

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator

Chapter 21

The shot was dead-on.

Caught her square in the forehead.

Blood welled up so fast, it made her tumble down the stairs that morning look tame by comparison.

Frank stared in shock, his body moving before his mind could catch up.

He shoved Elissa away, anger flaring in his voice, cold and laced with disappointment. “What the hell are you doing? Elissa, was all that sweetness and kindness just an act?”

Elissa crashed to the floor, stunned by the sudden force. She met his accusing gaze,

dazed and silent.

He was right.

It had all been an act.

But this time, she was done pretending.

Frank hadn't expected her to be so fragile, not after everything she'd been through. The realization made him pause.

Marcia clutched her forehead, her voice trembling with tears. "Frankie! It hurts so much—I'm bleeding everywhere..."

He couldn't think about anything else. Sweeping Marcia into his arms, he hurried out of

the room.

Just before he left, Frank glanced back, worry flickering in his eyes.

That single look hit him like a punch *to* the gut.

There she was—the girl who’d once promised to marry him—staring at him with eyes as clear as black and white, but now utterly devoid of feeling.

Not even the bare politeness you’d give a stranger.

The IV bottle smashed against the floor, yanking the needle from her hand.

Bright blood streamed down Elissa’s pale, slender wrist, dripping steadily.

She barely seemed to notice. Instead, she gripped the bedframe, knuckles blanched, fighting her way to her feet. Her thin body swayed, but she refused to let go.

13:31

That’s the moment Tanya Foster walked in.

She startled, rushing over to press a wad of gauze against Elissa's bleeding hand, steadying her with the other. "What on earth happened? You're bleeding all over, and you didn't even call for a nurse—what were you thinking?"

What was she thinking?

Elissa gave a faint, bitter smile.

She was thinking—it wasn't worth it.

Three years of genuine feeling, and in the end, maybe none of it was worth it.

Tanya frowned, helping her back onto the bed. "What's going on? Edna called and said you were pushed down the stairs?"

Elissa forced herself to focus, lips pressed into a thin line. "Yeah. But I already got my revenge."

"What?"

"I split Marcia's head open."

She nodded toward the broken glass on the floor. “That’s the weapon.”

Tanya acted like she hadn’t heard. She wiped up the blood on the IV bottle with an alcohol pad and tossed it in the trash. “Weapon? Please. It’s just an IV bottle that slipped and broke, nothing more.”

Elissa gave a wry, colorless laugh. “If I ever killed someone, would you help me dispose of the murder weapon this calmly?”

“No,” Tanya said, dead serious after a moment’s thought. “I’d help you hide the body first.”

Elissa stared, slightly impressed.

But the thing Tanya feared never happened.

Days passed, and *no* police ever showed up at her hospital room. Marcia never filed a report.

Cliff stopped by a few times when his schedule allowed, checking in on Elissa.

He always gave her a few acupuncture treatments.

A few days later, after the doctor finished his rounds, he glanced at her chart, surprised.
“You’re recovering fast. That was a nasty fall, but you’re nearly healed already.”

“You’ll be ready to go home in a day or two. But remember–no strenuous activity for a while. You need time to heal.”

13:32

“Doctor, I’d like to be discharged tomorrow,” Elissa said.

“Tomorrow?”

“Yes, I have something important to do.”

She'd studied medicine at her mentor's side for over a decade. Her mentor and Jacqueline had always treated her well.

She couldn't break a promise to her teacher.

"All right," the doctor agreed.

He checked the wound on her forehead and carefully removed the stitches. "It's lucky your hairline will cover the scar. Otherwise, you'd have a mark right in the middle of your

forehead."

Only a female doctor, Elissa thought, would worry about that for her patient.

Elissa smiled. "A scar doesn't bother me."

First, she truly didn't care.

Second, she was good at getting rid of scars.

“Oh, but you should care.” The doctor’s tone turned playful. “Such a pretty face—what a waste it would be to leave a mark.”

“Exactly!” the nurse chimed in with a laugh. “By the way, your chart says you’re married. How come we haven’t seen your husband once this whole time? Doesn’t he worry about you at all?”

Elissa let out a soft laugh. “Him? He’s busy.”

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator

Too busy playing the knight in shining armor.

Too busy fussing over his sweetheart.

A couple of days ago, Tanya Foster dropped by with afternoon tea for Elissa. The moment she stepped inside, she gave Frank an earful.

And who could blame her?

She'd walked in on Frank in the VIP room, doting over Marcia as if she were made of glass.

The next morning, Elissa finished her discharge paperwork without a hitch.

Cliff, ever the worrier, sent her a message to check in.

[Elissa, want me to pick you up from the hospital?]

[Cliff, don't trouble yourself. Tanya Foster's taking me to the airport.]

Elissa replied as she stepped into the elevator.

She'd just reached the underground parking lot when she caught a familiar voice echoing

from the stairwell.

It was Frank, on the phone.

“You think I still don’t know her well enough? I really didn’t expect she’d get into a fight with

Marcia.”

Whoever was on the other end must have said something sharp, because Frank sounded weary as he replied, “I never intended for her to be left out in the cold, and there’s no way I’m divorcing her.”

The voice on the phone suddenly jumped an octave, “No way! Little Elissa beat up your precious Marcia and you’re not even thinking about divorce?”

There was a brief pause, then the friend snickered, “Wait, don’t tell me you’re actually catching feelings for little Elissa?”

“Give it a rest,” Frank muttered.

He hesitated, as if searching for the right words. “If I divorced her now, the gossip alone would drown Marcia. And after all the rumors lately... my family would never let her off

the hook.”

Elissa heard every self-sacrificing word, and couldn't help but smile silently.

13:32

She'd always known his reasons.

But hearing them out loud still stung in a way she hadn't expected.

Frank continued, "I promised I'd always protect her."

"...You mean that old childish promise?"

His friend scoffed, "Come on, you two barely met as kids. Are *you* sure you're not confusing her with someone else? Anyway, see you tonight at the usual spot?"

Frank's reply was cool. "Not tonight. I'm not coming out with *you* guys."

"Celebrating Marcia's birthday?"

“With Elissa. I asked the doctor—she insisted on being discharged today. I guess she wants to spend my birthday with me. I’ll pick her up and take her home soon.”

Frank’s tone softened, almost fond. “She even prepared a birthday present for me, and tonight—”

Before he could finish, Elissa spotted Tanya Foster’s car pulling up outside the elevator.

She didn’t linger. She slipped away without a word.

She wouldn’t be going home with him. Tonight, the only one opening that divorce agreement would be Frank himself.

That place she once thought of as home—it was nothing more than a convenient facade.

A curtain hiding all of Frank’s secrets.

But *once he* unwrapped her gift, he’d know—she was done with him.

When Elissa got in the car, Tanya pointed to the back seat. “I picked up your things from Edna. Check if anything’s missing.”

One suitcase and a backpack. Elissa only bothered to unzip the backpack.

All her documents and essentials were there.

She shook her head. “No, that’s everything. Let’s head to the airport.”

“Alright.”

Tanya tapped the gas, steering them out of the lot.

Some unexplainable urge made Elissa glance back toward the stairwell.

Frank had just stepped out, tall as ever, with those gentle eyes and that easy grace she

remembered so well.

13:32

Tanya glanced at her in the rearview mirror. "What are you looking at?"

"Nothing."

The car slipped out of the garage. Morning sunlight streamed through the windshield, and Elissa let out a soft laugh. "It's such a beautiful day."

"Yeah, it's been ages since we've seen the sun."

No one can resist winter sunshine. Tanya kept her eyes on the road, but raised an eyebrow at Elissa. "You're in a good mood for someone heading overseas. We've traveled plenty of times before, but I've never seen you this happy. What's different?"

"Tanya,"

Elissa rolled down the window, slipped off her wedding ring, and tossed it out into the morning air. "This time is different."

This time,

before leaving, she'd been Mrs. Frank—someone's human shield, a name on a marriage

license.

But when she returned, she'd just be Elissa.

Simply Elissa, and nothing else.

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator

Chapter 23

Elissa headed toward the gate and immediately spotted Cliff.

Dressed casually yet sharp, Cliff stood tall and striking, effortlessly handsome.

He seemed to be searching for her as well—their eyes met across the crowd.

Even after all these years, Cliff still looked genuinely taken aback by Elissa's bare-faced beauty. He crossed the distance between them in a few quick strides and took her backpack from her shoulder.

He glanced over her delicate face, and his professional instincts kicked in. "You haven't been sleeping well at the hospital these past couple days, have you?"

"A little," she admitted.

Just two nights ago, a new patient had arrived on her ward—a lovely older woman with an impressively loud snore.

When Elissa boarded the plane, she was surprised to find her seat had been upgraded to first class.

Cliff caught the confusion in her eyes and arched a brow. "It's so you can actually get some rest. This trip's on your own time, after all. The least I can do is make sure you're comfortable."

He handed her a small sachet filled with lavender and chamomile—something to help her relax.

5511

Elissa accepted it with a smile. “Is your expense account going to cover all this, Professor?”

“Don’t worry, I can afford a little luxury.”

“Well then... Thanks, Cliff.”

Elissa didn’t bother with false modesty. The truth was, Cliff’s family owned one of the most prominent pharmaceutical companies in the country. Running his own holistic medicine center was more of a passion project than a business.

Neither of them had expected that the herbal remedy they’d developed together would put the clinic on the map. Ever since, patients had been lining up out the door.

There was a six-hour time difference between Vistapeak City and Germany.

When they landed, the sun was shining in Berlin, the weather warm and bright.

The research institute had sent a driver to pick them up and take them to the hotel.

13:32

Cliff walked Elissa to her room and, as she fished for her key, he noticed her bare left hand. “You usually never take off your wedding ring. Where is it?”

“Lost it,” Elissa said with a shrug. “Cliff, I’m getting a divorce.”

Cliff blinked, then a slow, delighted smile spread across his face. “So the old man was right—Frank never deserved you.”

Elissa caught the glimmer of amusement in his eyes. “Should I take that as you gloating?”

“You wound me. I’m genuinely happy for you.”

He grinned, carrying her luggage inside. “Get some rest. I’ll pick you up for dinner tonight.”

“Okay.”

Once alone, Elissa freshened up and finally dug her phone out of her bag.

As soon as she turned it on, a stream of notifications poured in.

Frank’s messages stood out.

[Elissa, something came up last minute. I can’t pick you up from the hospital and take you home.]

[Don’t worry, I’ll be home tonight to open presents with you.]

A faint, mocking smile tugged at Elissa’s lips.

Was it really him who was busy—or Marcia?

She didn't bother replying. Instead, she opened her chat with Tanya Foster to let her know she'd arrived safely.

With plenty of time to spare and having caught up on sleep during the flight, Elissa decided to go for a walk.

Tanya was in a meeting when the message came through. Relieved to know Elissa was okay, *she* didn't respond right away.

Later, after working late, Tanya called, getting straight to the point. "Did Frank see the divorce papers? Has he given you an answer?"

By now, it was the middle of the night back home.

If Frank hadn't flaked again, he should have found the divorce agreement with the gift by now.

Maybe he'd just gotten used to her quietly waiting for him in that big, empty house—night after night.

213

13:32

Elissa had no interest in speculating.

She was standing inside Berlin Cathedral, gazing up at the sculptures overhead, answering at her own pace. "No idea. Not yet."

She kept it brief.

She wasn't in a hurry, but Tanya was. "Elissa, aren't you even a little anxious?"

"No matter how it plays out, the result won't change." Elissa's tone was light. "So why

rush?”

“...Fine,” Tanya sighed. “If every one of my clients and bosses were as zen as you, my life would be a lot easier.”

“That’s impossible,” Elissa teased. “Half your salary is hazard pay for dealing with people’s

stress.”

By the time Elissa left the cathedral, dusk had fallen.

Seeing it was nearly time, she took a cab back to the hotel and ran into Cliff in the

elevator.

They headed to the restaurant reserved by the institute—a welcome dinner in their honor.

Their mentor, after all, was a renowned figure in holistic medicine. Representing him, they

were treated as VIPs.

The institute's local representative greeted them with a warm handshake. "Mr. Riley, Ms. Drummond, thank you for coming such a long way. Please, have a seat."

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator

Chapter 24

Cliff was a natural at socializing.

Throughout the dinner, Elissa barely had to say a word; her only job was to enjoy the meal. Whenever Cliff noticed a dish she liked, he'd quietly serve her a portion—always paying

attention.

Take the stuffed vegetables, for instance.

Frank never touched anything made from soy, so that dish never appeared on the Atwater family table. But Elissa enjoyed it.

She glanced at Cliff, her eyes curving in a silent smile. She didn't say a word, but Cliff read her gratitude all the same. He gave her hair a gentle ruffle. "Eat while it's hot," he said. "Father Benedict specifically asked me to take good care of you."

At that moment, the door of the private dining room across the hall swung open.

The first to step out was a man in his late forties, flanked by several sharply dressed associates—he radiated the air of a successful executive, the kind you'd expect to see at the helm of a Fortune 500 company.

He moved aside with a broad, beaming smile, his German rolling off his tongue. "Mr. Murphy, it's settled then. I'll deliver the contract to your hotel personally tomorrow."

A younger man responded with a curt nod, his manner cool and reserved. Dressed in a custom-tailored black shirt and slacks, jacket draped carelessly over his arm, he exuded an effortless authority. His chiseled features carried the unmistakable mark of someone used to being in charge.

His assistant leaned in at just the right moment. "Sir, the CEO of ApexBio Labs is waiting for us at the hotel."

The older executive caught on immediately. “Allow me to show you out,” he offered.

Just then, on Elissa’s side, a waiter pushed open the door to their room to serve the next course. The young man passing by cast an absentminded glance inside.

He saw a girl in a dusky rose sweater and jeans that hugged her slender figure, smiling up at the man by her side as he playfully tapped her head. She didn’t mind in the least—her whole demeanor was sweet and docile.

The assistant noticed the man’s pause and followed his gaze, eyes lighting up. “Sir, isn’t that Miss Elissa? What’s she doing here in Germany?”

Then, looking at Cliff in confusion, the assistant added, “And who’s that guy? Has Miss Elissa already divorced Frank and found someone new?”

13:32

The waiter exited, closing the door behind him and cutting off their view.

The man shot his assistant a sidelong look and loosened his tie with elegant, impatient fingers. “Am I supposed to be psychic now?”

Elissa could never sleep well in a strange bed—jet lag was never an issue. She woke up on her own, well before the alarm.

The ribbon-cutting ceremony was scheduled for 9:58 a.m.—clearly a time chosen for good luck. No matter where Veridian folks went, they never left their superstitions behind.

The new research institute was in a prime location.

The event had drawn top names from the field of traditional medicine. If not for representing her mentor, Elissa, with her cautious nature, would never have been invited to such an exclusive gathering.

Young women at the top of this industry were a rarity. As Elissa and Cliff entered, they turned more than a few heads. Successful, youthful, and strikingly beautiful—who

wouldn't look twice?

When people learned she was Aaron's student, they naturally came over to chat, eager to discuss the herbal remedies she and Cliff had developed.

One pharmaceutical company even tried to buy the formula outright for a handsome sum.

Cliff caught Elissa's eye, and with a polite smile, declined. "Sorry, but our main goal has always been helping patients. Many of our clinic's regulars still need this medicine."

It wasn't the first time this had happened.

The offers were always tempting, and Elissa had wavered before. But once a big company took over, the price would be out of their hands.

Many of their patients had already exhausted every option they could afford. Elissa refused to be the final straw that broke them.

After a while, she stepped out to use the restroom. As she returned, the head of the pharmaceutical company stopped her and handed over his card, speaking warmly. "If you ever want a change of scene, you're welcome to join us anytime."

He'd done his homework before the event.

The woman before him wasn't just anyone. She had a rare gift for traditional medicine, and Cliff's Center owed much of its reputation not just to Aaron, but to her as well.

Elissa gave her usual polite smile. "Thank you, I'll think about it."

13:32

She excused herself and turned to go, but the smile on her lips froze instantly.

Her mind went blank.

For three years, she'd wondered if she'd ever run into Rowan again.

At Murphy Manor, at Frank's parties, even in some high-rise in Vista peak City—she'd imagined it so many times.

But he'd never appeared. Not once.

And now, here he was, materializing out of nowhere, in the last place she ever expected,
at

this exact moment.

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator

Chapter 25

Several years had passed, and the man had changed almost beyond recognition.

His features were sharp and chiseled, every line of his face cold and distant. He stood tall and straight, dressed in a perfectly tailored black suit. A wooden prayer bracelet circled his wrist, an odd, earthy touch that only emphasized the sense of aloofness he carried with him. There was an intimidation about him—a pressure that came from years of being in command, the kind that made people instinctively keep their distance.

He was no longer the boy she used to chase after, calling him “brother” with childish affection. Whatever had once connected them was gone. They were different people

now.

A crowd gathered around him, but unlike Frank, whose charm and courtesy won over every room, Rowan only acknowledged the attention with a curt nod. Whether people sought his approval or tried to flatter him, he remained silent, barely bothering to speak. His dark eyes drifted past her with idle indifference, then moved on, as if she were a

stranger.

“Elissa?”

Cliff appeared at her side, his timing a welcome relief. The tension finally eased from her shoulders. “Come on, it’s time for the ribbon-cutting.”

“Yes, *of* course.” Elissa replied quickly, determined to ignore the eyes she could feel on her back. She wasn’t the one who’d done something wrong all those years ago. What did she have to *be* afraid of?

The ribbon-cutting was held at the front entrance of the institute. As she stepped outside, Elissa saw that everything was ready. The staff waited, scissors in hand, for the guests of honor to take their places.

Elissa and Cliff, representing Aaron, were given spots close to the center. The winter wind stung her cheeks, but she forced herself to focus, accepting the scissors from a staff member and listening intently to the host’s speech. All she needed to do was cut the ribbon, and she could leave.

“I never imagined you’d find time to attend in person,” the institute director gushed as he led Rowan to the center. “If I’d known, I would have picked you up from the airport myself. I hope you’ll forgive the inadequate welcome.”

Since Rowan had taken the helm of the Murphy family, he’d thrown himself into the medical field with ruthless efficiency. Now, not only did he own elite private hospitals,

but also some of the world's top research facilities. Everyone wanted a connection with him.

13:32

When the invitation went out, no one expected Rowan himself would actually show up.

Hearing the voices, Elissa turned slightly and saw the tall, imposing man standing at her side. Her knuckles whitened around the scissors. She didn't even have to look—his subtle, woody cologne was the same one she'd known since childhood.

Rowan took his place beside her, his voice even and distant as he responded to the director. "You flatter me."

As he moved, his elbow brushed lightly against Elissa's arm, but he didn't seem *to* notice. He didn't spare her so much as a glance.

She instinctively shifted away. Cliff, noticing her discomfort, assumed she was uneasy around unfamiliar men and leaned in, voice gentle. "Would you like to switch places?"

"Yes, please."

She answered without hesitation, and Cliff, concerned about the crowd pressing around them, slipped an arm around her shoulder to guide her to the other side.

After the ribbon was cut, Elissa felt as if a weight had been lifted from her chest.

The institute had arranged a luncheon, but she had no intention of staying. After a quick word with Cliff, she excused herself, claiming she wasn't feeling well.

Outside, Elissa waited in the cold, trying and failing to hail a cab.

A long, black sedan pulled up beside her, horn beeping softly. Rowan's assistant stepped out and opened the back door with a respectful nod. "Miss, it's freezing. Let us take you back to your hotel."

She glanced up and immediately saw Rowan seated in the back, his posture relaxed, a couple of shirt buttons undone at the collar—a striking contrast to the icy reserve he'd shown at the event. He looked more at ease, though only just.

When she hesitated, Rowan spoke up, his tone cool. "Should I get out and invite you in myself?"

The simple question swept away her awkwardness, replacing it with a flicker of irritation. Her reply was polite but edged with coldness. "I wouldn't dare trouble Mr. Murphy to lower himself for my sake."

Mr. Murphy. The words drew a clean, unmistakable line between them.

Rowan met her gaze. “Then get in.”

“No, thank you.”

He glanced back toward the institute. “Do you want to stand here until everyone else comes out and sees that you know me?”

13:32

She frowned, jaw tight, and got into the car with brisk efficiency, making it clear she didn’t appreciate being maneuvered.

No one spoke. The silence in the car was heavy and uneasy.

Then, as the car made a turn, Elissa finally broke it. “This isn’t the way to the hotel.”

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator

Chapter 26

“Let’s get something to eat,” Rowan said quietly.

Elissa’s expression darkened. “Pull over.”

Ian Murphy didn’t stop. He watched Rowan in the rearview mirror, waiting for a signal.

When Rowan didn’t give him one, Elissa didn’t waste another word. She reached for the door handle, her voice sharp. “You know I won’t listen to you. Three years ago, I’d have jumped out of this car—and I still would now!”

Almost instinctively, Ian slammed on the brakes.

The memory of what had happened three years ago still made his heart race.

Rowan, unruffled, was ready for this. He leaned over and grabbed her wrist, his voice cold as ice. “Then who do you listen to? Frank?”

“I’d listen to anyone but you!”

She yanked her arm free, like a startled wildcat, her movements desperate and fierce.

Rowan let out a bitter laugh. “And who was it that used to beg me not to leave her behind, swearing she’d always do as I said?”

“That was a long time ago!” Elissa had never felt so out of control. Her eyes were red as she glared at him. “Mr. Murphy, I’m twenty-four now. Not seven.”

“All you had to *do* was crook your finger, and I’d follow you anywhere without a second thought.”

As soon as she finished, Rowan’s grip slackened just enough. Elissa wasted no time—she pushed open the door and climbed out.

She didn’t bother to call a cab. Instead, she stepped onto the sidewalk and let the bitter night wind cut right through her, hoping it would scatter the memories churning in her

mind.

The best years of her life with the Murphy family had been those nine years beside

Rowan.

She'd had no family left, and he'd become her family.

Rowan had watched over her, raising her from a lost, naive girl into an adult, careful and patient every step of the way.

His friends would ask where he'd found such a sweet, lovable little sister. Rowan would just laugh. "She acts all innocent, but you should see her at home."

13:32

At sixteen, Elissa was abandoned for the second time in her life.

The first had been when her parents died in an accident, leaving her behind.

The second was when her brother decided he didn't want her anymore.

For a long time, she'd been stuck in a cycle she couldn't break, falling apart again and again in the dark, endless nights.

What wasn't good enough about her? Why did everyone leave?

The night she was sent back to the old lady's house, she was forced to kneel for two straight days.

The old woman had smiled at her. "Rowan's always been a moody one. When he's in a good mood, he'll amuse himself with a pet, but if he gets bored, he'll toss it away. You? You're just the sort of lost stray who'd mistake him for a savior."

"Learned your lesson now, have you?"

Elissa could barely remember what she'd answered. She only recalled the blazing sun, how she fainted from the heat, and a servant woke her with a bucket of ice water.

But all these years later, she'd never let herself forget: never depend on anyone, never become anyone's burden.

She measured every step she took, always so careful, always on guard.

-

The next night, Elissa and Cliff landed in Vistapeak City. Tanya Foster was waiting at

arrivals.

Seeing someone there to meet her, Cliff felt reassured and headed back to the clinic.

Tanya started the car, eyeing the bags in the backseat. “So, Zen Sister, you coming to my place or what?”

“Take me to Greenwood Manor first,” Elissa replied.

Her so-called “home” with Frank was at Greenwood Manor—Vistapeak City’s most exclusive neighborhood.

Tanya nodded, then couldn’t help asking, “No word from Frank these last few days?”

“Nothing.”

“What’s he up to? Holding a candlelight vigil for his mistress?” Tanya’s tongue was as sharp as ever, typical for a lawyer.

Elissa didn’t answer. She wasn’t sure herself—which was exactly why she planned to go

13:32

home and settle the divorce face-to-face.

When they arrived, Elissa left her luggage with Tanya. “Take it to your place for me, will you? Save me the trouble of hauling it around again later.”

She hadn’t brought much—just the clothes she wore most often. There were plenty of things still at Greenwood Manor that she didn’t want, but would do for a change of

clothes.

It was nearly midnight by the time they reached the house. The porch light was still on, as always.

Hearing the door, Edna, the housekeeper, came out, surprise flickering across her face. “Mrs. Murphy, you’re back. Can I get you something to eat?”

“No, thank you.”

Elissa shook her head, getting straight to the point. “Is Frank home?”

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator

Edna’s expression faltered for a split second, but she answered honestly. “No, sir hasn’t been home these past few days.”

She quickly added on Frank’s behalf, “He’s always busy. Don’t let your mind wander.”

Elissa nodded. “Alright, don’t worry.”

She didn’t have the energy, nor the interest, to speculate about her almost-ex-husband’s whereabouts.

After several nights of restless sleep, Elissa had hoped that a hot shower and the comfort of her own bed would finally bring her a full night's rest. Instead, insomnia kept her awake.

This place just didn't feel like home anymore.

Same room, same bed—nothing had changed, yet somehow everything felt different.

Elissa reached for her phone on the nightstand, scrolling through her social feed out of

sheer boredom.

Tanya Foster: Dropped off the world's most amazing bestie. Now back to the grind—case files, here I come!

A small smile tugged at Elissa's lips as she gave the post a like.

She kept scrolling until her thumb froze mid-swipe.

Marcia: You really meant it—you always protect me, you're always there whenever I need

you.

The accompanying *photo* showed Marcia in a hospital bed, someone feeding her slices of fruit.

Only a hand was visible in the frame—long fingers, defined knuckles, and a small red birthmark by the wrist.

Elissa recognized it instantly. The man in the photo was Frank.

She took a screenshot, then sent it to Frank with a message: [You're still at the hospital, right? I need to talk to you. Can I stop by tomorrow?]

He wasn't coming home.

She didn't mind being the one to reach out.

After all, the divorce was a relief for both of them.

Vistapeak International Airport.

13:33

The plane touched down. Frank slumped back into the car seat, rubbing his brow wearily.

It was late, the streets nearly empty. The black Maybach glided smoothly through pools of yellowish streetlight, the shifting glow tracing sharp lines along Frank's refined profile. Usually calm and poised, tonight he looked cold and distant.

His assistant spoke quietly, "Mr. Atwater, are we heading *to* the office or to Greenwood

Manor?"

"To the office first."

The day Elissa was discharged, an accident at the Crestwave City branch of Atwater Group left someone dead. Frank flew out immediately to handle it, working nonstop for days until the crisis was resolved.

Meanwhile, a mountain of work had piled up at headquarters. He planned to work through the night so the team could carry on in the morning.

The weight of the entire Atwater Group rested on his shoulders—he couldn’t afford to slack off.

Beside him, his phone screen lit up. Seeing Elissa’s name, Frank unconsciously let out a breath.

She hadn’t replied to his last message; he’d assumed she was still upset and figured he’d try to make it up to her once things calmed down.

He opened her message, brows knitting, but

Marcia.

“When did *you take* that photo?”

dn't reply right away. Instead, he called

Marcia was at a bar, pushing through the noisy crowd toward somewhere quieter as she answered, "What *photo*?"

Frank didn't mince words; his *voice* was edged with exhaustion. "The photo you just posted on *your* feed."

Marcia hesitated.

That post—*among* everyone connected to the Atwater family, only Elissa could see it.

She'd tailored it, carefully adjusting the privacy settings so Elissa would notice.

How had Frank found out?

When her silence stretched, Frank seemed to understand. His tone sharpened. "There's no need for this. Elissa is straightforward; she doesn't play games."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

13:33

“That’s what I should be asking you,” Frank said flatly.

“Fine. I did it on purpose!” Marcia didn’t care about the noise anymore. Her voice shook as she admitted, “I wanted her to see it. I wanted her to know that you care about me. That you love me! I was scared if you didn’t get divorced, you’d start falling for her...”

“Marcia!” Frank’s patience snapped. He loosened his tie with one hand, voice tense. “Rowan and I are the same age. I’ve known Elissa since she was a child—she’s like a little sister to me. If I ever saw her as anything else, what would that make me? Can’t you be

rational for once?”

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator

Marcia pressed him, “So when are you going to divorce her?”

Divorce.

Lately, that word was all Frank ever heard.

It seemed like everyone around him believed splitting up was the only logical step left.

But only Frank knew the truth: every time the word surfaced, something heavy settled in his chest, making it hard to breathe.

He wasn't even sure why. Maybe it was because the company's shares would take a hit if he got divorced now. Maybe it was the fallout, the way it would drag Marcia's name through the mud.

Whatever the reason, he knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that divorce wasn't an option.

He blurted out his answer, firm and final. "Never. Not now, not ever."

The next morning.

Elissa woke in a daze, squinting at her phone to check the time, and finally noticed Frank's reply.

What is it? I'll talk to you when I get home tomorrow.

She understood, *more* or less, what he meant—he didn't want her storming up to Marcia and making a scene.

He was probably just worried she'd smash another bottle over Marcia's head.

Still, that answer was enough for her.

Once Frank came back and they cleared the air, she could finally walk away from this house that had long since stopped feeling like home.

She washed up, dressed with a sense of quiet satisfaction, and was about to leave the dressing room when she paused, glancing back with a thoughtful frown.

As Mrs. Frank, she'd never been spoiled with grand gestures, but Frank always brought her along whenever he needed someone on his arm at company events or society galas.

As a result, designer clothes, jewelry, and handbags filled more than half the walk-in closet.

The Atwater family never had to worry about money, but once the divorce was final, all

13:33

these things would end up where they belonged—in the trash.

So why not do something better?

Elissa contacted a charity, arranged for everything to be donated, and instructed the staff to send the proceeds to fund girls' education in underserved areas.

Once everything was packed up and Edna had agreed to handle the shipping, Elissa finally went downstairs for breakfast.

As she passed through the living room, she spotted Frank's mother, Carmela, sitting ramrod straight on the sofa in a tailored Chanel suit, her carefully styled hair immaculate, her expression cold.

Elissa was surprised. She greeted her instinctively, "Mom, what brings you here?"

Carmela beckoned her over. “Come here, Elissa.”

Elissa’s gaze fell to the coffee table, where a gift box sat open, its ribbon untied and trailing.

Her lashes trembled. She didn’t know if Frank had seen the divorce papers yet, but one thing was clear—the Atwater elders had seen them first.

She walked over to the sofa and took a slow, steadying breath. “You’ve seen

everything?”

“You want a divorce...” Carmela’s voice lost some of its edge. She patted the sofa, inviting Elissa to sit. “Why didn’t you talk to me or your grandmother about this?”

Elissa leaned forward to refill Carmela’s tea, her tone deferential. “Grandma just got out of the hospital. I was afraid if I brought it up, it might upset her.”

Carmela’s gaze softened, though her words were sharp. “And you think divorcing in secret won’t affect her health?”

She caught herself, sighing. “I know you’ve always been a sensible girl. If you want a divorce, you must have your reasons. But are you sure you and Frank are truly past the point of no return?”

“Mom...” Elissa’s eyes dropped to the marble floor, her long lashes casting shadows on her cheeks. For a moment, she struggled to find the words. Finally, she spoke, her voice barely above a whisper. “Frank and I have been married for three years, and we’ve never even shared a bed.”

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator

Chapter 29

Sharing a bed.

Any married woman knew exactly what that meant.

Carmela’s eyes widened in disbelief. “You’re not joking with me, are you?”

“I would never joke about something like this with you.”

Elissa lifted her gaze. Her small, delicate face looked even paler, but her voice remained gentle. “Mom, I honestly can’t think of any other way out besides divorce.”

Carmela was furious, but not at Elissa.

Her anger was reserved for her own son and Marcia.

One was clueless, the other always looking for something better.

But now that it had come to this, even as a strong-willed mother-in-law, she couldn’t bring herself to ask Elissa to stay.

How could she? Her own son had wasted three years of someone else’s life for nothing.

The poor girl carried the label of a married woman, yet had never even experienced what marriage was supposed to be.

Carmela took a steadying breath and patted Elissa’s hand. “I noticed in the divorce agreement, you’re only asking for the house on Juniper Road?”

Elissa nodded, lips pressed together. “If that’s not possible, I can walk away without it...”

She knew perfectly well that her only goal today was to get divorced.

The last settlement, along with her own savings, was more than enough for her to live comfortably.

To outsiders, she was the butt of every joke—a woman who wasted three years, wore the most colorful cuckold’s crown, and then left with nothing.

But she knew it was worth it.

For these three years, she’d been free—far freer than she’d ever been with the Murphy family.

She didn’t regret it for a second, not even when she counted the times she’d been punished or forced to kneel back then.

“You’re overthinking this,” Carmela said, glancing at her. “If word got out, people would say the Atwater family was mistreating our daughter-in-law. Here’s what I’ll do: you keep the

house on Juniper Road, and I'll transfer another one in your name, also on Juniper Road."

"One for you to live in, and one you can rent out for extra income."

Elissa was taken aback.

The houses on Juniper Road were all single-residence, and renting one out brought in five figures a month, not to mention the market value.

The Atwater family had treated her well enough over the years, but it wasn't as if they had deep emotional ties. Giving her an extra house out of the blue didn't quite add up.

As she was considering how to respond, Carmela spoke again, her voice unusually sincere. "Elissa, I know it wasn't easy growing up with the Murphy family. No matter how much Matriarch Paige doted on you, you still had to suffer there."

"So, when you came to us, the Atwaters, we did our best to treat you well. Wouldn't you agree?"

Elissa nodded. "You and Grandpa and Grandma have always been good to me."

She knew the Atwaters had no obligation to treat her as family, and their kindness had been more than she could have expected. Especially Grandpa—he really had cared for

her.

Carmela's expression softened. "I knew it. You've always been a hundred times more considerate than Marcia."

"Elissa..."

She poured her a cup of tea, her voice slow and measured. "I have a favor to ask—one I wouldn't mention if I had any other choice."

Elissa accepted the cup. "Please, go ahead."

"I'll agree to the divorce," Carmela said, "but I need you not to mention it to Frank for now, all right?"

Elissa hesitated. "What do you mean?"

“I’ll take care of the paperwork,” Carmela replied/her mind already made up. “But for now, the divorce will stay between you and me. I’ll find a new match for Frank, and once that’s settled, we’ll make the divorce public.”

The meaning couldn’t have been clearer.

This was to keep Marcia from swooping in at the first opportunity, to prevent the Atwater family from airing their dirty laundry in public.

The house on Juniper Road was a parting gift, compensation to Elissa until Frank’s new

14:46

wife was chosen.

But Elissa wanted a clean break, nothing left unfinished. She’d never been one for dragging things out.

She looked at Carmela, uncertain. “Mom, I know you mean well, but-”

“Elissa, this really is a win-win.”

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator

Chapter 30

Carmela was as collected as ever, though her expression had grown noticeably colder. “You’re still officially part of the Atwater family. The Murphys will show us at least a little respect, don’t you think?”

Elissa’s fingers clenched tightly at her side. When she met Carmela’s gaze, a flicker of confusion crossed her face.

“If Matriarch Paige Murphy really cared about you, why did she sabotage your job at St. Jude’s Hospital back then?”

Carmela didn’t wait for an answer. “I’ve seen you come back from Murphy Manor more than once, barely able to walk straight.”

Elissa froze, her entire body tensing. Her eyes drifted slowly toward Edna, who was hovering not far away.

gaze darted away, guilt written all over her face.

Edna's gaze

In that moment, everything clicked for Elissa. All those years she'd tried to put on a brave front—Carmela had seen right through it. But clever people like Carmela never call out the truth until the moment's absolutely necessary.

Elissa's face went pale. She released her clenched fists and, almost out of spite, found herself pushing back. "How long is this 'temporary' arrangement you mentioned supposed to last?"

"I'll arrange it as soon as possible."

"Five hundred thousand."

"What did you say?"

Elissa, ignoring Carmela's shock, replied in a calm, even voice. "Both houses on Juniper Road. And five hundred thousand in cash."

She knew she was asking for the moon. But she said it anyway, because deep down, she hated being coerced or talked down to. If Carmela had pleaded with her, brought up Old Mrs. Atwater's failing health, she might've agreed without a second thought.

But she loathed being made to feel like she owed everyone, like she was the one taking advantage—just as the Murphys always did. In their eyes, she was treated worse than the family dog, yet to outsiders, she was supposed to be endlessly grateful for the so-called “favor” of being raised by them.

“Do you even hear yourself? How dare you be so ungrateful!”

14:46

what we discussed.”

“Thank you, Mom.”

Elissa got up to see her out. “And the divorce papers...?”

“I'll have someone bring them over when they're ready.”

Carmela, still fuming, tossed the words over her shoulder and clicked out the door in her heels.

Elissa let out a long breath of relief. When she turned around, she found Frank looking at her, confusion written on his face.

“Divorce papers?”