

## Caged

The terrarium in Tiffany's room had everything it needed to provide the most comfortable life a pair of frogs could ask for. But Tiffany's parents weren't frogs. What joy do you take in a small pond, fresh moss, logs to jump around on, and all the crickets you could eat when you can remember living the lifestyles of the rich and famous? They squatted now in the damp muck, staring up at their daughter with begging eyes.

Tiffany stared back at them. At first, she'd delighted in no longer having to do everything her parents told her. Getting a couple of pet frogs out of it was also a nice bonus. Lately, however, she began to wonder. Her pets didn't jump around, or get excited to be fed. They didn't even try to bang on the glass anymore, which had at least been funny. They mostly just . . . stared at her. Somewhere in her young mind, she began to understand that something wasn't right.

"Tiffany, it's time for bed."

She turned towards Frau Hildegarde, who stood in the doorway. She looked at her bed, then back to her tutor, wanting to speak, but not knowing what she needed to say. Frau Hildegarde's cold and stony expression softened.

"Is something the matter?"

Tiffany glanced back at the terrarium. "I don't think they're happy."

For just a moment, a glimpse of worry crossed Hildegarde's face, but it passed too quickly for Tiffany to spot it. Crossing the room, she looked into the terrarium. Tiffany's parents crawled as far back away from her as the glass allowed.

"Why do you say that? You give them everything they need, don't you?"

Tiffany shrugged. "I thought so, but . . ."

"But?"

"They don't move around anymore, not even to chase their food."

"They're just getting used to being frogs," Hildegarde said, suppressing a disdainful sniff.

"Frogs don't move around much in the wild, either. They wait for their food to come to them."

"Oh . . ."

The tone suggested Tiffany remained unconvinced. Frau Hildegarde continued staring down at the cowering frogs while she considered the situation. Perhaps she shouldn't be surprised. Tiffany might be young, but a lack of life experience wasn't the same as being blind. Her parents might no longer speak, but they could make their mood known in other ways. They were obviously unhappy – everything in life had been taking away from them – and Tiffany picked up on it. Regret, that useless emotion always getting in the way of one's goals, now crept into the girl's mind.

"Maybe I should change them back?"

And there it was. Frau Hildegarde saw the change in the frogs' posture, suddenly more attentive and hopeful, even filtered through their current shape's limited expressive ability. She couldn't allow this. Not after all the work she'd done to get Tiffany in her grasp. Not after all the time and energy she'd expended on so many different spells to deflect questions, to keep people from wondering where Tiffany's parents had gone and why she was now in her own care. Fortunately, she'd planned for this. Distorting her face into an unwelcome and unfamiliar expression of sympathy, she turned to Tiffany.

"Oh, darling," she said softly, "why would you do that? Don't you enjoy having some pets?"

Tiffany hesitated, then nodded. "But they're not really my pets. They're my parents."

"Are they?" the older woman asked.

The question confused Tiffany. "Yes?"

"Oh, sweetie." Frau Hildegarde bent down and put her hands on Tiffany's shoulders. "Parents care about their children."

Tiffany's brow furrowed. "They cared about me, didn't they?"

A question, not a firm statement. Frau Hildegarde held back her smile.

"I'm sorry, my dear," she said. "I didn't want to tell you this, but no. Your father didn't send you to me because he cared about you. He sent you to me because he wanted to use you for his selfish personal goals. He never loved you."

Tiffany's face fell sharply. Her father puffed himself up, the only way he could express his seething rage. Seeing the hurt and betrayal on her face, however, anger struggled with a deep, hidden shame at knowing the old woman's words weren't entirely untrue.

"He wanted to use your power to make himself rich," Frau Hildegarde continued. "He wanted you to make his boss give him more money and to make people who he thought stood in his way back down. If he weren't a frog now, then people he didn't like now would be. He'd have asked you to do that. It was all he wanted from you."

Tears in her eyes glittered in the light. "But what about mommy?"

Frau Hildegarde shook her head. "How often was she there for you, Tiffany? How many times did she leave you with a babysitter while she went off to enjoy drinks and parties with her friends? You weren't her daughter, you were just a responsibility that kept her from enjoying life. A responsibility she handed off to anyone else as often as she could."

Once again, Frau Hildegarde forced herself not to smile when she heard Tiffany sniff and saw her lip starting to tremble. In the cage, Tiffany's mother curled up and covered her head with her front feet. Had a frog been capable of tears, she would have wept, too.

"I'm so sorry I have to tell you this," said Frau Hildegarde, kneeling down and hugging Tiffany.

Clutching at Frau Hildegarde's dress, Tiffany wailed. The old woman gently patted her back and whispered gently in her ear.

"I know, I know. It hurts, but that's over now. I'm here for you."

"Really?" Tiffany sobbed.

"Yes. I'm here for you. I picked you to be my pupil for a reason, Tiffany. You are a special little girl. Even if your parents couldn't see it, I could. I'm teaching you everything I know and someday, everything that I have will be yours."

She held Tiffany tighter, steeling herself for the greatest lie she'd ever told in her life.

"I love you, Tiffany."

Tiffany's father pounded his tiny frog hands against the glass, furious, but powerless.

"I love you, too, Frau Hildegarde."

With Tiffany's face pressed into her dress and unable to catch it, Frau Hildegarde indulged a smile of triumph before replacing the sympathetic mask.

"Come with me to the kitchen," she said. "I'll have Roger make you a snack."

"Thank you," Tiffany said, allowing herself to be led out of the room.

At the door, Frau Hildegarde paused, reaching for the light switch. She spared just a moment to sneer at Tiffany's parents before turning off the lights and closing the door behind her.

In the dark, two frogs huddled together seeking comfort in each other's touch. It was all they had left in the world.