

Oleander Eloise

During the French military campaigns under Napoleon Bonaparte, there were numerous instances of soldiers facing harsh conditions, including hunger and exposure to the elements. One particularly unfortunate event occurred when a group of Napoleon's troops was accidentally poisoned during a cookout involving oleander branches.

The incident is said to have occurred while Napoleon's army was stationed near the southern parts of France, possibly during his campaigns in Italy (1796-1797). After a long day of marching and battle preparation, the troops set up camp to rest and cook meat for their evening meal. With resources scarce and supplies low, the soldiers scavenged for firewood from the surrounding environment, unknowingly gathering branches from the oleander plant.

Oleander (*Nerium oleander*) is a highly toxic shrub native to the Mediterranean region. While its beautiful flowers make it appealing, every part of the plant—leaves, stems, flowers, and sap—contains toxic compounds called cardiac glycosides. These compounds can cause severe poisoning when ingested or even inhaled in the smoke of burning branches.

Unaware of the danger, the soldiers used the oleander branches to skewer their meat over the fire. The branches' toxicity leached into the food as it cooked, leading to an outbreak of poisoning among the men. Many soldiers became violently ill, experiencing symptoms of nausea, vomiting, abdominal pain, and in more severe cases, cardiac irregularities. Some accounts suggest that a few soldiers may have died from the poisoning, though the exact number of casualties is uncertain.

Napoleon, a strategic genius and a man known for his attention to detail, would have been deeply disturbed by such an avoidable tragedy. This incident was a stark reminder of the importance of knowledge in survival, especially in the unpredictable circumstances of war. Though it was not the first or last case of accidental poisoning in military history, the event highlighted the dangers of using unfamiliar plants and materials in desperate situations.

In the aftermath of the poisoning, the troops were likely warned to avoid using unknown plants for fuel or food preparation, though the lessons learned came at a high cost. Napoleon's relentless march to expand his empire was marked by many such challenges, where both nature and the enemy tested the limits of human endurance.

"This account is based on historical anecdotes and references to the known toxicity of oleander (Nerium oleander). While some stories suggest that Napoleon's troops were poisoned in such a way during a campaign, detailed records of the incident are not widely available."

Eloise sat by the window, stirring a cup of tea. The golden liquid swirled lazily as she added a sprig of herbs from the small wooden box on the counter. The dried and carefully crushed oleander leaves blended seamlessly with the others. She turned, smiling as her husband, Harold, shuffled into the kitchen, his face pale, the corners of his mouth drawn down in discomfort.

"Morning, dear," Eloise chirped, extending the cup toward him. "Your tea's ready."

Harold hesitated for a moment, rubbing his temples. "Morning, El. I... I don't know; I've been feeling off these days. My stomach's in knots. Must be something I ate."

Eloise tilted her head, feigning concern. "Oh, you poor thing. It's probably just a little bug going around. You've been working so hard, Harold. Here," she pushed the cup into his hands, "that'll help. You know tea always makes you feel better."

Harold took a tentative sip, the warmth sliding down his throat. He closed his eyes, sighing. "You're right... I just need to relax." He took another sip, his brow furrowing slightly as a wave of nausea rolled through him. "But El, I don't understand why it's not going away. It's been days. Maybe... maybe I should see a doctor?"

Eloise chuckled softly, sitting across from him. "Oh, you men are such babies. You probably just ate something a bit too greasy. You always complain when I cook too rich." She smiled sweetly, placing a hand on his. "You'll be fine. Just rest, okay? Drink your tea."

Harold's gaze lingered on her, but the exhaustion in his body overpowered his instincts. "I guess," he murmured, taking another sip. "You always know best."

As the day wore on, Harold grew more sluggish. His steps were heavy, and a sharp pain gnawed at his insides. When he returned home from work, Eloise was already waiting with another cup of tea, her face serene and loving. He sat down at the kitchen table, groaning softly.

"Still feeling bad?" she asked, her voice light.

"It's worse," Harold admitted, rubbing his chest. "My heart's been pounding, and I keep getting dizzy spells. I... I think something's seriously wrong, El."

Eloise frowned, leaning closer, her fingers brushing his forehead. "Oh, sweetheart, you're burning up. I think you're just stressing yourself out. You've been so tense lately with work. It's probably just fatigue." She slid the cup toward him. "Come on, finish this. I've added a bit of ginger. It'll calm your nerves."

Harold stared at the tea, a strange suspicion creeping into his mind. "You're sure this is just tea, right? No medicine or anything?"

"Of course, it's just tea," she said, her tone warm and steady. "Don't you trust me?"

He shook his head, feeling a pang of guilt for doubting her. "No, I do, I just..." He winced, a sudden sharp pain gripping his stomach. "I don't know. I've never felt like this before."

Eloise stood up and walked behind him, her hands resting on his shoulders, massaging gently. "You need to stop worrying. Stress is going to kill you before anything else." She laughed softly at her joke, but Robert didn't join in. His face had grown paler, and he placed the cup back down, half-finished.

"I think I need to lie down," he muttered, his voice weak. "Maybe I'll call Dr. Stevens tomorrow if this doesn't get better."

Eloise stiffened slightly, but her smile remained plastered across her face. "If it makes you feel better," she said softly, brushing her lips against his forehead, "but I'm sure you'll be right as rain after a good night's sleep."

The night stretched long for Harold, filled with fevered dreams and cold sweats. Eloise lay beside him, staring at the ceiling, her mind calm despite the rhythmic sound of his labored breathing.

By morning, Harold's condition hadn't improved. He sat slumped at the breakfast table, staring into space as Eloise placed another cup of tea in front of him.

"I really can't, El," he said, his voice hoarse, barely above a whisper. "I feel like I'm dying..."

Eloise gave him a gentle smile, though her eyes gleamed with something darker. "Oh, darling. You're just being dramatic." She pushed the tea closer to him. "Drink up. It's good for you."

He looked at her, confusion and fear flickering in his eyes. "El... what's in this tea?"

Her smile widened. "Just love, dear. Just love and some honey."

Harold sat on the edge of the worn leather couch, his hands trembling as he picked up the teacup. He had felt worse every day for weeks now—headaches, dizziness, the slow weakening of his limbs. Something wasn't right.

Eloise appeared from the kitchen with a concerned smile, wiping her hands on a dish towel as she entered the room.

"Harold, darling, you look pale again. Have you taken your medicine today?" she asked, her voice dripping with sweetness.

He glanced at the cup in his hands, then back at her, suspicion clouding his eyes. "I don't know, Eloise... this tea doesn't taste like it used to."

Eloise's eyes flashed for a split second before she caught herself. She softened her gaze, moving toward him with gentle concern. "Oh, sweetie, it's probably just the stress. I've told you. You need to relax more. I've been giving you that herbal blend from the health store; it's supposed to help."

Harold frowned, rubbing his temples. "But I keep getting worse. I feel weaker every day. Maybe we should call my doctor. Maybe I should go to the hospital."

Eloise's heart skipped, panic rising. She couldn't afford for him to seek medical help, not now when she was so close to being free. She leaned down beside him, brushing his hair back like a doting wife, her eyes wide with mock worry.

"Of course, darling, I'll call 911 right now if you want me to. But think about it—what are they going to say? That you're just a bit rundown? Hospitals are full of germs. You might catch something even worse." She reached for the phone on the table, her hand hovering over it. "But I'll call if you think it's serious."

Harold hesitated, staring at the phone in her hand. "Maybe you're right... it's just stress. I'll get over it."

"Exactly," she cooed, easing the phone down as relief flooded her. "Here, drink this tea. It's the best thing for you right now. You don't want to make things worse by not caring for yourself."

He took a cautious sip, his face contorting at the bitterness, but Eloise leaned closer, watching intently. "You need to drink all of it, Harold. It's good for you."

"You said there was honey in the tea, but I don't taste it. Can you add more?"

"Certainly. Give me your cup."

Harold sighed, pushing past his suspicions. His head was spinning too much to fight her any further. She had always been the one who took care of him, after all. Why would she do anything to harm him? He took another gulp of the tea, grimacing but better now.

Eloise smiled, but there was a flicker of impatience behind her eyes. She stood up and went to the medicine cabinet, retrieving a few bottles of pills. "I've got your medication, too. You need to keep up with it; otherwise, it won't do any good."

She handed him the pills—more than the usual dose. Harold eyed them warily. "Isn't this too much?"

"Doctor's orders," she lied smoothly. "Trust me, Harold. The sooner you take these, the sooner you'll feel better."

With trembling hands, he swallowed the pills, chasing them down with the rest of the tea. His suspicion lingered, but Eloise's calm demeanor soothed him just enough to override the alarm bells ringing in his head.

Eloise watched him down the medicine, satisfaction growing as he drained the last tea. She offered him a gentle smile, though her impatience was building inside. Soon enough, Harold wouldn't be a burden anymore. He wouldn't ask to go to the hospital. He wouldn't suspect a thing.

Soon, he wouldn't even be able to argue with her.

Eloise stood over the kitchen counter, her hands moving deftly as she crushed the oleander leaves into a fine powder. Her heart was steady, her mind calm—almost too quiet, she thought, given what she was about to do. The smell of the leaves was faint, but she could already imagine them dissolving into her husband's evening tea, their bitter essence masked by honey and lemon. As she worked, her thoughts drifted back to the last time she had done this.

Chapter 2

Her first husband, Robert, had been easy to fool. He was a man of routine, set in his ways, never suspecting that the woman he adored had only married him for what came after. She could still remember the sound of the life insurance policy papers as they slid across the attorney's desk, the ink drying on her signature. She'd felt nothing when he'd passed away—no guilt, no sorrow. All that had filled her heart was the anticipation of wealth, of freedom. For a time, it had been enough.

But freedom, as it turned out, had a cost. Eloise's evenings became filled with drinks, her fingers wrapped around glasses of whiskey, her mind lost in the thrill of cards and slot machines. The insurance payout had vanished quicker than she had anticipated, sucked into the dark, noisy abyss of casinos and poker tables. The rush of winning never seemed to last, but the losses clung to her like a second skin. It was too late by the time she realized how deep she was in. Destitute, she found herself back where she had started—alone, desperate, staring at the bottom of an empty glass.

She added the crushed leaves to the tea, stirring carefully. Her current husband, Harold, wasn't as naïve as Robert, but he had his weaknesses. He loved her—God help him, he indeed did—and that was all Eloise needed to ensure her plan would work. She had found Harold in a bar, just like Robert. She spent countless nights sitting in dimly lit taverns, scanning the faces of lonely men who looked like they needed a woman to save them. And when she had found Harold, she knew he was the one. He was lonely enough to be vulnerable and wealthy enough to be worth the effort.

Eloise smiled bitterly as she poured the tea into a cup. Harold would never suspect a thing. He trusted her implicitly, and that was his mistake. She'd nurtured that trust with patience, playing the devoted wife, cooking his meals, and pretending to care about his long-winded stories. But in the end, this would be like before. He would get sick, and the doctors would be baffled, chalking it up to some strange illness they couldn't identify. By then, it would be too late.

The insurance payout this time wasn't as large as the one from Robert, but it would be enough. Enough to get her back on her feet, back into the world of cards and whiskey. Enough to start again.

Eloise carried the tea to the living room, where Harold sat, unaware of what his wife was capable of. He smiled as she handed him the cup, and Eloise watched, the corners of her mouth twitching as he took his first sip. It would take time, but she could wait. She had always been good at waiting.

As Harold drank, Eloise's mind wandered to the next man she would find. There was always someone. Another man sitting in a bar, lonely and unsuspecting, just waiting for her to come along. And when the time came, she'd do it all over again.

The time came now to call 911.

Eloise Harold sits in the waiting room, nervously biting her lip as a doctor approaches her. She looks up, tears already glistening as she anticipates the act she's about to put on.

"Mrs. Edwards?" The doctor asked.

"Yes, that's me. How's Harold? Is he... is he going to be okay?"

The doctor gestures toward a nearby private room, encouraging her to sit. Eloise follows, wringing her hands dramatically.

"Your husband's condition is severe. His symptoms are puzzling, though. He's unresponsive, his heart rate is erratic, and there's severe respiratory distress."

"Oh God! What's wrong with him? He was fine this morning! He is a little tired, but he always works so hard. Is it a heart attack? Stroke?"

"We're not sure. His initial tests came back inconclusive. His organs are shutting down rapidly, but there's no apparent cause. We're running more tests—checking for toxins, infections, and anything that might explain this—but it could take time."

"Oh, Harold... he's always been so healthy. He only started feeling sick a few days ago. We thought it was the flu or something simple like that. You have to save him, Doctor!"

The doctor shifts uncomfortably, knowing the severity of Harold's condition but trying to maintain a calm demeanor.

"We're doing everything we can. I must ask if he has been exposed to chemicals or ingested something unusual. Any medications he's taken recently?"

"No! No, nothing like that. We live a quiet life. He's not even on many medications. Just some blood pressure pills... I can't believe this is happening. Could it be food poisoning? We had seafood the other night, but I was fine..."

Her voice cracks, well-practiced.

"It's possible, but food poisoning wouldn't explain his current symptoms. His system is shutting down much faster than we would expect. You said he's been feeling unwell for a few days—has he mentioned chest pains, difficulty breathing, or anything unusual before today?"

"Well, yes, he did say he was tired all the time and he had some stomach cramps. I just thought it was the flu... God, I should've brought him in sooner!"

She covers her face dramatically. I didn't know it was this serious!

"It's not your fault. These things can be unpredictable. We will keep working on him, but I have to be honest with you... his prognosis is not looking good."

"What do you mean? Is he... is he dying?"

Her eyes widen as she steps closer, grabbing the doctor's arm. Please, Doctor, you have to do something!

"We're doing everything we can, but his organs are failing. If we can't pinpoint the cause, there's little we can do beyond supportive care. It might help to know more about what's happened recently—

any changes in his routine or diet. Has he been in contact with anything unusual, like garden plants or household chemicals?"

Eloise's breath catches slightly at the mention of plants, but she quickly regains composure.

"No... nothing! He gardens sometimes, but just standard stuff. Roses, tomatoes... oh, I think we have some oleander bushes outside, but nothing dangerous, right? They're just plants..."

The doctor's expression changed slightly, his brow furrowing in recognition of something.

"Oleander, you say? That's quite dangerous. The leaves and flowers are highly toxic if ingested."

Eloise released a sharp gasp, overacting as she grabs the doctor's arm, pretending to be horrified.

"Toxic? Oh no! Could that be it? I never thought... but how would he...?" Her voice trailed off as she pretended to struggle with the thought.

It's possible. We'll need to test for oleandrin poisoning immediately. If he somehow ingested even a small amount of those leaves or flowers, it could explain the rapid organ failure.

Just then, a second doctor emerges from the nearby room, his face grave. Eloise stiffens, sensing the news coming.

"I'm sorry... we did everything we could, but Mr. Edward's heart stopped a few minutes ago. He didn't make it."

Eloise lets out a piercing wail, throwing herself into the nearest chair and burying her face in her hands. Her sobs are loud and overly dramatic, as if she's performing for the room. The doctors exchange a look, unsure of how to comfort her.

"No! No! He can't be gone! He was fine! This... this can't be happening!"

"Mrs. Edwards, I know this is a lot to take in, but we'll need to do a full toxicology report to confirm the cause of death but it might take some time. The labs are backed up with the Covid and all. If there's anything else you can remember, now's the time to tell us."

"I don't know... I don't know! Please... just tell me it wasn't my fault."

She sniffles, glancing up at the doctor with wide, tear-filled eyes.

"We won't know until we run all the tests, but if it was oleander poisoning, it could have been accidental. People often don't realize how dangerous certain plants can be. We'll keep you updated once we have more information."

Eloise nods weakly, her sobs subsiding as she sinks into her seat, hiding her face again. Internally, she feels a small surge of triumph—Harold is gone, and the doctors are none the wiser... yet.

"The second doctor responded: Take your time, Mrs. Edward's. We'll give you some space. I'll send a nurse to sit with you if you'd like. Eloise whispered: Thank you... I just... I need a moment."

As the doctors leave the room, Eloise's tears slowly dry up. She wipes her face, takes a deep breath, and closes her eyes, already rehearsing her next act. She knows the tests could come back with something, but for now, she's safe—and Harold is no longer a problem.

"I have to have the body cremated as soon as possible," she thought.

Chapter 3

The room is dimly lit, with the scent of old perfume and dusty curtains hanging in the air. Eloise sits with a cup of tea, staring out the window, trying to mask her irritation as Harold's daughter, Catherine, paces back and forth in the small space.

"I'm telling you, Eloise, something doesn't add up. My father was in perfect health before he married you. First, your husband dies, and now my father—both within a few years. And you expect me to believe it's all a coincidence?"

"People die, Catherine. It's part of life. I know this is hard, but we all must grieve and move on."

Catherine (narrowing her eyes, stopping in place) "Move on? Is that what you did with my father's money, too? I've seen the bank statements. You've burned through his savings like it was nothing."

Eloise sets her teacup down with a soft clink, her calm demeanor faltering. She looks up at Catherine with a steely gaze.

"I don't know what you're implying, but Harold left me that money. I was his wife. It's not your concern what I do with it." "Not my concern? He was my father!" Catherine said. "You used him, just like you used the first one. I spoke to some people about your first husband. You got the insurance payout and lived like a queen until it ran dry. And now the same thing happens with my dad? People aren't blind, Eloise."

Eloise leaned back, her voice cold. "If you think you can accuse me of something, you'd better have proof. Otherwise, this conversation is over."

Catherine stepped closer, her voice low but full of anger.

"How dare you accuse me of this! I loved your father. We were happy until the end!"

Catherine steps back, unfazed by Eloise's sudden outburst, her eyes narrowing with suspicion.

"Were you? Or were you just waiting for him to drop dead? Maybe you helped him along."

Eloise's face darkens, and her mask of composure cracks for a brief moment. She opens her mouth to respond but catches herself, swallowing the sharp words she almost let slip. Her voice trembles slightly when she speaks.

"You don't know what you're talking about," Eloise said.

Catherine quickly cut her off.

"I know enough. The tea. He was drinking it constantly before he died, wasn't he? You always made it for him. That's how you did it, isn't it?"

Eloise's hands shake as she grabs her cup of tea and takes a sip, trying to steady herself.

"Would you like some? This conversation is over."

"Oh, it's far from over. I think you had the body cremated to dispose of the evidence."

Eloise slams her teacup down, spilling the liquid onto the table. She glares at Catherine, her voice now cold and threatening.

"You think you can come into my home and throw these accusations at me? Fine. When you find nothing, I'll ensure you regret ever crossing me. You'll be the one in court for defamation."

"We'll see about that. Maybe the authorities will be more interested in your first husband's death, too. It's all starting to fit together."

Eloise's face turns pale at the threat. She knows Catherine won't back down. The tension in the room grows heavier, and Catherine glances at Eloise before turning to leave.

"You're not getting away with this," Catherine said.

The door slams shut behind Catherine, leaving Eloise standing in the empty room, her knuckles white as she grips the armrest of her chair.

The scene leaves Eloise rattled, her carefully constructed facade now beginning to crumble under the weight of suspicion.

"I better be careful how I spend the money," she thought. I have to lay low for a while. Catherine may be a thorn in my side."

Eloise sits in the plush office of John Cornelius, a polished investment banker in his mid-40s. The office smells of leather and freshly brewed coffee, the walls adorned with abstract art and accolades. Eloise, dressed in a conservative suit, leans forward, holding her purse tightly as Randall adjusts his cuff links and opens a portfolio.

John: "Mrs. Edwards, it's a pleasure to meet you. You've recently come into some funds—\$100,000, correct?"

Eloise (smiling stiffly): "Yes, that's correct. From my late husband's life insurance. I... want to make sure it's handled discreetly."

John (nodding): "Discretion is always a priority. Now, how would you like to allocate these funds? High-growth stocks, mutual funds, real estate, perhaps?"

Eloise (hesitating): "I was thinking more along the lines of... invisible investments," Eloise said hesitating.

"Invisible?"

Eloise (leaning in slightly, her voice lowering): "Something that doesn't draw attention. I don't want any red flags. Do you understand? People... ask questions when money moves too quickly. I want these funds to grow quietly, unnoticed."

"Ah, I see. You're looking for investments that won't raise eyebrows but offer growth. We can

certainly work with that. There are plenty of options for minimizing visibility while ensuring steady returns."

"Good. That's exactly what I need."

John opened a folder and slid a sheet towards her. "I'd suggest starting with a diversified portfolio of municipal bonds. These are tax-exempt, which means they won't generate the kind of income that attracts attention from auditors. Low-risk, slow growth, and ideal for avoiding unnecessary scrutiny."

Eloise (nodding): "That sounds promising. But what about... something off the books?"

Randall (pausing, then choosing his words carefully): "There are ways to minimize the visibility of your transactions, but we must stay within the legal framework. That said, I can explore international investments for you. Certain offshore funds are notoriously private. The returns aren't as quick but steady and—most importantly—discreet."

"Offshore sounds perfect. It keeps the money far away... safe."

"I can set up an offshore account for you in a secure jurisdiction like the Cayman Islands or Switzerland. We'll spread the investments across diversified funds so they look like any other portfolio. If anyone asks, it's all above board—just international diversification."

Eloise (her eyes lighting up): "And no one will trace it back to me?"

"The only people who'll know are the firm and me handling the funds. It's nearly invisible unless someone knows exactly where to look, and even then, the paper trail leads to legitimate sources. You'll be covered."

"And what if... someone starts asking questions? My husband's daughter, for instance. She's suspicious."

"As far as anyone is concerned, your portfolio is just a smart financial decision by a grieving widow securing her future. If they try to dig deeper, it'll look clean—prudent, even. Municipal bonds, some international funds, a conservative mix. No one will find anything out of place."

Eloise (sighing with relief): "That's what I need. I don't want to take any chances. I'll prepare the documents, and we can transfer the funds immediately. You'll receive quarterly reports—nothing flashy, just a steady growth plan. Trust me, this is the safest way to manage your situation."

Eloise stood and offered her hand. "Thank you, John. I feel much better about... everything now."

"It's my job to ensure you sleep easy at night, Mrs. Edwards. You're in good hands."

Eloise walks out of the office with a sense of satisfaction. She knows the money is safe, tucked away in invisible investments that will keep suspicions at bay—at least for now.

Catherine followed Eloise and determined a pattern whereby her times away from home were evident.

It was a cold evening; Catherine parked her car a few houses down from Eloise's, watching as the lights flickered on and off through the windows. Catherine slipped out of her vehicle and entered the backyard, hoping to snoop around. She knew this was reckless—illegal, even—but she was desperate.

The back door was unlocked. Catherine thought bitterly that her father had always trusted people too quickly. She slipped inside the house, creeping, her heart pounding. It smelled like stale cigarettes and old perfume. The kitchen counters were cluttered with unwashed dishes and empty bottles. She went to the den, where her father had spent most of his final days. The faint smell of his cologne still lingered there.

Catherine rummaged through drawers, looking for anything that could prove her suspicions. She froze when she found an empty bottle of medication, one she hadn't seen before—labeled with her father's name but filled months before his death. The pills were gone. She snapped a picture of the label and stuffed it back, her breath coming in shallow gasps.

Suddenly, the sound of a car pulling into the driveway jolted her. Eloise was back. Catherine cursed under her breath, her pulse spiking with fear. She bolted toward the back door, but she heard the front door creak open before she could reach it.

"Eloise?" Catherine's voice trembled as she called out, stepping into the hallway, hoping to avoid being caught like a thief. "We need to talk."

Eloise paused for a moment, surprised to see Catherine standing there. Her eyes narrowed, instantly suspicious. She dropped her grocery bag onto the table. "What the hell are you doing in my house?"

Catherine steadied herself, adrenaline coursing through her veins. "I know you poisoned my father," she said. She was always good at acting innocent, but now the mask had fallen, revealing something more sinister.

Get out of my house before I call the law.

"This is not over," Eloise said, running out of the house."

Chapter 4

Eloise sits at the end of the bar, nursing a glass of whiskey on the rocks. She looks glamorous for her age, but there's a hard edge beneath her polished exterior. She taps her fingers against the glass, scanning the room. A man, Jim, late 60s, walks in, orders a beer, and sits a few stools away from her. He notices her right away.

Jim glanced over. "Seems like a slow night, huh?"

Eloise looked up from her drink and flashed a coy smile. "It always is around here. Not many people appreciate a good whiskey these days."

"You got that right. Nothing beats the classics."

Eloise tilts her head, studying him for a moment. She shifts closer, her eyes bright with interest.

"You seem like the kind of man who knows a thing or two about classics. What's your name?"

"Jim. And you?"

"Eloise."

She extends her hand.

"Eloise. Nice to meet you, Jim."

They shake hands. Her grip is firmer than expected, but Jim likes that. They talk for hours about music, old films, and the things people used to value. Eloise laughs at his jokes and looks genuinely interested in everything he says. As the evening wears on, she leans in closer.

"I'm retired now. It used to be in construction. But I lost my wife a few years back... Cancer. So now, I just spend my time trying to fill the void, I guess."

Eloise's face softens at his admission. She places a hand on his arm, her touch lingering just enough.

"I'm sorry to hear that. Losing someone... it's never easy. I've been through it myself. Twice."

Jim raises an eyebrow, surprised.

"Twice?"

Eloise nods, looking down at her drink as if the memories are too painful

"Yes. My first husband had a heart attack. And my second... well, he was ill for a long time. Eventually, his body just couldn't take it anymore." Jim frowns, the wheels in his mind turning. But Eloise quickly shifts the mood, flashing a smile and patting his hand.

"But enough about that. We're not here to dwell on the past, are we?"

Jim smiles, the subject dropped for now. They continue talking late into the night, exchanging stories and laughs until the bar closes. As they leave together, Jim can't help but feel drawn to her.

Eloise plays the part of a grieving widow perfectly, knowing exactly when to be vulnerable and when to charm.

Her charm was too much for a lonely man like Jim. She accepted his marriage proposal.

All heads turn as she walks down the aisle, escorted by her son-in-law.

Eloise, now in her late sixties but with the radiance and vitality of a woman in her forties, is elegant and charming on her wedding day. Her stunning grayish red hair, cascading in soft waves, is vibrant against her fair, flawless skin. Her piercing blue eyes, framed by perfectly applied makeup, sparkle with a mischievous allure that draws everyone in, betraying none of the deadly secrets she harbors. She is wearing an ivory gown that clings to her hourglass figure and exudes timeless beauty and sophistication. The dress, adorned with delicate lace, accentuates her graceful neck and slender arms, while a subtle trail behind her adds a touch of regal sophistication.

Her posture is poised, her steps measured, and her smile enchanting—a bride who appears as fresh and youthful as she did decades ago. Eloise is a black widow hidden behind a façade of irresistible charm and beauty, captivating her new husband with her magnetic presence, while masking the lethal intent that simmers beneath.

The wedding reception went well.

The sound of clinking glasses and soft laughter fills the air. Eloise and Jim have just been married in a small ceremony, and now they're celebrating with close friends. Jim looks happy but slightly dazed by how quickly everything has moved. Eloise, in contrast, is radiant, holding a glass of champagne and chatting with guests.

Later that evening, they retreat to their newly shared home. Jim sits in the living room, gazing at his wedding ring, still processing everything. Eloise enters, holding two glasses of whiskey. She hands one to Jim and sits beside him.

"I still can't believe it. We're married," Jim said.

Eloise laughs softly, leaning her head on his shoulder. "Believe it, darling. We're going to be so happy together."

Jim takes a deep breath and then sets his glass down. His expression turns more serious.

"There's something I've been meaning to ask you, though... I couldn't shake it off earlier, but I didn't want to ruin the day."

"Go ahead. You can ask me anything."

"It's about your previous husbands... You mentioned before how they both died, and I didn't think much of it then. But, Eloise... two husbands gone like that? It seems... I don't know, strange. What happened?"

Eloise's expression tightens for a fraction of a second, but she quickly recovers. She sets her glass down and takes Jim's hands in hers, giving him a look of deep sympathy.

"Oh, Jim. I knew this would come up eventually. I thought I explained that earlier. I didn't want to burden you with the sadness of it all, especially not today. But I promise you, there's nothing to worry about. My first husband, Roger, had a heart condition for years. His death was tragic, but not unexpected."

Jim nods slowly, but he still looks uneasy.

"And the second?"

"Harold... poor Harold. He was older and in terrible health. I did everything I could for him, but sometimes... sometimes life just isn't fair. He slipped away peacefully in the hospital."

Jim studies her face for a long moment, sensing something is off. But Eloise is a master manipulator. She looks him straight in the eyes, a hint of tears forming, her voice cracking just enough.

"Jim, I loved them both. Losing them was the hardest thing I've ever been through. I wouldn't wish that kind of pain on anyone. But I don't want to live in the past anymore. I want to move forward... with you."

Jim's resolve softens, guilt washing over him for even questioning her. He pulls her close, wrapping his arms around her.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have asked. It's just... I care about you, and I wanted to make sure..."

"I know you care. And I'm grateful for it. Let's just focus on our future now, okay? I've had enough loss for one lifetime," Eloise said tearfully.

Jim nods, and Eloise smiles to herself, her face hidden against his chest. He has no idea what he's gotten himself into. "Was I looking for love in all the wrong places," he thought.

Later that night, in a bedroom, she stood in front of the mirror, slowly removing her wedding dress, a slight smirk tugging at her lips. Jim is already asleep in the next room, unaware of the danger he lives with. She reaches into a drawer and pulls out a small vial of clear liquid, examining it under the light.

"Third time's the charm," she whispers to herself.

When the moment arrives, she'll make sure his lingering doubts are silenced forever.

Tension mounts as Jim begins probing into Eloise's motives, but she deftly disarms him with charm and cleverness, all while quietly planning her next step.

It took several months for Eloise to work up the courage to broach the topic of his will.

The discussion between Eloise and Jim about wills takes on a critical turn. Eloise knows that she must tread carefully, for she has already dispatched two husbands, reaping the rewards of their deaths without arousing too much suspicion. Yet Jim is different—more cautious, possibly even skeptical of her past. Eloise must skillfully manipulate the conversation, presenting her motives as selfless and in Jim's best interest, all while masking her true intentions.

It was a quiet Sunday afternoon when Eloise decided to broach the subject. She and Jim sat on the porch, enjoying a mild breeze that carried the scent of freshly cut grass. Eloise had made tea, of course—her signature Earl Grey, with a hint of lemon, just how Jim liked it. As they sipped in comfortable silence, she studied him. Jim was still spry in his late fifties, but his graying hair and the deepening lines around his eyes made it clear he wasn't the young man he once was.

Eloise cleared her throat, setting her cup on the table between them. "Jim, darling, I've been thinking..."

He looked up, slightly amused. "Oh? About what?"

"About us, about the future," she began slowly as though the thought had just come to her. "We haven't talked much about it, but I think it's important. We're married now, and with marriage comes certain responsibilities."

Jim raised an eyebrow. "Responsibilities?"

"To each other," she clarified, placing a hand on his. "We should be thinking about what happens... you know, in case something happens to either one of us."

Jim leaned back in his chair, his expression still neutral but more guarded now. "What are you getting at, Eloise?"

She laughed lightly, trying to diffuse the tension. "Don't look so serious, darling! I'm only talking about preparing for the inevitable. We're not getting any younger, and it's wise to have a will in place. I thought I'd like to leave you the bulk of my estate."

There. She had said it just enough to set the wheels in motion. The offer had to seem genuine, a gesture of love and trust.

Jim's eyes narrowed slightly. "Your estate?"

"Yes, of course," Eloise said smoothly. "I know it's not much, but it's something between the house, my savings, and the money I got from Harold's will. I want you to have security if anything happens to me."

She saw Jim's jaw tighten ever so slightly at the mention of Harold. He had never asked many questions about her second husband, and Eloise had volunteered little. However, she had learned over time that Jim was not as easily manipulated as her previous husbands. He listened carefully, and she had to be precise with her words.

"Harold's will, huh?" he muttered as though weighing the information.

"Yes," she said, maintaining eye contact. "The \$100,000 I received after he passed. Some people were surprised, but Harold wanted to take care of me. He was always very generous."

Jim's gaze lingered on her, trying to read her mind. "And what about his daughter? She didn't contest it?"

Eloise felt a momentary irritation but quickly masked it with a serene smile. "Oh, she tried, but she had no legal standing. Harold made sure of that. She has been a pain in the ass, accusing me of harming him. But he had a bad heart."

"Yeah!" She has been harassing me, too."

Jim took another sip of his tea, his eyes still on her. "So, you want to leave me everything? Is that what this is about?"

"Not everything," Eloise corrected, her voice light. "But most of it. I just want to make sure you're taken care of. And... well, I think it would make sense for us to do the same for each other. It's only fair."

Jim didn't respond immediately. He swirled the tea in his cup, watching it whirl as if it might reveal some hidden truth. "So, you want me to change my will too? To leave everything to you?"

Eloise allowed herself a small laugh, feigning surprise. "Oh, Jim, I don't want you to think I'm pushing you into anything. This isn't about me getting your money—it's about us looking out for each other. If something happens to me, I want to ensure you're okay. But I also think it's wise for us to have that security."

Jim's expression was unreadable. "Security, huh?"

"Yes," Eloise said softly. She leaned in, her hand still resting on his. "We've worked hard to build a life together, and I don't want to leave anything to chance. I love you, Jim. This is about love, not money."

For a moment, there was silence between them. Eloise could feel the tension building but remained calm, her face a perfect mask of sincerity. Inside, her mind raced. Jim wasn't buying it as quickly as she'd hoped, but she had expected him to resist. That's why she had to keep pushing, subtly, but firmly.

"I mean, it's only natural, right?" she continued, her voice soft and persuasive. "You've talked about wanting to make sure I'm taken care of, and this is just... a way of formalizing that. We don't have to do anything drastic right now, but it's good to have a plan. To know that we're both protected."

Jim set his cup down, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. "And you've already written this into your will? That I'd get everything?"

Eloise smiled sweetly. "Almost everything, yes. It's not filed yet, but I've been working with a lawyer. I wanted to talk to you first, of course. I didn't want to do anything without your input."

Jim nodded slowly, but there was a flicker of something—doubt, suspicion—in his eyes. Eloise could sense it. She had seen that look before in Harold's daughter, right before she started asking too many questions. She couldn't afford that now. She needed to keep Jim on her side to ensure he didn't start digging too deeply into her past.

She leaned in closer, lowering her voice to a near whisper. "I trust you, Jim. More than I've ever trusted anyone. That's why I'm doing this. I want you to know how much you mean to me."

Jim's eyes softened slightly, but the tension still hung. "I appreciate that, Eloise. I do. But..."

Her heart skipped a beat. "But what?"

"But I'm not sure I'm ready to make any changes just yet," he said slowly. "It's a big decision, and I'd like to consider it."

Eloise forced herself to smile, though her mind was already racing for a new approach. "Of course, darling. Take all the time you need. I just wanted to start the conversation."

Jim nodded, but there was a wariness in his gaze now, one that Eloise knew she would have to navigate in the days to come carefully.

As they sat there, sipping their tea in the fading sunlight, Eloise couldn't help but feel the pressure building. Jim wasn't going to be as easy as the others. She would have to be patient to play the long game. But she had time. After all, Jim was in her life now—and if she had her way, it wouldn't be long before she'd be in his will.

And once that happened, she had to ensure he didn't outlive his usefulness.

"When the moment arrives, she'll make sure his lingering doubts are silenced forever. Tension mounts as Jim begins probing into Eloise's motives, but she deftly disarms him with charm and cleverness, all while quietly planning her next step. It took several months for Eloise to work up the courage to broach the topic of his will. The conversation about their wills takes a pivotal turn as Eloise knows she must be cautious. Having already benefited from the deaths of two husbands without raising suspicion, she now faces a more cautious and possibly suspicious Jim. Eloise must artfully guide the discussion, framing her intentions as being for Jim's own good, all while hiding her true agenda."

Chapter 5

Catherine sits across from Detective Reynolds, her face pale with exhaustion and grief. Her hands tremble slightly as she speaks, but her voice is steady.

"I know she killed him. I should've seen it earlier, but everything happened so fast. She pushed for the cremation right away. Now, she's remarried and living off his insurance money. You have to do something!"

Detective Reynolds listens intently, leaning back in his chair. He's been through this before—the suspicion and grief, but his hands are often tied without hard evidence. He straightens his posture, carefully choosing his following words.

"How long was she single?"

"Just a few months."

"How do you know about insurance money?"

"I saw it in his papers after his death?"

"How much was the policy?"

"One hundred thousand."

"Did you contact the insurance company?"

"They said they could not disclose anything?"

"Miss Justice, what do you want me to do?"

"Can you get the court to freeze the money?"

"Not without evidence that she had something to do with his death. Even then, she probably has gone through the money."

"I understand how difficult this is for you, Catherine. But without a body to autopsy, it's going to be complicated—near impossible, actually—to gather the kind of evidence you're talking about. Cremation destroys most forensic traces," Detective Reynolds said.

Catherine's eyes widen with frustration, her voice rising slightly.

"But what about the tea? She gave him tea every day! He started getting sick right after they got married. I should have known—she's been after his money from the start. She poisoned him."

Reynolds sighs, tapping his pen against his desk thoughtfully. "what was the official cause of death?"

The symptoms mimicked heart trouble, but he died before the tests could be run.

"You mentioned tea before. Do you still have any of the tea left in the house? Or any cups, pots, or anything that might have traces of it?"

Catherine shakes her head, regret flashing across her face.

"I don't think so. After the funeral, she cleaned out everything. And even if I found something, would anything be left after all this time? Can you get a search warrant to see if oleander leaves are there?"

Reynolds nods, understanding the difficulty of the situation. It's a dead end, but he doesn't want to leave her without hope.

"It will be challenging to obtain a court order. We are unlikely to find anything, especially if she's thoroughly cleaned up. But sometimes people make mistakes. Have you noticed anything—anything odd in her behavior? Did your father ever say anything to you about feeling uneasy or suspicious before he died?"

Catherine thinks for a moment, searching her memory.

"He did mention feeling weak and nauseous, but he thought it was just his age catching up to him. Eloise always brushed it off and said it was nothing. But now I wonder... could it have been something in the tea all along?"

Reynolds leans forward, sensing the shift in her tone. "I heard about a case where a woman poisoned her husband with tea laced with oleander leaves. Oleander poisoning can mimic a lot of symptoms—nausea, weakness, and even heart problems. If he was ingesting it slowly over time, it would've been hard to tell without specific tests. But again, without the body or any physical evidence, it's mostly speculation."

Catherine's shoulders slump, and she stares at the desk.

"So there's nothing I can do? She just...gets away with it?"

Reynolds frowns slightly, hating the helplessness of the situation.

"It's not hopeless. Even without a body, we can still build a case if we can gather enough circumstantial evidence. There are ways to investigate—tracking financial records, interviewing people who knew your father, or even looking into Eloise's past. Has she ever been involved in anything suspicious before? You said she remarried quickly, which we can look into, too."

Catherine's eyes flash with determination.

Eloise was married once before. Her first husband died under strange circumstances, too—supposedly a heart attack, but I never believed it. And now, she's targeting another man, probably with the same plan in mind.

Reynolds raises an eyebrow, jotting down the new information.

"Do you know if her first husband was cremated or buried?"

"I don't know."

"That's precisely the kind of thing we need to follow up on. If there's a pattern of behavior, we can dig deeper. And if we find anything unusual in her financial dealings—insurance payouts, sudden purchases, things like that—it could raise red flags. Then maybe we can get a court order to exhume her previous husband's body."

Catherine's frustration eases slightly as hope flickers again.

"So you can still investigate? Even without his body?"

Reynolds nods firmly.

"Absolutely. It's more challenging without direct forensic evidence, but people make mistakes. Financial records, witness statements, inconsistencies in her story—there are ways to build a case. If she's done this before, we might find more. We can also talk to her new husband. Maybe he's already noticed something off," Detective Reynolds said.

Catherine nods slowly, her voice soft but resolved.

"Then please—look into it. I don't want anyone else to die the way my father did. She needs to be stopped."

Reynolds stands, extending his hand to her.

"We'll do everything we can, Catherine. I'll have someone look into Eloise's previous marriage and keep an eye on her current one. In the meantime, let us know if you remember anything else, no matter how small. Sometimes, it's the little details that break a case wide open."

Catherine shakes his hand, standing tall despite the weight of her grief.

"I'll help in any way I can. Thank you, Detective."

Reynolds watches as she leaves the room, his mind already turning over the possibilities. It would be a long, difficult road ahead, but something about Eloise didn't sit right. And if there was a trail, he intended to find it.

This scene captures the frustration and challenges of proving foul play after a body has been cremated, while also leaving room for a potential investigation into Eloise's pattern of behavior, financial dealings, and suspiciously fast remarriage.

"If she has remarried, she will probably try again. All we can do is monitor the situation and talk to family members."

It's a chilly autumn afternoon, and Jim is sitting on his porch, bundled up in a heavy sweater. The neighborhood is quiet, with leaves slowly falling from the trees around them. Catherine approaches, her face flushed with anger and frustration, her determination unwavering. Oblivious to the danger he's in, Jim doesn't seem to sense the gravity of her words as she corners him. Her persistence has been unwavering.

"Jim, we need to talk. I've been trying to reach you for weeks, and you've dodged me. This can't wait any longer."

Jim glanced up with mild irritation.

"More of this nonsense? Catherine, you've been making a real mess of things. What do you want now? Quit harassing me."

"It's not nonsense! You have no idea who you're living with. Eloise... she's dangerous. You've heard what happened to my father, haven't you? That wasn't some tragic accident, Jim. She poisoned him. And she will do the same thing if you're not careful."

Jim chuckled dismissively.

"Oh, come on. Catherine, you've been obsessed with this conspiracy for months now. Eloise has been nothing but kind to me. She's taken care of me in ways no one else ever has. You need to stop this madness and leave us alone."

"Jim, she's after your money. Just like she was after my father's. Don't you see the pattern? She marries older men, waits for them to fall ill, and then... when no one's looking, she poisons them! My father had heart problems, and suddenly, he was dead just after changing his will. Does that seem like a coincidence to you? And if you start feeling bad, get checked for oleander poisoning immediately."

"Your father was a very sick man. Eloise didn't do anything but help him live a little longer in peace. And frankly, I don't need to listen to these wild accusations. You're grieving, and I get that. But it's clouding your judgment. Eloise isn't some villain in one of your crime stories."

"She killed him, Jack! I'm sure of it. She gave him something — something that made him sicker, and now she's doing the same to you. Do you even know what oleander is? It's a poison, Jack. A deadly one. She used it on my father, and it's only a matter of time before she starts slipping it into your tea or soup, just like she did with him!"

Jim glaring now, stood up shakily from his chair.

"Enough, Catherine! I won't stand for this any longer. Eloise has been nothing but good to me. I stand her while you've spread these crazy stories, trying to ruin our peace. I've had enough of your harassment. You need to leave. Now."

"You think I'm harassing you? Do you think I'm the problem? Jim, you're the one who's blind. She's playing you, just like she played my father. I bet she's already making sure your will's in her favor. Isn't she? Tell me she hasn't asked you about it."

"That's none of your business. What Eloise and I talk about in our home is private. And I won't have you accusing her without proof."

Catherine pressed further, seizing on the moment of doubt.

"Exactly! She's clever, Jack. She won't give you a reason to suspect her until it's too late. Just think — have you started feeling weaker lately? Nauseous, maybe? She'll start small, just like she did

with my father, and before you know it, she'll be mixing her poison right under your nose. It won't take much. Oleander is deadly in the smallest doses."

"I feel fine. Maybe a little tired lately, but that's old age, Catherine. You can't just blame Eloise for everything. She's... she's taking good care of me. And let's assume she did poison him; how do you know it was oleanders?"

"Because his symptoms mimicked heart problems and he was taking heart medication. It was the perfect opportunity to use a poison that would be difficult to detect. The doctors were even going to get tests for oleander poisoning."

"That's a stretch," Jim said.

"Jim, please. I'm begging you. Don't wait until it's too late. Get away from her before you end up like my father. Talk to a doctor and get checked for signs of poisoning. She's not what she seems, and I'd rather you hate me now than let her kill you."

Jim stared at her, the doubt growing but still shaking his head.

"You're wrong about her. I know you think you're protecting me, but you're just letting your grief drive you to madness. I'm not going anywhere. And I'm not letting you destroy my marriage. But you will be the first to know if I start feeling bad."

"Then she'll destroy you, Jim. And when she does, don't say I didn't warn you."

Catherine walked away, glancing back at Jack one last time. Jack, visibly disturbed by the conversation, watched her go, unsure whether to trust her words or his loyalty to Eloise.

Chapter 6

Catherine received a phone call from Detective Reynolds, and he asked if she could meet him at the police station.

Detective Reynolds sat across from Catherine in a small, dimly lit room. Papers are scattered across the table, including medical records, notes on Eloise, and a formal request for a court order. Catherine leans forward, anxious but determined to uncover the truth about her father's death.

"Thanks for coming down, Ms. Edwards. We understand this has been difficult for you, and we want to update you on your father's case. Please, have a seat."

"I just want the truth. I know Eloise had something to do with my dad's death. I can feel it."

"We understand how upsetting this must be. You've mentioned before that you suspect Eloise may have been involved in your father's death for financial gain. We're taking that accusation seriously, Catherine, but we must explain where the investigation currently stands. We obtained a court order to review his medical records."

"Detective, I don't know how to say this without sounding crazy, but I'm sure Eloise poisoned my father. The way he went so quickly—it just didn't make sense. He was managing his heart condition, but then, overnight... he's gone."

"I understand your concerns, Catherine. I've seen this kind of thing before. Sometimes, it's the people closest to us who we least expect. And you're right—the timing was suspicious. But you mentioned something about her having the body cremated?"

"Yeah, she insisted on it almost immediately after he passed. He said it was what he wanted, but I don't believe that. My father was meticulous. He had a will and plans for everything. Cremation was never something he talked about."

"Unfortunately, cremation makes it nearly impossible to do a proper toxicology screening. Without a body, there's no direct way to test for poisons like oleander or anything else that could've contributed to his death."

"So we're stuck? There has to be something. She's getting away with murder!"

"Well, it's not all lost. Poisonings, especially with something like oleander, can mimic heart issues, especially in someone already taking medication for heart trouble. But here's the thing—depending on the time of death and how long he'd been sick, there may be records from his doctors or hospitals that could help."

"What do you mean?"

"Doctors usually run blood tests when managing heart conditions, especially if he was on medication. If they did blood work in the days or weeks leading up to his death, those samples could contain clues. It might not show the exact poison now, but certain markers might be off—electrolytes, potassium levels, things that could suggest interference from something like oleander."

"So you're saying that past blood work could reveal if something were off before he died?"

"It's possible. Oleander can cause heart changes that might appear in past tests, like irregular potassium levels or abnormal electrocardiograms. If his doctors monitored his heart, those results might look strange retrospectively."

"Could they have saved any blood samples? Is that something doctors do?"

"Sometimes, yes. If he was admitted to a hospital, especially in his final days, they might have stored samples for future tests. Hospitals must keep records, but whether they kept physical blood samples depends on a few factors—state laws, the hospital's protocols, and how recently the tests were done."

"So what can we do now? How do we even begin to discover if this exists?"

"We start by going through these records. We already got access to them with the court order. I'll contact his doctors, particularly his cardiologist, and any hospital where he was treated. We need to see if they ran tests close to his death, especially within the last few weeks or days. If they did, and the samples were preserved, we can request them for additional analysis. We'll at least look at the test results if nothing was preserved. Anything off could give us grounds to dig deeper."

"But Eloise will fight this. She'll try to block everything if she knows we're looking into his records."

"She can try, but it won't do her much good. We've already got the court order for his medical records. She cremated the body, but if there's enough suspicion in his bloodwork and past test results, we can build a case. A toxicologist could look at the records and tell us if there's something unusual. Even the slightest anomaly could suggest he was being poisoned over time."

"So, even though we can't test his body, there's still a chance we can prove she did this?"

"There's always a chance, Catherine. People like Eloise think they're covering their tracks by cremating a body, but they forget—there are always other ways to look at the evidence. We just need to be thorough. If she slipped up, we'll find it. For now, I'll reach out to his doctors and the hospital. If anything looks off, we'll bring in a toxicologist to review the bloodwork. And if there's enough there, we can start building a case."

"She may try this again with her current husband. I have warned him to be careful," Catherine said.

"You are the one to be careful. He could accuse you of harassment."

"OK. I just want justice for him, Detective. Dad didn't deserve to go like this... not at her hands."

"And we'll do everything we can to ensure she doesn't get away with it. You've done the right thing coming to me. Now it's up to us to follow the evidence wherever it leads."

Catherine nods, her expression resolute. The Detective gathered the files, ready to dig deeper into the mystery surrounding her father's death. They both know it won't be easy, but there's a sliver of hope. And sometimes, that's all it takes to catch a killer.

Chapter 7

Eloise entered the café and spotted Catherine sipping coffee at a corner table. The tension was thick as Eloise walked over, her face hard and cold. Catherine, noticing her approach, shifted uncomfortably but didn't flinch.

"We need to talk," Eloise said.

"Oh, I figured we would. How's Jim? Still alive?"

"Cut the crap, Catherine. You've been running your mouth. Harassing Jim. Telling him that I—" "poisoned your father?"

"Well, didn't you? My father had some heart issues but not enough to become fatal, and suddenly he was dead. Right after he married you. And now, you're up to your tricks with Jim. Someone has to warn him."

"I'm warning you now. You keep pushing this—slandering me—you'll regret it."

"Oh, is that a threat, Eloise? Or are you just giving me a 'friendly' warning like you did before you slipped oleander into my father's tea?"

"You have no idea what you're talking about. Your father was a sick older man. I had nothing to do with his death, and you spreading lies about it is going to end today."

"My father wasn't sick. He was fine until you showed up, dragging him into your twisted little world. How much insurance money did you walk away with again? A hundred grand? And now Jim's next on your list, isn't he?"

"Stay. Away. From my husband. If you had an ounce of respect for your father's memory, you wouldn't be going around throwing accusations like you're some kind of detective."

"Oh, I have plenty of respect for my father. That's why I'm doing everything possible to ensure no one else falls into your trap. Especially Jim. Do you think I didn't notice how you've been isolating him? Convincing him to sign things and take out more life insurance? It's all so convenient, isn't it?"

"You little witch. You think you're so smart, don't you? Snooping around, playing the grieving daughter. But what you're doing is stalking. And I won't tolerate it any longer. By the way, just for your benefit, there is an insurance policy on me, too, so shut your mouth."

"Stalking? Oh, Eloise, I'm not the one stalking her. You're the predator, always looking for your next victim. And Jim is blind to it, just like my father was."

"Enough! You've been meddling in my life for too long, and I'm done playing nice. You don't want to push me, Catherine. You don't know what I'm capable of."

"Oh, I think I know exactly what you're capable of. That's why I'm not going anywhere. And I'm sure as hell not backing off."

"Is that so? You're making a huge mistake. You don't want me as an enemy, Catherine."

"You think I'm scared of you? Maybe I should be the one giving you a warning. Stay away from Jim, Eloise. I've been digging into your past, and it's only a matter of time before the truth emerges."

"Don't you dare cross that line? Do you think you can dig up dirt on me? Go ahead, try it. But when you come for me, you better be ready for what's coming your way."

"Oh, I'm ready. The question is—are you?"

"You've just signed your death warrant, Catherine. Do you want a war? You've got one."

"Bring it on, Eloise. You won't win."

Eloise glares at Catherine for a long moment, her jaw clenched, before turning on her heel and storming out of the café. Catherine watches her go, a defiant smile on her lips, knowing this is far from over. Eloise sits in her car across the street, waits for Catherine to leave, and follows her. As luck would have it, Catherine goes home.

The sun began sinking, casting long shadows over Catherine's quaint, suburban home. The air felt tense as if the universe anticipated the impending storm. Eloise stood at Catherine's front door, her hand hovering over the brass knocker momentarily. She adjusted her scarf, feeling a twinge of exhilaration beneath the surface of her calm demeanor. This confrontation had been brewing for too long.

With a swift knock, she waited, and after a few beats, the door swung open. Catherine stood there with a stern expression, not surprised to see Eloise. They had exchanged too many terse words over the past weeks for this visit to be unexpected, especially the one that had just occurred in the cafe.

"Eloise, what the hell are you doing here?" Catherine's voice was firm, but the tension in her body showed she was on edge.

Without waiting for an invitation, Eloise pushed past her and entered the house. "We need to talk," Eloise said, her voice deceptively calm, but something darker flicked beneath the surface. Catherine shut the door, her irritation mounting.

"Talk about what? How you've poisoned half my family?" Catherine shot back. "And the conversation we had earlier summed it all up, so get out or I'm calling the cops."

Eloise's face hardened, her eyes narrowing as she turned to face Catherine fully. "Don't be so dramatic, Catherine. You never did know when to stop."

The tension between them crackled like a live wire, and the room seemed to shrink under its weight. They moved toward the kitchen, the argument escalating, their voices growing sharper and louder with each accusation.

"No, the conversation is not over. You've been harassing Jim. You've been poking around where you don't belong!" Eloise's voice was a growl, her hand clenching the kitchen counter. "I won't have

you ruining my life because you can't accept what's happened."

"Jim? Do you think Jim's on your side? He doesn't even believe you poisoned Dad! You're the one who's ruined everything," Catherine shouted, taking a step closer, her face flushed with anger. "And I know what you did. You can't hide it forever."

The kitchen felt claustrophobic now, both women locked in their fury. In a flash, Catherine lunged forward, and the two women collided. They grappled violently, knocking into chairs and counters. Catherine managed to shove Eloise back, but Eloise was determined. She grabbed a dish off the counter and hurled it at Catherine, who dodged it, smashing it against the wall. They were both breathless, panting with rage, their bodies colliding again.

In the struggle, they tumbled toward the kitchen island, and Eloise's hand brushed against a block of knives. Without hesitation, she yanked one free, her face contorted with a wild determination. Catherine's eyes widened as she saw the glint of the blade.

Before Catherine could react, Eloise thrust the knife forward. Once. Twice. The sharp blade pierced Catherine's side, her torso, and again, her shoulder. Blood splattered across the white kitchen tiles, the metallic scent filling the air. Catherine gasped, stumbling back against the counter, clutching her wounds, her breaths coming in shallow, panicked spurts.

Eloise's breath was ragged, her chest heaving as she stared at Catherine, whose body was now crumpled on the floor, blood seeping through her fingers as she pressed them against her side. For a moment, it was as though time had stopped—Eloise's mind was entirely still in the aftermath of violence.

Then, without another word, she turned and ran. She bolted from the house, blood still on her hands, and threw herself into her car. Her hands trembled as she gripped the steering wheel, but a calm settled over her face as she drove. It was done. Catherine would be dead soon, and there would be no more threats hanging over her. Eloise's mind began to drift, thinking back over the years.

She thought about Harold—how easy it had been to get rid of him. The oleander in his tea had worked slowly, painfully, just as she had planned. She had expected Catherine to become a problem, but it was all worth it. She thought about Jim, her third husband, and how he refused to believe she had killed Harold. "He'll never know," she mused, smiling to herself. It didn't matter what Jim believed anymore.

For a while, she simply drove, reminiscing about her life without any flicker of guilt or remorse. She remembered the small victories, the lies she had told, and the money she had inherited from Harold. Jim wouldn't get the life insurance; she had anticipated that. But she had left him something in her will—enough to satisfy him after she was gone. He wouldn't be able to claim ignorance forever. She smiled at the thought, relishing the control she had wielded over many lives.

The drive took her to the coast, where the cliffs loomed ahead, stark against the darkening sky. The waves crashed violently below, and Eloise pulled the car over, stepping out into the cold, salty air. She walked toward the edge, the sound of the sea filling her ears.

She stood at the cliff's edge for a long moment, looking over the churning water below. There was no regret. Only an eerie sense of peace. Her life had been a series of calculated moves, and this was simply the final one.

Without hesitation, she stepped forward, letting gravity take her as she plunged into the icy waters below.

But Eloise's plans, like her life, had cracks she couldn't see.

Back in the house, Catherine lay bleeding on the kitchen floor, fighting for her life. The cold tile beneath her only sharpened her resolve to survive. Her breaths came in shallow bursts, but she dragged herself across the floor, leaving a trail of blood. She managed to grab the phone, dialing for help with trembling fingers.

The ambulance arrived within minutes, and Catherine, barely clinging to life, was rushed to the hospital. She survived the ordeal, her body battered but her spirit unbroken.

As for Jim, he remained in denial. He couldn't believe that Eloise had poisoned Harold, and even with Catherine's accusations and near-death experience, his mind rejected the idea. But reality soon set in. With Eloise gone, the truth started to seep through the cracks, though it was too late to confront her.

The life insurance wouldn't pay out—there was too much suspicion now—but Eloise had left Jim a small fortune in her will. Perhaps, in her twisted way, it was her final act of control.

Eloise had ended her life on her terms, but the damage she left behind would haunt those who survived her.

The End