

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator

#Lullaby 106 - Read A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator Lullaby 106

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Lullaby 106

Chapter 106

He was always busy.

So busy, in fact, that he'd forgotten he even had a wife.

Elissa took a breath, then turned back to look at him. "How did you know?"

"I guessed."

Frank wasn't surprised at all when she didn't even bother to contradict him. Still, it felt like someone had stuffed a sponge into his chest, making it hard to breathe.

Elissa let out a quiet laugh. "I thought you'd never notice."

He stared at her, the tightness in his chest making his brow furrow. "Am I really that inattentive?"

"You're very attentive," she said, her lips curving into a sharper smile, "but only when Marcia's watching."

He wasn't much of a husband.

But he was a model lover.

She meant every word, yet to Frank, the remark stung with irony.

He exhaled, trying to force the heaviness from his lungs. "I'll get her to move out. Soon."

"When that happens, I'll come home," she replied.

“We’ll see.”

Elissa gave a wry little smile but didn’t press further.

Still, those three light words made Frank’s unease worsen, a creeping panic rising up. He reached out and seized her wrist. “What do you mean? You’re not coming back?”

She wanted to nod, wanted to say yes. But the divorce decree she hadn’t yet received held her back. “No, you’re overthinking it.”

“That’s enough,” she said briskly, glancing at her watch. “Tanya only gave me twenty minutes. I need to go.”

She pulled her hand free, drew her cashmere coat around her, and strode away without looking back.

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Frank slipped behind the wheel, his mind replaying the calm, almost indifferent look in her eyes.

She never used to be like this...

A strange, unfamiliar anxiety crashed over him.

But whatever Elissa was thinking, she was still his wife—legally, at least.

The thought brought him a small measure of comfort.

As long as he didn’t sign those papers, she’d always be Mrs. Atwater.

The restaurant was right across from the Murphy Group building. Elissa swung by the underground garage to pick up her car, then headed home.

She was still scanning her fingerprint at the door when she heard a commotion inside.

The moment she opened it, a loud bang exploded in her ears.

A flurry of colorful streamers fluttered down from above.

Elissa jumped, only to see Tanya Foster toss aside a confetti cannon and rush over with open arms. “Honey! Congratulations on being single again!”

Elissa glanced around at the living room, decked out in vibrant reds and golds, and couldn't help but laugh.

It looked less like a divorce party and more like someone was about to get married.

"Did you spend all day on this?"

"Not just me," Tanya grinned, nodding toward the kitchen. "Cliff helped out too. He's been here since this afternoon."

The three of them had all graduated from Vistapeak University. When Tanya first joined the law firm, Elissa had introduced her to Cliff.

As Tanya liked to say, everyone was a potential client. And Cliff, coming from a well-off family, was definitely a VIP.

After a few get-togethers, they'd become good friends.

"No wonder he wasn't in the lab today," Elissa mused.

"Of course not," Tanya said, her tone teasing. "Cliff knows how to prioritize."

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Elissa shot her a look. "Don't start playing matchmaker."

She'd married into the Atwater family, Tanya into the Riley family—both of them had married up.

As for her and Cliff, their relationship over the years had always been just right: not too close, not too distant.

It was a balance Elissa appreciated.

"Elissa." Cliff emerged from the kitchen, apron on, carrying a platter of food like the picture-perfect boy next door. "Tanya said you got the divorce finalized.

Congratulations."

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Elissa let out a soft laugh as she took the dish from Cliff's hands. "Thank you, Cliff."

She had always known he was talented in the kitchen.

Whenever they visited their mentor's house, Cliff, being the younger one, often cooked for everyone.

He'd prepare a full spread—six dishes and a hearty soup, each one perfectly seasoned and beautifully presented.

Tanya Foster had even opened a bottle of wine for the occasion. She poured glasses for everyone, her lips curving into a bright smile. "Cheers! To Elissa—may you be free, fearless, and always true to yourself from this day forward!"

Elissa had never been good at handling these sentimental moments.

It took all her effort not to tear up as she clinked her glass with theirs. "Alright, here's to freedom."

Freedom.

Even as a child, she used to dream about it.

She'd already had dinner at the restaurant, but tonight, she couldn't help eating a little more. Maybe it was the taste of freedom that made everything so delicious.

After dinner, Cliff moved to help clear the table.

Elissa waved him off. "Cliff, you've already done enough cooking for us. We'll take care of the mess. Let me walk you downstairs."

"Alright," he agreed easily.

He hadn't driven tonight, knowing there would be drinks, so he didn't have to worry about calling a cab later.

Elissa hadn't had much to drink, but each step still felt a little light and unsteady.

She did her best to walk straight as she accompanied Cliff all the way to the front gate.

Cliff was well aware of her low alcohol tolerance by now. Still, in a neighborhood like this, with security on every corner, he wasn't worried. Slowing his pace, he glanced down at her. "I'll wait for my ride here. You should head back upstairs and get some

rest.”

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Elissa shook her head, stubborn as ever, and kept walking toward the curb. “No way. I have to see my guest off properly.”

Her skin, usually flawless, was flushed pink from the wine. Even the corners of her eyes glowed red as she looked up at him.

Cliff’s heart skipped a beat. For a second, he felt dizzy himself.

“Excuse me!”

A delivery bike whizzed by, nearly clipping Elissa. Before she even processed what was happening, Cliff pulled her firmly to his side.

She blinked in confusion. Even tipsy, her first instinct was to steady herself. She looked up at him with a grateful smile. “Thank you, Cliff.”

“Boss, wasn’t that Miss Elissa just now?”

At a traffic light nearby, Ian spotted her from the back seat of a polished Bentley.

Rowan lifted his eyes, glancing in the direction Ian indicated. His sharp, angular profile was half-hidden in shadow, impossible to read—yet quietly intimidating.

He’d never smiled at Rowan except in a way that felt mocking, but in front of others,

she was almost infuriatingly polite.

Narrowing his cold eyes, Rowan replied evenly, “Turn around.”

“On it.”

Ian answered without hesitation—he was good at following orders.

It was late, the roads were clear, and soon enough Cliff's ride arrived.

Before getting in, Cliff paused and looked at Elissa, his gaze gentle. With a big-brother air, he adjusted her scarf. "Elissa, I hope from now on, your life is always free and easy"

"Thank you"

Elissa nodded firmly, though her head immediately spun, and she had to grab the car door for balance.

Cliff couldn't help but laugh. "Get upstairs, will you?"

"You're the guest—you go first."

Elissa was determined to stick to her own brand of hospitality.

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Left with no choice, Cliff got into the car.

There was a security guard stationed right there at the gate—nothing could go wrong.

Elissa watched the rideshare car merge into traffic before she finally turned back, satisfied, and marched home with a spring in her step.

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She was so tired, she could barely keep her eyes open.

All Elissa wanted was to go home, take a quick shower, and collapse into bed for a sleep so deep she'd forget her own name.

But the night had other plans.

Or rather, Rowan had other plans.

She'd barely taken a few steps when a sharp blast of a car horn startled her. Heart racing, she spun around and caught sight of Rowan's infuriatingly stoic face through the rear window, which had just rolled down.

His features were sharply cut—high brow, deep-set eyes, the kind of cold, chiseled look that made it clear he kept the world at arm's length.

Elissa sobered up a little. “Mr. Murphy, is there something you need?”

A deep red scarf was loosely wrapped around her neck, but it still couldn't fully hide the delicate pale curve of her throat. The streetlight above cast a soft glow over her face, making her skin look even more flawless than usual.

Normally, she'd have her dark hair pulled up for work, but tonight it tumbled over her shoulders, glossy and smooth as wet silk.

She looked, from head to toe, the picture of sweetness and composure.

And yet, the second she spoke to him, there was always a note of rebellion in her voice that anyone could hear.

Rowan didn't seem rushed. He withdrew his gaze and said, “I wanted to discuss the project's progress with you, Ms. Drummond.”

Since starting at the clinic, Elissa hadn't once made a habit of working late into the night.

If it was about saving lives, she wouldn't complain.

But what Rowan wanted had nothing to do with her actual responsibilities at this hour.

"The project assistant updates the progress every week and Director Jones sends the report to your inbox."

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"But I want to hear today's update."

Rowan raised an eyebrow. "Or is it that you're quitting, Ms. Drummond?"

Corporate tyrant.

Elissa took a deep breath, forcing her foggy, wine-soaked brain to find the right words, though the chill in the air made her voice stiff and her lips numb. “Today, Simon

Charles and I went over the plan we discussed last week-”

“In the car,” Rowan interrupted.

He fixed her with an unblinking stare. “The window’s open. I’m cold.”

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Once again, Elissa had no choice but to give in.

She got in, and tried her best to deliver a clear, thorough report.

If nothing else, she wanted to sound responsible-and irreplaceable-so she left out no detail.

Rowan probably didn't understand half of the technical jargon, but surprisingly, he listened to every word. When she finished, he leaned back and, with infuriating calm, asked a question that had nothing to do with work. "You know, letting a man into your apartment this late—aren't you worried Frank will find out?"

Business was business. Personal was personal.

Elissa was tipsy, but her reflexes were sharp. She met Rowan's eyes. "And what's that got to do with *you*?"

He should just keep an eye on Lorraine.

If Lorraine didn't have men over in the middle of the night, that was her business.

Why did he care about her?

Rowan arched a brow, looking utterly unbothered. "If word gets out, people will say I practically raised you. The Atwater family might come knocking on my door expecting an explanation."

Elissa's lips curled into a mocking smile. "You raised me? What, until I was sixteen? Rowan, you're two years short."

Legal guardianship lasted until eighteen.

Suddenly, Rowan leaned in, taking her wrist in his hand, closing the distance between

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them. She could smell the faint mingling of jasmine and alcohol on her skin, his eyes shadowed and unreadable.

His thumb brushed over the soft inside of her wrist, slow and deliberate, ignoring the way she shrank back until her shoulders pressed against the car door.

"So what you're saying, princess," he murmured, voice low, "is that I owe *you* two more years?"

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“Princess.”

When Rowan was little, he used to call her that all the time.

Elissa had only spent a year or two suffering in the orphanage and then in the old woman’s garden—nowhere near enough time to wear down the pampered

temperament she’d grown up with.

All it took was a little kindness from Rowan, and soon enough, her old self came right back.

She was seven then—earnest but spoiled, kind-hearted yet willful, every bit the little princess she’d been raised to be.

She’d even go so far as to clutch her favorite stuffed animal and, barefoot, sneak into Rowan’s room during summer thunderstorms in the dead of night.

Rowan was six years older, already in his teens and well aware that boys and girls shouldn’t share a room. He’d keep a stony face and send her back to her own bed.

But little Elissa, thoroughly spoiled by him, would dart right into his bed anyway. With a blanket draped over her head and a pout on her lips, she'd declare with perfect confidence, "But big brother, little Nine is terrified of thunder! If I stay alone, the lightning will get me!"

Rowan never did tell her that only rotten people get struck by lightning.

He'd just glare at her, exasperated and resigned. "Princess, what am I supposed to do with you?"

Even at that age, Elissa was clever enough to hear the affection and surrender in his voice.

But everything changed after that.

When Rowan decided he didn't want her anymore, and she set her heart on marrying Frank, every time he called her "Princess," the word dripped with mockery.

As if he were laughing at her, as if to say—do you really think you're still that cherished little girl in my eyes?

Can't you see you're not as special as you think?

Yet tonight, perhaps because of the alcohol, Elissa heard something different in the

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word. It sounded almost the way it had when they were children.

She leaned against the car door, feeling the warmth of his hand pressed to her wrist. The air was thick with the subtle scent of his cologne—a fragrance she recognized

immediately.

She'd given him that cologne for his eighteenth birthday.

Rowan had loved it.

After that, it was the only bottle he kept on his dresser. Whenever he was running *low*,

she'd make sure to replace it before he ran out.

Funny, she thought. He could stay loyal to a bottle of cologne for years, but he'd tossed her aside without a second thought.

Elissa snapped back to reality, quietly pulling her wrist away. Her voice was calm, almost mocking. "Mr. Murphy, you're overthinking it. I don't make a habit of tripping over the same stone twice."

With that, she opened the car door and stepped out. The icy wind slapped her face and sobered her instantly.

She sniffed, pulling her professional mask back on. "Mr. Murphy, the project update's

done. I'll head home now."

"Drive safe."

Elissa had assumed that after the past couple of days, Marcia would be too

embarrassed to show her face at the clinic.

But Marcia seemed oblivious *to* the sidelong glances from everyone. After just two days off, she breezed in carrying bags of imported snacks and fruit.

She even made a point of sharing them with the nurses and doctors who worked with Elissa.

During her lunch break, Elissa went to wash her hands and found the staff looking at her with silent pleas for rescue.

Marcia just smiled at her. “Surely Dr. Drummond isn’t so petty as to stop people from accepting a few treats, right?”

Elissa hadn’t intended to get involved, but seeing Marcia try to take the upper hand, she cut her off. “You’re here to work today?”

“I’m off today,” Marcia replied, utterly shameless. “Just happened to be passing by, so I brought something for everyone.”

“Oh? So you’re here on your own time.” Elissa tucked her hands into her white coat pockets and looked at her coolly. “In that case, you should call me Mrs. Atwater. Isn’t that right, homewrecker?”

The whole room froze.

Then, as if on cue, a few people broke into muffled laughter, covering it with coughs.

Damn.

Who knew Dr. Drummond could bite like that? She’d always seemed so calm—who would have guessed she could strike like lightning?

It was glorious.

Marcia’s face turned an ugly shade, but she drew herself up, still trying to act superior. “You really think you’ll always be Mrs. Atwater?”

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Chapter 110

“Looks like you’re eager to pick up the trash I threw away.”

Elissa said this lightly, glancing at the food she’d brought, then turned to the nurses.
“Waste not, want not—let’s not let good food go to waste. Dig in, everyone.”

With that, hands in her coat pockets, she strolled off.

Back in her office, she finally picked up her phone and saw a WhatsApp message Lorraine had sent two hours ago.

“Elissa, do you have time for lunch?”

She checked the clock. It was already past one.

She replied honestly, “I just finished up—I only just saw your message.”

She started typing a second message, about to suggest rescheduling for another day since it was so late, but Lorraine replied instantly.

“No problem! I’m actually nearby. Want to grab a bite together?”

Elissa could already guess what was on Lorraine’s mind. Maybe it was time to clear the air anyway, so she grabbed her bag and headed to the little bistro where they’d agreed to meet.

It was the lull between lunch and dinner, so the place was quiet, just a few scattered customers.

Elissa walked in and immediately spotted Lorraine waving from a window booth.

She made her way over. Lorraine, ever the social butterfly, took her bag for her and grinned, “I always thought doctors had crazy schedules, but this is something else.”

“It’s not so bad,” Elissa replied,

Truthfully, she was never entirely comfortable with such warmth from people she didn’t know well.

Lorraine, on the other hand, had grown up surrounded by people—and most of them went out of their way to please her. Especially after becoming Rowan’s assistant, she was never short of admirers. But someone like Elissa, who kept her at arm’s length time and again, was a novelty—maybe even a first.

But then, Elissa was Rowan’s sister. That made all the difference.

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Lorraine didn’t seem bothered. She slid the menu across. “I have no idea what you like, so I thought I’d wait for you to order. Take a look—see what you’re in the mood

for.”

“Sure.” Elissa took the menu.

She’d been to this bistro plenty of times since it was right by her clinic. She picked two dishes at random and handed the menu back.

Lorraine glanced at her choices and teased, “You and Mr. Murphy really are siblings. It’s not just your personalities—even your taste in food is nearly identical.”

Elissa took a sip of her lemon water. “We grew up under the same roof. I guess it’s bound to happen.”

But that wasn’t quite true.

She’d started getting taller and thinner when she was barely a teenager. She’d always been a picky eater, and the combination only made her skinnier. Rowan hated seeing her waste away and told the kitchen to make everything to suit her tastes.

She loved sweet, sour, and spicy things—anything but bitter.

Rowan, who preferred mild flavors, eventually got used to her preferences too. Over time, even his palate changed.

The food came quickly. Lorraine pushed the dishes Elissa liked closer and, as if by accident, asked, “So, Elissa... Has Mr. Murphy ever had a girlfriend?”

Elissa hesitated, then shook her head. “I wouldn’t know.”

He hadn’t, at least back then.

But for the past eight years, she’d been out of his life completely. She had no idea what he’d been up to—or who he’d been with.

“Wow, I thought if anyone knew, it’d be you.”

Lorraine looked a little let down, but perked up almost instantly. “Well then, do you know if there’s someone he likes? He always keeps a picture in his wallet—he’s so protective of it...”

For the first time, Elissa realized just how sharp the lemon water tasted in this place. The sourness lingered at the back of her throat, spreading through her chest and leaving her heart feeling oddly tight.

“Secretary Lynn,” she said, drawing a breath to steady herself, “Honestly, I haven’t

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spoken to Mr. Murphy in years. If it weren't for this Murphy Group project, we probably still wouldn't be in touch."

"So whether he likes someone—or who that might be—I really don't *know*."

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