

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator

Chapter 41

Before she decided to marry Frank, she'd asked around—more than a few people—trying to find out who his heart truly belonged to.

No one ever told her.

Those young men who seemed friendly enough on the surface were, in truth, all Frank's friends. Naturally, not a single one of them would betray him.

Left with no options, she finally called Rowan.

She could still remember exactly what Rowan had said.

Elissa rolled down the car window a crack. The cold night air came rushing in, biting at her skin and clearing her thoughts.

That line came back to her at last.

He'd said, "Miss Elissa, what exactly are we? Why should I answer your questions?"

Without thinking, she hung up on him.

After that, she blocked Rowan's number for good.

He'd warned her more than once: there was nothing between them. Maybe there never had been.

The cold wind kept pouring into the car, chilling the inside until there was barely any difference from the freezing darkness outside.

"Ridge, close the window."

Frank stirred awake from the cold, not even bothering to open his eyes, but already issuing orders, a true businessman to the bone.

Elissa didn't answer, but her hand moved to the controls and rolled the window all the way down.

Cold, wasn't it?

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Good. Let him freeze.

It was nearly 3:30 a.m. by the time they reached Greenwood Manor.

Elissa stayed in the car, unmoving, and pulled out her phone to make a call.

Being woken in the middle of the night by Elissa, Marcia was in no mood to be polite. "Are you okay? Do you even know what time it is?"

"Come downstairs."

"For what?"

Elissa glanced into the rearview mirror, her gaze cool. "To pick up your lover."

"What?"

A light flicked on in one of the upstairs guest rooms.

Elissa kept it simple. "Frank."

That name worked like magic. Less than two minutes later, the porch lights snapped on and Marcia came out the front door.

Elissa still hadn't moved, just urged her, "Hurry up."

She was desperate to get home and catch some sleep.

Marcia yanked open the back door and found Frank sprawled drunkenly in the car. She frowned, "What were you two doing?"

Elissa grinned. "If we'd done anything, would I have called you to come get him?"

"What's your angle?" Marcia eyed her suspiciously.

Who in their right mind would deliver their own husband straight into the arms of a rival?

Elissa glanced at the time—her patience had run out. "If you don't get him out now, I'll take him back to my place."

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Frank had been so preoccupied, he didn't even know she'd moved out.

But Marcia was nosy enough, and so intent on keeping tabs on her, she'd definitely have found out.

Marcia couldn't make sense of it. Elissa had always been the harmless, timid type—everyone knew it.

How had she suddenly become so sharp, so unpredictable?

Yet everyone else, Frank included, still saw her as sweet and gentle.

She really did know how to put on an act.

Marcia struggled for ages but couldn't manage to move Frank—a six-foot-two man wasn't exactly easy to haul. She shot a look at Elissa. "Aren't you going to help?"

"Oh, sure."

Elissa replied calmly. She got out, didn't bother waiting for Marcia, and hauled Frank out of the car and onto the ground.

Frank had drunk so much that when he landed on the lawn with a dull thud, he simply rolled over and settled back into a comfortable sleeping position.

Marcia stared in disbelief. "Elissa, are you insane?!"

"If you're not insane and you're so strong, you can carry him yourself."

Without another word, Elissa got in her car and drove away, leaving Marcia frozen on the front lawn, unable to process what had just happened.

She just couldn't figure it out—what was this woman really up to?

Playing hard to get?

The next morning, as Marcia sat at breakfast, those words suddenly floated through her mind: playing hard to get.

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And she had to admit—the tactic seemed to be working.

Frank's attitude was noticeably different.

“Where’s Elissa? Bradley said she was the one who picked me up last

night.” Frank came downstairs, looking worse for wear but still impossibly handsome, and took a seat across from Marcia.

Marcia had her excuse ready. “She left early. Went to the clinic.”

He looked surprised. “This early?”

“Mm.” Marcia feigned calm and nodded.

She’d keep the move a secret for as long as she could—no way would she let Elissa get her way.

Playing hard to get? Dream on.

Frank’s stomach was still uneasy from all the alcohol. He glanced over at Edna. “Edna, bring out that soothing soup Elissa made, would you?”

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

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Elissa rarely cooked herself; usually, she just handed Edna a list of recipes for medicinal meals.

But ever since she learned Frank had stomach problems, things changed. The morning after each of his business dinners, a pot of nourishing soup would appear on the table—always prepared by her before dawn.

A bowl of it, and his stomach would feel noticeably better.

Edna blinked in surprise. “Nourishing soup? Madam didn’t make it... She always customizes the recipe based on your current symptoms. I

couldn't make it if I tried..."

It wasn't just that she hadn't cooked.

She hadn't even come home.

Frank pressed a hand to his stomach, his brow furrowing. "She's been this busy lately?"

He hadn't even caught a glimpse of her the past couple of days.

Apparently, she didn't care about his health anymore either.

It used to be that the slightest hint of discomfort, and the young woman would be bustling between the kitchen and his study, brewing herbal remedies and keeping a close eye on him—insisting she was his personal physician.

"Uh, yes... That's right," Edna replied, sounding more than a little uneasy.

Marcia watched him carefully, a sly smile appearing as she changed the subject. “By the way, Frank, didn’t I major in traditional medicine in college too? Honestly, sitting around taking care of Hickey all day is getting old. Could you help me find a job?”

Frank absentmindedly spooned up some savory porridge. “How about the City Traditional Medicine Hospital? It’s close to home.”

“Oh, no.”

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Marcia’s tone turned modest, her voice gentle. “I haven’t worked since graduation. Even if I have a knack for it, I get nervous around real patients. Maybe I could start by apprenticing at a private clinic?”

“If there’s a place with a real master—someone legendary in the field—willing to take me under their wing, that would be ideal.”

Traditional medicine is all about mentorship and passing down knowledge.

But that kind of apprenticeship depends on fate, not just connections. Frank couldn’t just force someone to take her in.

And to be honest, there was only one true legend in all of Northland, not just Vistapeak City—Mr. Blaine.

Still, he didn't say no. "Alright, I'll see what I can do."

The clinic was at its busiest in the mornings.

Patients came in one after another, and Elissa barely had time to leave her chair for hours. At last, a cheerful nurse poked her head in. "You've worked hard, Elissa. That was the last scheduled patient for today."

"But—there are two walk-ins who really wanted to see you. I told them we couldn't fit them in, but they're still waiting in the hall."

Elissa took a sip of water. "Go ahead and send them in."

It turned out *one* patient just had a minor issue.

Elissa quickly wrote up a prescription and moved on to the last patient—a woman nearing eighty, accompanied by a relative.

The elderly lady was very thin, plainly dressed, but carried herself with an undeniable air of dignity. When she entered, she closed the door behind her, shutting her companion firmly outside.

Elissa finished taking her pulse, withdrew her hand, and spoke gently: “Ma’am, what seems to be bothering you?”

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The woman frowned. “Aren’t you the doctor? Shouldn’t you be able to tell what’s wrong just by taking my pulse?”

“Sometimes, yes.”

Elissa was known for her patience with patients. She only smiled. “But your pulse is steady, and there’s no sign of illness. At most, *you* seem a little anxious and agitated. You don’t need medicine—just *some* good

food and rest.”

Her light makeup masked any pallor, and her voice carried strength.

To be nearly eighty and still so robust—she was truly blessed.

“Says who?”

The old woman glanced nervously at the door, making sure it was still firmly closed. Satisfied, she declared loudly, “I’m not well. I feel terrible, everywhere!”

“My grandson’s almost forty and still single. How could I possibly feel well?”

Elissa glanced at the file, confirming the woman’s age. “Almost forty?”

The lady was seventy-eight.

Even by the most generous math, her grandson could only be in his early

thirties.

She huffed, “Thirty! That’s practically forty—practically an old man! If he doesn’t find a wife soon, he’ll be the death of me from worry. Just give me some medicine, please, I need it.”

Old man.

Elissa couldn’t help thinking of Frank... and then of Rowan, who was around the same age,

She nodded sympathetically. “You’re absolutely right.”

“How about I prescribe you something to ease your nerves and settle your spirits?”

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Autumn and winter always brought a surge in illnesses, and Elissa had just finished three grueling days of back-to-back clinic appointments. Only now were the extra walk-in patients beginning to thin out.

“Thank you, Dr. Elissa. Every time I begged for a last-minute slot, you always squeezed me in.”

It was finally an afternoon off, yet Elissa was still in the clinic, performing acupuncture on a patient. The woman lay on the treatment table, gratitude lining her tired face as Elissa worked.

She was nearing fifty—a long-term patient with severe kidney disease. Life hadn’t been kind: she’d lost her only child in midlife, and her husband was a mean-spirited man. Every visit meant waking before dawn, catching two buses and three subway trains from the outskirts just to make it downtown.

Perhaps it was the healer’s heart, or maybe something more personal, but Elissa felt a wave of tenderness. She smiled and said, “No need to thank me. You come here and pay for treatment, I do my job and help you get

better. That’s how it should be.”

The woman dabbed at the corners of her eyes. “Your receptionist told me... Every time, you’ve paid out of your own pocket to give me a discount on my prescriptions. And you’ve never once charged me for the

acupuncture.”

Elissa’s hand paused for a brief moment, but her next movements were steady and precise. After expertly placing a dozen needles, she hesitated, then gave a soft smile, admitting her own private reason. “If my mother were still alive, she’d be about your age.”

She let the words settle, then gathered herself and instructed, “If you need anything, just press the call button. I’ll be back in thirty minutes to remove the needles.”

By the time her workday ended, it was nearly three in the afternoon.

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Starving, Elissa ducked into a nearby noodle shop for a quick meal, then called Tanya Foster. When she learned Tanya was busy with clients at her law firm, Elissa decided not to head home just yet. She picked up some fruit and went to visit Jacqueline.

To her surprise, Aaron was home as well.

The old couple greeted her warmly. “Weren’t you working today? The nurses were saying in the group chat that you’ve been swamped. Aren’t you tired? And you still found time to visit us two old folks?”

“I mostly came to see Jacqueline,” Elissa replied, setting down the fruit and slipping her arm through Jacqueline’s with a grin. “I promised her I’d come by and give her a facial this week.”

Elissa had always been fascinated by traditional medicine—especially making her own botanical skincare. The creams and balms she concocted during her downtime were legendary; her colleagues at the clinic were always begging for her next batch. But Jacqueline was the only one she’d ever pamper personally.

Jacqueline shot her husband a triumphant look. “Hear that? She’s here for

me, not you.”

Aaron feigned offense. “Ungrateful girl! You never know who’s the king around here.”

Jacqueline laughed. “Oh? Then tell me—which of us is the king?”

“Obviously, I am—or, well, maybe I’m the prince,” Aaron conceded, ever the doting husband.

Elissa couldn’t help but laugh and slipped into Aaron’s custom-built apothecary, a room that never failed to amaze her. Every shelf was lined with rare and precious ingredients.

She opened the cabinets and began selecting ingredients—poria, ginseng, angelica, and a dozen others—retrieving the tools she kept stored there and losing herself in the ritual of mixing and grinding.

Halfway through, Jacqueline poked her head in. “Elissa, how about sweet

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and sour ribs for dinner? If you’re in the mood, I’ll get your teacher to cook

them himself.”

Elissa’s face lit up. “Yes, please! It’s been ages since I’ve tasted his cooking.”

She'd been nine when she first started apprenticing under Aaron, learning everything from identifying herbs to compounding remedies. Holidays had always meant early mornings and late nights at the clinic; Rowan would drop her off and pick her up, day in and day out. Later, she'd learned to make her way on her own.

Jacqueline, who'd always longed for a daughter but only had one son, couldn't help but dote on Elissa from the start. She knew every one of Elissa's favorite dishes by heart.

"All right, you keep working in here. I'll call you when dinner's ready," Jacqueline said, smiling as she closed the door behind her.

Elissa might have started making these potions just to pass the time, but there was no denying it—when it came to talent, some people really were born with a gift.

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Every time Jacqueline peeled off one of those pungent-smelling face masks, she swore she could see her skin growing visibly smoother and brighter. Just one tiny jar would last her a while, the glow lingering for weeks.

Those wealthy ladies she knew had even given up on their fancy skin treatments, pestering her to reveal her secret.

She didn't know what to tell them.

And even if she did, she certainly wouldn't.

A sleek black Maybach slid quietly down the road.

In the back seat, Marcia wrung her hands. "Frank, what am I even going to say when we get there? Mr. Blaine..."

Frank's voice was gentle. "Don't be so nervous. Mr. Blaine is a kind man, and you're talented—he'll enjoy talking with you."

He added, "But he's been retired for a few years now. He might not want to take on another student. We're just dropping by for a visit. If it doesn't work out, we'll consider another approach."

Marcia huffed. "But he accepted Elissa, didn't he? I graduated from Vistapeak University too. Why wouldn't he want me?"

Just thinking about it made Marcia's blood boil.

She'd been a year ahead of Elissa, desperate to study under Mr. Blaine, only for him to announce that he wasn't accepting new students that

year.

Spencer had even tried pulling strings, but Mr. Blaine just shrugged and said he didn't have the energy.

Then, the year Elissa enrolled, Mr. Blaine changed his mind and took her on. After that, he promptly retired!

Who knew what kind of dumb luck that woman had stumbled into.

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Frank could only say, "Let's just see how it goes."

"Mm!"

Marcia pinned her hopes on him. "No matter what, Mr. Blaine will give you some respect. Frank, I trust you."

In her mind, this was practically a done deal.

Aaron might be impressive, but with Frank's influence—and the right incentive—who could turn down a generous offer?

Besides, Marcia's no slouch herself. Her professors had praised her all through college.

After dinner, Elissa headed out.

At the door, Jacqueline fussed over her just like she had when Elissa was a little girl.
“Don't rush. Text me when you get home.”

Elissa smiled. “You go inside, okay? It's cold out, and I don't want your headaches acting up.”

“Alright.”

Once Jacqueline disappeared inside, Elissa turned to leave—only to nearly collide with Frank and Marcia, walking side by side into the courtyard.

They looked awfully close.

It wasn't surprising; Atwater Group had interests in healthcare, and sometimes Aaron needed advice on specialized issues.

But the winter night air was biting, and Elissa instinctively zipped up her coat, hoping to slip by unnoticed.

Then she heard Frank's voice. "Elissa?"

Winter evenings fell early, and the only light in the yard came from a dim streetlamp.

He hadn't quite seen her face.

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Elissa hesitated, then turned with feigned surprise. "Frank? What are you doing here?"

At that moment, she thought, Carmela's five million dollars wasn't wasted. After all, she was playing her part.

"That's what I should be asking you," Frank said, peering down at her, his large hand ruffling her hair. "Didn't you say you were busy? You're never home, and now I find you at Mr. Blaine's?"

"Uh..."

Elissa pressed her lips together, quickly inventing an excuse. "My mentor asked me to stop by. There's a complicated patient case at the clinic, and we didn't want to make a mistake, so he sent me to consult with my old professor."

"And now?"

Frank's tone was as gentle as ever, like he was coaxing a child. "Shouldn't you be heading home?"

"Go wait in the car for us. We just need to stop in and see Mr. Blaine, then we'll be right out."

For some reason, Elissa felt a strange pang.

She didn't feel like Frank's wife.

More like the child of Frank and Marcia.

If she wanted, they could be one big, happy family. A picture-perfect trio.

No, quartet.

She almost forgot about Hickey.

The thought was so absurd she couldn't help but laugh at herself. When she looked up at Frank, her face was nothing but sweet and obedient. "Can I head home on my own a little later? Tanya invited me out for dinner,"

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Her question sounded sincere, but she knew Frank too well.

Frank would agree, of course—he always did. He had a habit of tossing out questions just for show, never really caring about the answer. His concern was no deeper than the casual small talk with a neighbor during an after-dinner stroll: “Have you eaten yet?” Did it matter what the neighbor said? Not in the slightest.

Sometimes Elissa wondered if this was how their marriage had managed to last three years. Frank’s attention was always there in the gestures, never in the actions. When she had cramps, he’d say, “Make sure to have some herbal tea.” If she came home drenched from the rain, he’d tell her, “Go take a hot shower.” When she tripped and fell, he’d remind her, “Watch your step next time.”

But he never actually made her tea, never brought her an umbrella, never asked if she needed a ride to the hospital. All his tenderness and care were just words—never deeds.

As expected, Frank agreed and added, “Don’t stay out too late.”

Elissa nodded obediently. “Okay.”

Whether she came home early or not, he never really gave it a second thought.

At the door, Frank and Marcia paused. Suddenly, Marcia slapped her forehead, “Frank, go on in without me—I think I left my phone in the car. I’ll go grab it.”

“Alright,” Frank replied, frowning a little.

Elissa would never be so scatterbrained. She was young, but always organized—more mature than her peers, really. She never gave him any

trouble.

As Elissa stepped outside the gate, her phone rang. It was Tanya Foster, calling to say she was on her way to pick her up. Elissa had barely ended

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the call when someone called her name.

Marcia approached with a bright smile. “Elissa, do you know why Frank’s here today?”

“No idea.” And honestly, she didn’t care.

“I’m about to become Mr. Blaine’s student,” Marcia announced, her tone

triumphant.

She could never stand how calm Elissa always seemed—*so composed*, so unbothered. “You’re just one of the many students Mr. Blaine taught at Vistapeak University. I, on the other hand, will be his personal apprentice.”

Elissa met her gaze. “You know Mr. Blaine has only ever taken on one private student outside his time at Vistapeak, right?”

“Of course I know!” Marcia scoffed. Who didn’t?

Aaron Blaine had a single protégé—someone to whom he had passed on everything he knew, a student of rare talent and extraordinary skill. But no one knew who it was.

Elissa smiled faintly. “So what makes you think he’ll choose you?”

Marcia’s confidence was unwavering. “Because I’m more capable than you, and because Frank will make sure I get my chance.”

“Just wait and see, Elissa. I’m going to surpass you—step by step.”

Becoming Aaron’s apprentice meant instant fame in their field. With that, Marcia spun around, brimming with confidence, as if victory was already hers.

“So you want me to take your dear sister-in-law as my apprentice?” Aaron lounged on the sofa, sipping the herbal tea Elissa had personally made him before she left. His gaze drifted over the table, where expensive gifts had been carefully laid out. The message was clear: they meant business,

Frank nodded. “Yes, Mr. Blaine. I know you’re well into your golden years,

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and I shouldn’t ask this of you, but she’s had a rough time...”

“No matter how rough she’s had it-” Aaron interrupted smoothly, “-doesn’t she still have you, her scandal-stirring brother-in-law, to lean on?”

The old man was clearly taking Elissa’s side, his tone half-mocking.

Frank picked up on it, but responded evenly, “As you said, it’s just a rumor. There’s nothing to it.”

Aaron snorted, amused by Frank’s ability to lie with a straight face. “Rumor or not, I know the truth as well as anyone!”

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Frank shot an exasperated glance toward the garden, his mustache bristling as he barked, “You and your little girlfriend need to get out of here–now! And take all your stuff with you!”

“Don’t think you can buy me off with these petty favors!”

Once a teacher, always a father. Elissa, that girl, was as good as a daughter to him.

If he lost his mind and actually agreed to their proposal, it wouldn’t just be Elissa–Jacqueline would be the first to come after him.

“Mr. Blaine, whatever you want, just name your terms,” Frank offered.

Marcia stepped in just as he finished, gliding to Frank’s side, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. Her voice was gentle. “Frank, what do you think?”

Aaron stayed silent, already considering what herbs he'd need to wash his eyes out after they finally left.

Frank turned to him. "Mr. Blaine, Marcia's right. We're here today with genuine respect and sincerity."

Their attitudes were polite enough, but Aaron only felt anger simmering in his chest.

He pitied Elissa. What a farce.

"Any terms at all, *you* say?" Aaron's voice was icy.

"Of course." Marcia cut in quickly, confident that the Atwater family's wealth and Frank's generosity would be more than enough to satisfy this old man.

Aaron stood, straightening his jacket. "Then go apologize to Elissa. Get down on your knees. If she forgives you, come back and talk to me."

Marcia's face flushed hot with anger and shock. "What did you say?"

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She thought back to what Elissa had said at the door earlier, and

suddenly everything clicked. She glared at Aaron, teeth clenched. "Did Elissa tell you something about me? You can't believe a word she says-" "That's enough, Marcia," Frank interrupted, his tone calm but firm. He turned to Aaron, not the least bit upset. "Mr. Blaine, thank you for your time today. We'll take our leave."

Marcia followed him out, sulking, but once they were in the car, she couldn't hold back. "Frank, this is all Elissa's doing. She's always had it out for me. Why else would she have just left Mr. Blaine's house right before we arrived?"

"Is it that she has it out for you, or is it the other way around?" Frank's gaze hardened as he looked at her, his voice colder than usual. "I've told you before-she's not as scheming as you think."

Marcia's hands clutched the hem of her coat, her eyes brimming with tears. "Why do you always trust her, no matter what?"

"Marcia," Frank sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose, "even the police need evidence to make an accusation. You say she said something—can you prove it?"

"Do I really need proof?" Marcia sniffed stubbornly. "She's never liked me, she just happened to visit Mr. Blaine right before we got there, and she's

his student..."

Frank shook his head. "If every cop thought like you, we'd have a lot of innocent people behind bars."

Marcia opened her mouth to argue, but Frank's patience was running thin. "Maybe you should forget about studying traditional medicine and become a screenwriter instead."

As he spoke, an image of Elissa flashed in his mind—always busy with her patients *or* tinkering with her hobbies at home, never one to waste time on pointless scheming. The girl was as straightforward as they

came.

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Lost in thought, Frank glanced out the window. “Ridge, pull over.”

He stepped out and ducked into a nearby bakery, returning with a slice of strawberry cake.

Marcia watched him, her anger ebbing a little at the sight. She reached out, trying to take the cake. “Alright, for the sake of the cake, I’ll forgive what you just said...”

“That’s for Elissa.” Frank handed the box to the driver.

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Frank avoided her gesture and placed the box on the empty passenger seat. “She’s younger—has a sweet tooth. And aren’t you watching your sugar?”

Marcia stared at him in disbelief.

He was as calm and handsome as always, as if nothing about him had changed.

She stood there, frozen, thinking for a long moment—then, suddenly, it hit her.

Maybe what had changed was his heart.

He kept insisting he saw Elissa as a little sister, but what if—what if he was falling for her and didn't even realize it?

Her fingernails dug deep into her palm. She shot Frank an unhappy look, but this time, she didn't bother to question whether he'd caught feelings

for Elissa.

“So, do you treat every friend’s kid sister this well?”

“She burned bridges with Rowan just to marry me.”

Frank glanced over, clearly thinking her question was unnecessary. “Is it wrong to be a little nicer to her?”

Back home, Elissa stepped out of a hot shower.

She was drying her hair when Tanya Foster came in, balancing a plate of dark cherries, and popped one into Elissa’s mouth. “Come on, spill. What happened?”

“Hm?”

“You might not look miserable,” Tanya said, handing her a napkin for the spit, “but trust me—my eagle eyes can tell when something’s off.”

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Elissa couldn’t help but laugh.

Sometimes, she thought, her life really wasn't so bad.

Her mentor and Jacqueline treated her kindly, and she had Tanya as her best friend.

She set the hairdryer aside. "Guess who I ran into after leaving my mentor's place?"

"Who?"

"Frank and Marcia."

Elissa's lips twisted into a wry smile. "Frank was there, paving the way for Marcia—trying to get my mentor to take her on as a student."

She wasn't even sure how she felt about it.

Mostly, it left her feeling stuck.

Frank had only gotten close to her mentor because of her, and now he was using that connection to help the woman he truly cared for.

It didn't even make her sad, exactly-

"What's Frank thinking? Is he trying to slap you in the face? Honestly, you two aren't even officially divorced, and here he is, parading it around." Tanya was indignant.

Exactly.

It was like getting slapped in public.

It stung, no matter how she tried to brush it off.

But once she said it out loud, Elissa felt a little better. She let out a long breath, "Probably only Marcia knows what he's thinking."

"The divorce papers?"

Tanya looked as if she'd love to drag Elissa out of her wreck of a marriage herself. "When is his mother finally going to send them over?"

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“I asked today. Should be soon.”

“She’s not stringing you along?”

“No.”

Carmela always acted warm and easygoing, but she was sharp and decisive underneath.

Elissa had made her own intentions perfectly clear—she was definitely not the kind of daughter-in-law Carmela wanted.

If anything, Carmela was probably even more eager to get the divorce finalized than she was.

Just then, Tanya’s phone, left forgotten on the living room couch, started ringing. Tanya dashed out to answer it.

Elissa picked up her hairdryer, about to finish drying her hair, when her own phone buzzed on the table.

The caller ID made her body tense up instantly. She traced her fingernail along her fingertip several times before finally answering.

“Hi, Grandma.”

On the other end, the old woman’s voice was impatient and sharp. “What took *you* so long?”

Elissa drew in a silent breath. “I was just getting out of the shower...”

“Elissa,”

Matriarch Paige Murphy cut her off with a cold, mirthless laugh. “Being a little late to answer isn’t the problem. Not answering at all—that would be impressive.”

Elissa’s knuckles whitened around her phone. “Grandma, I would never-”

“All right,”

Paige's tone softened, just slightly. "Family dinner tomorrow night. Make sure you're home early. Slate's just got back from overseas—he's been

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saying he hasn't seen you in ages."

A jolt ran through Elissa, and the phone slipped from her hand, clattering to the floor.

By the time she picked it up, the call had already ended.

She stared up at the ceiling, taking several deep breaths to try and steady herself, but the memories crashing through her mind only made her hands tremble harder.

She hesitated, weighing her options again and again, before finally dialing Frank's number.

"Elissa, what's wrong?"

He picked up almost immediately.

Somewhere in the background, she could faintly hear Marcia urging him to eat more fruit.

Elissa kept her voice steady. “There’s a Murphy family dinner tomorrow night. Can you come with me?”

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“Mm,”

Frank hesitated a moment before answering, “I’ve got a meeting tomorrow afternoon. It might run late.”

Elissa felt her heart sink, slow and heavy.

“I see...”

“What do you see? Let me finish,” Frank’s voice was gentle but firm. “I just won’t make it back in time to pick you up. We’ll meet directly at Murphy Manor, alright?”

The tension in Elissa’s shoulders eased in an instant, and the corners of her mouth lifted almost involuntarily. “Of course, that’s fine.”

As long as she didn’t have to go back alone, she’d be alright.

“Mm. Are you almost home?”

She dropped her gaze to the floor. “I’m close.”

Frank’s tone softened further. “I bought you some cupcakes. Left them in *the* fridge—don’t forget to have one.”

Elissa froze.

He’d given her plenty of expensive gifts before—those never surprised her. But bringing *home* cupcakes just for her? That was new.

She was caught off guard. “Thank you, Frank.”

But that little flicker of surprise faded quickly.

She scrolled through her phone and saw Marcia’s post:

[This morning I just mentioned craving cupcakes, and tonight he brought some home!]

Her cupcake.

12 13 #

It must have been something Frank picked up on a whim, just because Marcia wanted them.

She tossed her phone carelessly onto the bed and collapsed after it, staring at the ceiling. The thought of the Murphy family dinner tomorrow night tangled her nerves all over again.

If she was honest, Matriarch Paige Murphy had done her a real kindness.

When her parents died, those two months in the orphanage had been nothing short of nightmarish for a five-year-old.

There'd been a girl there, only a year older, the undisputed queen of the orphans' little kingdom. Elissa had barely arrived before the girl *took* a dislike to her.

She'd been banned from playing with anyone else, had her dresses snipped up, found tacks hidden in her shoes, turtles drawn on her face with markers, and even lost the jade pendant she'd worn since birth—snatched right off her neck.

Elissa tried to tell the teachers, but every child insisted she was making

things up.

The teachers, of course, believed the crowd.

She'd hidden in the backyard, sobbing in a lonely corner, aching for her mom and dad. That's when Paige Murphy had arrived.

If Paige hadn't taken her in, if Rowan hadn't brought her to his own part of

the house...

She probably wouldn't have even made it to adulthood.

As a child, Elissa had been the picture of well-behaved—so obedient it was almost foolish.

And the world is unkind to the foolish.

So someone spent nine years teaching her how to be clever. How to fight back.

014

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Elissa stared up at the ceiling, the light stabbing at her eyes until they

ached.

—

“Sir, we’ve arrived.”

Rowan was lounging in the back seat, eyes closed, pretending *to* nap. At Ian’s words, he cracked an eye and glanced out the window. The usual sharpness in his gaze softened—just a little.

A moment later, another emotion flickered across his angular features: a rare, fleeting exasperation.

He made no move to get out of the car.

Ian prompted again, “Sir, we should go in. Grandma’s already seen us...”

Rowan shot him a lazy look, then swung his long legs out and stepped from the car.

“Grandma.”

Inside, Janice Garrett—nearly eighty—peered behind him, confirmed he’d come alone yet again, and her face fell into stern lines.

“Why are you by yourself again? I told you last time, if you don’t bring me a granddaughter-in-law, don’t bother coming home.”

Rowan strolled over, hands shoved in his pockets, and dropped onto the sofa. “Grandma, if you really want, I could bring you a new one every day.” “Don’t you dare.”

Janice didn’t miss a beat; she grabbed her cane and smacked him with it, all seriousness lining her wrinkled face.

“When it comes to love, you ought to be devoted. If you ever mess around with a girl’s feelings, you can forget about calling me Grandma.”

“Alright, alright, I’ll do as you say.”

Rowan let her scold and whack him until she was satisfied, only then

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gently setting her cane aside.

If anyone else saw this, they'd be stunned speechless.

The infamous Rowan, tolerating a lecture without a word of protest.

He frowned at the mug on the coffee table, its dark contents unappetizing. "What's that?"

"Medicine," Janice declared, picking up the mug and launching into her usual melodrama. "I'm so worried every night I can't sleep. Had *to* see a doctor. Some nice young lady told me that if I keep this up, I won't have long left. She wrote me a whole stack of prescriptions."

"Where'd you dig up such a quack?"

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator

Chapter 49

Every year, Rowan arranged two full physicals for her—he knew her health better than anyone.

Janice shot him a glare. “What do you mean, quack? That young woman’s got her act together—her medical skills are top notch, and she’s got a lovely temperament...”

She paused, eyes lighting up with mischief. “Honestly, I think she’d make a wonderful granddaughter-in-law for me...”

Rowan pressed his fingers to his temples, exasperated. “Grandma, every time you see a living, breathing woman, you decide she’d make a perfect wife for your grandson.”

“What’s wrong with that? Don’t you trust my taste?”

“Grandma, these things are about chemistry.”

“Chemistry? How do you know there’s none if you never even meet her?”

Janice was unfazed. “Just wait—I’ll visit a few more times, get to know her better, and then bring her over for you to meet.”

“I’m telling you, she’s sweet, and she looks-”

“Grandma,” Rowan cut in, rubbing his stomach as his temples throbbed, “I’m starving.”

“Starving? Goodness, look at the time! Why haven’t you eaten? Just sit tight!”

Janice jumped to her feet—forgot her cane entirely—and marched to the kitchen, moving with surprising speed for someone her age, determined to fix him some noodles.

Off to the side, Ian spoke up, looking worried. “Should I have our people look into that doctor? Just in case, so the old lady doesn’t get scammed.” “No need.” Rowan picked up a cup of herbal tea and sniffed it, his

12:13

expression cold and distant. “As long as she’s happy, that’s all that matters.”

“And that medicine...?”

“It’s nothing but herbal tea. Just a way to make a quick buck off her.”

Rowan leaned back on the couch, stretching out his long legs with nowhere to put them, looking both annoyed and indifferent. “Just make sure she doesn’t actually bring anyone home.”

“Understood.” Ian nodded, checked his phone, then frowned. “Sir, the Murphys’ family dinner is tomorrow. Miss Elissa will be attending.”

Rowan’s eyes darkened, his voice unreadable. “When has she ever missed one?”

“She’ll probably get caught up in another round of family discipline. Are we still not going...?”

Rowan cut him off, face like stone. “What does that have to do with me?”

“She likes Frank, doesn’t she? Let Frank protect her, then.”

“Sir...” Ian hesitated, almost as if he wanted to say more.

Was it just him, or did Rowan sound... annoyed?

Janice soon returned with a steaming bowl of noodles, her movements brisk. She looked over her grandson and sighed. “You coming over here—will Matriarch Paige Murphy be alright with that?”

She was referring to Rowan’s official grandmother, Lady Paige Murphy.

“What could she possibly object to?” Rowan’s eyes flickered with a hint of something sharp. But when he looked back at Janice, he softened. “You don’t have to worry. She won’t dare make a move anymore.”

“In the future, you’re the only grandmother I’ll have.”

—

Unless she **was** traveling, Elissa always wore dresses. Spring, summer,

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fall, or winter—it didn’t matter.

So when Tanya Foster saw Elissa emerge from her room that morning, she was surprised, and couldn't help but stare. "Why aren't *you* wearing one of your usual dresses today?"

"Heading back to the main house," Elissa answered shortly. She caught Tanya's lingering curiosity and added, "If I get in trouble and have to kneel, pants give a little extra protection."

Tanya mulled that over. It made sense, but something still felt off.

After breakfast, Elissa and Tanya left together.

"Aren't you off today? You've been seeing patients for three or four days straight."

Elissa smiled faintly. "Nothing to do at home anyway—I might as well help

out."

She didn't want to spend the day alone.

The clinic was always busy; with so many people coming and going, the hours flew by. There was simply no time to let her mind wander.

That afternoon, just as Elissa finished removing acupuncture needles from a patient, a group of young nurses by the window started calling

out.

It was snowing again.

Elissa glanced at the clock, hurried back to her office to change out of her coat, grabbed her bag, and headed out.

The weather report had predicted heavy snow. She wanted to leave early—if the roads iced over and traffic got bad, she'd be late, and give everyone at the Murphy house another excuse to make things difficult.

Her cab driver was a penny pincher; even as the car felt like an icebox, he refused to turn on the heat.

She rubbed her hands together in the backseat, and the driver glanced at

her apologetically. “Sorry, miss. If I save a little power, I can get in a few more rides today.”

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator

Chapter 50

“It’s nothing.”

Through the rearview mirror, Elissa caught a glimpse of the driver’s pale, drawn face. “I don’t mind a little cold now and then,” she said gently. “But you... I can tell your heart isn’t in great shape. You really shouldn’t push yourself like this.”

The driver looked at her in surprise. “Hey, how’d you notice?”

Before she could answer, he let out a weak, self-deprecating laugh. “Guess it’s obvious. This condition runs in my family—passed it on to my daughter, too. Right now, all I want is to save enough for her surgery.”

Elissa remembered the lock screen photo on his phone—a little girl with wide, sad eyes, her frailness betraying her illness. She couldn’t have been older than six.

Moved, Elissa asked quietly, “How much more do you need?”

He managed a hopeful smile. “Almost there. Just need another five or six grand, and the doctor can put her on the schedule.”

Five or six thousand.

By the time he scraped together that much, Elissa doubted the little girl could afford to wait.

She lowered her gaze and said nothing.

Later, she decided to wait for Frank to return so they could head back together. When they were a few blocks from Murphy Manor, she paid the fare by scanning the code and stepped out into the deepening snow.

Fat flakes fell harder and faster, swirling around her as she checked the time and pulled out her phone to call Frank. “Frank? How much longer? I’m waiting at a gazebo near the old house.”

“Elissa...” Frank’s voice hesitated, as if distracted. “Something came up at work. Can you go back first? I’ll come over as soon as I finish, okay?”

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She wasn’t in a position to say no.

She’d been out in the cold so long her voice had taken on a nasal rasp. “Alright. About what time?”

“Definitely before seven-thirty. I promise.”

“Okay. I’ll wait for you.”

She hung up, disappointment flickering in her eyes. But she didn’t wait—she turned and walked toward the old manor alone.

Frank wouldn’t be coming tonight.

For a moment, the realization stung. How could she have been so foolish as to think she could use Frank’s scraps of guilt as a shield to muddle through with the Murphy family?

In the old days, back when Spencer was still alive, Frank only accompanied her home when business with the Murphys demanded it.

Now, with Marcia single again, Frank could barely find time for her.

She was just an afterthought—a leftover slice of cake at a party, something Frank only gave when he had extra.

Leftover cake. Spare time. Pocket change.

As she neared Murphy Manor, her phone suddenly rang.

The brief smile that had flickered at the corners of her mouth vanished when she saw the unfamiliar number. She declined the call and sent a single text instead.

[Let me do a good deed for once. Take your daughter to see the doctor and don't worry.]

“Miss Elissa?”

Butler Murphy passed by, noticing her standing in the doorway, lost in thought. He hurried over, umbrella in hand. “Out in this weather without an umbrella? If you catch a cold, Mrs. Paige Murphy will have our heads.”

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Elissa managed a smile, slipping easily into the polite pleasantries expected of her. “You know my grandmother—she’d never blame you over something like this. She’s too kindhearted.”

The family dinner that night was livelier than usual.

Both of her aunts had actually come back with their families in tow—a

rare occasion.

Elissa’s back was ramrod straight as she entered, her gaze sweeping the dining hall, quietly relieved when she realized no one would bother with the pretense of welcoming her.

They barely acknowledged her presence, as if she were invisible.

She didn't care enough to spoil their mood. Instead, she headed to the kitchen, helping the staff set the table.

She'd just picked up a wine glass when a hand landed—without warning—on her backside, accompanied by a lazy, teasing voice.

“Hey, Elissa, long time no see.”

Elissa jumped, nearly dropping the glass, and had to resist the urge to smash it over his head. She forced herself to look down, voice even.

“Slate. You're back.”

“Yup. Missed me?”

Slate's eyes lingered on her, a mischievous glint in them. He tugged at the edge of her thick down jacket, clearly amused. “It's almost seventy-five in here—why are you bundled up like you're on an Arctic expedition?”

“What, are you afraid of me?”