in a few days. and send her packing. There was no reason to worry Tanya Foster with that, or drag her into unnecessary anxiety.

So Elissa changed the subject. "Is this whole mess going to affect your job?"

"It won't."

Tanya shook her head, a rare note of approval in her voice. "You know, for all that Rowan comes off as cold and aloof, he's actually pretty thorough when it comes to handling business."

"He already had the Murphy Group's lawyers call my boss, made it clear this

was all his cousin's doing and that I had nothing to do with it."

In the world of business, everyone's a sharp player. Rowan's intervention. didn't just clear her name—it also subtly implied that she had some kind of connection to the Murphy family.

Earlier, when Tanya finally got her phone back from the police, her business partners had bombarded her with concerned messages—some of them all but coming out and asking what exactly her relationship with

Rowan was.

When the two women got home and stepped out of the elevator, they unexpectedly ran into someone they knew.

Rex had just come from Rowan's place. His gold-rimmed glasses softened the sharpness in his eyes, but his words alright?"

He clearly wasn't talking to Elissa.

were blunt. "Are you

Elissa hesitated, a little surprised at how familiar he and Tanya seemed.

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Tanya's expression was cool and distant. "I'm fine."

With that, she took Elissa's arm, ready to walk past him and head inside.

But as they brushed by, Rex suddenly raised his arm, pressing his palm to Tanya's forehead, stopping her in her tracks. His hand, as always, was cold.

He frowned slightly, then looked at Elissa. "She's burning up. Must be at

least a hundred and one."

"Yeah," Elissa replied. She'd already noticed Tanya was feverish on the way home—probably from spending the night freezing at the police station. "I'll get her some medicine as soon as we get inside."

They always kept a few basic remedies at home—more than enough to

treat a mild cold.

But Rex didn't seem inclined to let them leave. Or, more accurately, he wasn't ready to let Tanya go.

It finally dawned on Elissa that there was something between these two she hadn't been told about, just as the door behind them clicked open.

Rowan stood there, now dressed in a tailored suit, his jaw set in command. He jerked his chin at her, issuing the order with casual authority. "Come here."

Like he was calling a dog.

But Elissa knew better than to protest. If you wanted to play the part of the lover, you had to accept the rules.

She glanced between Tanya and Rex, sensing the strange tension in the air, and wisely slipped away. Before she left, she told Tanya, "Call me when you're done."

Once the door closed behind her, the hallway fell silent again. Only then did Tanya take a step back, the polished elevator doors reflecting just how exhausted and disheveled she looked.

The man standing next to her, on the other hand, always seemed

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untouched by any of life's messiness.

Rex broke the silence first. "Did it scare you?"

He was talking about the night's events.

Tanya gave a tired half-smile. "No."

From start to finish, she'd never really been worried. She knew Elissa would find a way to get her out.

Rex had never met anyone else who could shut down a conversation so completely.

He studied her quietly, the crease in his brow deepening. "Are you always going to keep me at arm's length?"

After a sleepless night and now running a fever, Tanya felt heavy and foggy, her mind barely keeping up. Staring at the man before her, she blurted out without thinking, "Could you marry me?"

The words hung in the air. When she caught the flicker of surprise on his face, she understood.

But the truth was, she'd known the answer three years ago.

Men like him could have their fun with a girl from the outskirts of town—al nobody like her—but marriage? That was impossible.

If he ever tried, his ancestors would probably turn over in their graves.

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A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator

Tanya Foster offered a distant smile. “You see, Mr. Rex, we’re just not from the same world. You know it, and so do I...”

“Give me some time.”

Rex cut her off, his voice unexpectedly low.

Tanya narrowed her eyes, trying to clear her head. “What did you say?”

Inside the house.

Elissa slipped off her shoes as she entered. Spotting the man across the room, she let out a breath she hadn’t realized she was holding. “Thank you, for what you did for Tanya Foster.”

Rowan’s lips curved into a half-smile, half-smirk. “Thank me? Isn’t this what you earned?”

Elissa dropped her gaze in embarrassment, cheeks burning. She knew exactly what he meant—she’d paid for his help with her own body.

Before she could wallow in her discomfort, Rowan set a stack of papers on the dining table. “Sign this.”

Elissa approached and picked it up. The bold title at the top made her stomach twist:
Contract of Indenture.

She looked up at Rowan, who spoke as if it were the most natural thing in the world. “I have to look out for my own interests, don’t I?”

“...Of course.”

She never forgot that he was, above all, a businessman,

Rowan’s steady gaze watched her as she skimmed the contract, her eyes darting over the clauses. Without bothering to read every line, she scrawled her name at the bottom.

He slid an ink pad toward her. “Fingerprint, too.”

Chapter

He was meticulous, as always.

Elissa pressed her thumb onto the pad, then onto the paper, mumbling under her breath, “Not like I can run away.”

Rowan’s eyes glinted with irony. “Oh? And if one day you change your mind, run back to being hopelessly in love with someone else, how could I stop you?”

She knew he was talking about three years ago, when she'd insisted on marrying Frank.

She also knew there was no explaining herself to Rowan—he would never understand that some people are willing to sacrifice their marriage just. for a little more freedom.

In his mind, the only reason a woman would refuse to marry anyone else was out of deep, unwavering love.

“That won't happen again.”

Elissa slid the contract back across the table. “Signed and fingerprinted. That's all, right?”

She hadn't examined the terms too closely, but she could tell there weren't many restrictions on her, No clauses about not asking where Rowan went, or not telling anyone about their arrangement. Perhaps he thought those were just the basics of being a mistress—no need to put them in writing.

As Elissa stood up to leave, Rowan's brows arched in mild surprise. “Leaving already?”

Her nerves tensed, her mind jumping to the wrong conclusion.

Last night, all she could think about was begging him to help Tanyal Foster, so she hadn't really felt self-conscious. But now, with her ears burning red, she stammered, "Tanya Foster is still waiting for me..."

"What's the rush?"

Rowan rose to his feet, his steps deliberate as he closed the distance

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between them. The subtle scent of his cologne enveloped her, and Elissal found herself backing into the sofa, nearly collapsing onto it in her panic. Before she could fall, Rowan caught her, his hand gripping her waist tightly.

Just like that night in the car.

Only now, there was a layer of fabric between them—but somehow, that didn't make the moment any less charged.

Holding her firmly, Rowan leaned in. Elissa's heart pounded so loudly she was sure he could hear it. In a trembling voice, she tried to ward him off. "I-I'm still on my period..."

Rowan's lips curled into a knowing smile. "I haven't forgotten."

He gazed down at her, his eyes tracing the delicate lines of her face—long lashes fluttering with nerves, nose perfectly sculpted, lips soft and inviting. She looked so kissable.

His hand caressed her waist, his voice low and persuasive. "Kiss me."