

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator

“You’re Rowan’s girlfriend. If you want to know something, just ask him directly—there’s no need to go through me, his so-called ‘sister.’”

Elissa’s tone remained calm throughout.

She just wanted to be clear, to keep Lorraine from wasting any more time trying to curry favor with her.

But to her surprise, Lorraine’s eyes lit up as she leaned in, flashing a conspiratorial smile. “I’m his girlfriend, am I? Did Mr. Murphy tell you that himself?”

Elissa hesitated for a moment.

It dawned on her that maybe she’d misunderstood the relationship between Lorraine and Rowan. “No, I just assumed.”

Lorraine grinned and winked. “Well, it sounds like you’re pretty happy with the idea of me being your future sister-in-law.”

Elissa suddenly realized the dangers of saying too much.

Whether she was happy about it or not was irrelevant—her opinion didn't matter, just as Rowan had bluntly told her eight years ago: she wasn't really his sister.

After dinner, *not* only had she failed to clear things up, but Lorraine seemed even more enthusiastic about her. “Elissa, did you drive here? If you didn't, I can give you a ride home.”

Elissa shook her head. “No need, the clinic is right across the street. I just have to cross over, it's only a few steps.”

“Alright, then let's meet up again soon, okay?”

“Sure.”

Elissa returned to the clinic to pick up her car, then headed to a jewelry studio owned by an old friend from college.

She asked her friend to make a replica—an exact copy—of a jade pendant.

But there's no such thing as two identical pieces of jade in this world. All they could do was make it as close as possible.

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"That's easy enough," Hayley replied cheerfully. "I'll just need a few days to find a similar piece of jade. Want to come pick it up in a week, or should I deliver it?"

As soon as she heard it was possible, Elissa relaxed and smiled. "I'll swing by and pick it up."

After that, she dropped by the lab for a while.

Later that evening, she got an unexpected call from Frank.

"Elissa?"

His voice was warm and gentle on the other end. "You're still staying at the apartment in Vistapeak Gardens, right? I'll come pick you up later."

Elissa was momentarily caught off guard. "Pick me up?"

“The charity auction tonight—did you forget?” Frank chuckled. “I promised you I’d bid on a few things you like as an apology.”

She had, in fact, completely forgotten.

Thinking back, she vaguely remembered something about it. But at the time, her mind had been on the jade pendant—she hadn’t really registered what he’d said, nor had she agreed.

Her focus was still on her project; she didn’t even pause in her work. “That’s not necessary. I don’t really have time tonight.”

“Are you still upset with me?”

Elissa frowned slightly, her voice *cool* but not unkind. “I’m just not interested in auctions. I really am busy.”

But to Frank, her tone sounded more like she was still angry.

He remembered the cold look in her eyes when she’d left a few days ago and was suddenly desperate for reassurance. “No matter how busy you are, you’ll finish work at some point,

right? If you can't make it to the auction, I'll wait for you at Murphy Group. Or we can just have dinner after you're done."

He couldn't stand the distance she kept putting between them.

He needed to know she was still his wife, still the gentle, accommodating woman she used to be.

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Dinner, just the two of them. The auction.

Elissa wavered, then made her decision. "Alright, which hotel is hosting the auction? I'll head home after work, change, and come straight there."

"Let me pick you up from Vistapeak Gardens," Frank insisted, relieved that she was at least willing to attend a public event with him.

To him, it meant she was still willing to acknowledge herself as Mrs. Atwater.

It meant she hadn't completely given up on their marriage.

Elissa didn't argue. "Okay, that's fine."

As long as it wasn't dinner alone, she could deal with anything.

After hanging up, Elissa wrapped up her work, checked the time, and then drove home.

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As soon as Elissa stepped out of the elevator, she spotted an elegantly wrapped gift box waiting at her apartment door.

A bold label read: For Elissa.

She carried the box inside, curiosity piqued. Lifting the lid, she found a stunning, custom-made evening gown inside.

Frank's handiwork, no doubt.

It was exactly the sort of thing you'd wear to an auction.

He wanted her there, so naturally he'd provide the dress. It made perfect sense.

Elissa didn't bother with modesty. After a quick shower and a touch of light makeup, she slipped into the dress and headed downstairs.

A sleek black Maybach was already waiting at the front entrance. Frank stood casually against the car, his gaze lighting up the moment he saw her. He didn't hesitate to praise her, "That dress really was made for you."

With a gentleman's flourish, he opened the door for her.

Elissa slid in first. The gown's high slit revealed a flash of dazzlingly pale skin as she sat, and Frank's throat tightened at the sight. "Are you cold?" he asked, a hint of

concern in his voice.

She shook her head. "I'm fine."

The apartment and lobby were both well-heated, and now she was in the car.

Frank shrugged off his suit jacket and, before she could protest, draped it over her legs with genuine care. "You know, with your cycle coming up, you should really keep

warm."

Elissa was caught off guard.

She couldn't put her finger on it—Frank seemed different tonight. He wasn't just offering words; he was actually showing her kindness.

She let out a quiet laugh. "This is the first time you've ever given me your jacket."

The first time he'd actually done something like this.

"Before..." Frank trailed off, unable to defend himself. "That was my mistake. From

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now on, I'll-"

"How far is the hotel?" Elissa cut in smoothly, smiling.

There was no "from now on" for them.

She didn't need promises about the future.

Frank caught the hint of strain in her smile and felt a pang. His eyes softened as he replied, "Not far. We'll be there in about ten minutes."

With her makeup done, Elissa's delicate features looked even more striking, a subtle allure shining through. Yet she still carried an air of quiet innocence—soft peach fuzz on her cheeks visible in the gentle light—making her seem at once vulnerable and untouchable.

But she'd chosen a seat at the far end of the backseat, keeping a gap between them wide enough for two more people.

She was keeping her distance.

"Elissa..." Frank finally couldn't help himself. He leaned in ever so slightly, his voice low, searching for forgiveness. "You're still upset with me, aren't you?"

Elissa wasn't sure what had gotten into him. In the past, as long as things looked peaceful on the surface, that was enough for him.

Tonight felt different.

"No."

Elissa was good at saying what she didn't mean.

What would holding a grudge change, anyway? He'd just send a few more gifts. They'd go back and forth, wasting time she'd rather spend back at the clinic, helping her patients.

Before Frank could press her further, the limited-edition Maybach glided to a stop in front of the hotel.

Frank's sharp features and tall frame drew plenty of glances as he stepped out, but he seemed not to notice. Instead, he bent down patiently, straightening Elissa's dress as she climbed out.

Elissa caught the envy in the eyes of several women nearby.

"Let's go," Frank said, offering his arm with a warm, inviting smile.

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Elissa lowered her gaze, hesitating. But before she could move, a sleek 911 pulled up

behind them.

Marcia stepped out in a glamorous dress, moving with practiced poise. She walked right over and looped her arm through Frank's. "Frank, I saw an extra invitation at home and figured you must have saved it for me. So I came along."

She turned to Elissa with a bright, innocent smile. "You don't mind, do you?"

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Elissa arched an eyebrow, didn't bother replying, and simply turned on her heel.

Her dress kept tangling around her ankles as she walked. Annoyed, she kicked her leg back, bent slightly, and scooped the skirt up into her hand before striding into the ballroom.

A nuisance.

This dress, she thought, was just as much a nuisance as the divorce papers Carmela kept waving in her face.

But the moment she entered the ballroom, Elissa froze.

Slate stood across the room, winking at her before strolling over at a leisurely *pace*.

A chill crept down her spine. Instinctively, she dodged out of his path and walked straight into the auction hall.

An attendant led her to the VIP section. “Mrs. Frank, right this way.”

“Thank you.”

Elissa sank into her seat, finally able to breathe.

Slate followed her in, but as he tried to push further, someone yanked him back.

He was, after all, the Murphy family’s second son. In Vistapeak City, everyone treated him with courtesy, if only out of respect for his cousin Rowan.

He jerked his arm away in irritation. “Watch it! Are you blind-”

“Mr. Slate.”

Marcia released him, her tone soft and calm, “Patience, darling. If you rush in now, you’ll only make her more guarded. What’s the point?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I’ve got everything set up.”

Marcia’s lips curved in a sly smile as she poked his chest with her slim finger. “As long as you don’t mess things up at the crucial moment, you’ll get exactly what you want.”

“Seriously?”

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“Of course.”

Marcia glanced toward Elissa, her eyes narrowing with confidence.

After tonight, let's see how that woman manages to keep her place in the Atwater family.

When she saw Slate give up on approaching Elissa for now, Marcia allowed an attendant to escort her to a seat, leaving only one empty chair between herself and

Elissa.

After sitting, Marcia took out a compact mirror to touch up her makeup, sneaking a sidelong glance at Elissa. "You've always seemed so serene. I suppose you won't mind if I hold Frank's arm in public?"

Elissa kept her eyes on her phone, not even bothering to look up.

"If you enjoy announcing your mistress status to the world, I'd feel embarrassed to even watch the spectacle."

Marcia's hand trembled, and her lipstick smeared across her lips. She sucked in a breath, forcing a cold laugh. "Elissa, I hope you can always keep that calm façade."

She didn't believe for a second that after Slate had his fun with her, Elissa would still

look so unruffled.

Just as she finished, Frank finished his pleasantries and walked over, taking the seat

between the two women.

The scene didn't go unnoticed.

A few guests couldn't help but gossip.

"Mr. Atwater really is lucky—wife on one side, mistress on the other, both within arm's reach."

"Hah! They make adultery and being the other woman sound so classy. Marcia must be desperate if she's chasing after her own brother-in-law."

"Honestly, can you believe Mr. Atwater? Who brings a mistress to such a public event? He clearly doesn't care about his wife."

“Elissa’s got some patience, I’ll give her that. Marcia is basically rubbing her face in it, and she just sits there, totally unfazed.”

“How do you know it’s patience? Maybe she just doesn’t care. If Mr. Atwater gets to fool around with his sister-in-law, who says Elissa can’t enjoy herself with a male

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model? People at our level—how many couples are actually faithful?”

“If you ask me, Mr. Atwater’s only fault is his taste. If he’s going to cheat, at least pick someone younger and prettier. Marcia can’t hold a candle to Elissa...”

That, at least, struck a nerve with several onlookers.

They’d never put the two women side by side before, but now that they did, Elissa was clearly in a league of her own.

Not just her looks and figure, but the effortless grace she carried herself with...

Every scattered remark found its way to Marcia's ears, and her manicured nail snapped clean off in her clenched fist.

She's supposed to be less than Elissa?

At any other event, she would have been the center of flattery and praise. These people were just jealous because Frank preferred her.

The more she thought about it, the more resentful she felt. She turned to Frank, ready to unleash her anger, only to find he hadn't heard a word of it. His gaze was gentle, fixed entirely on Elissa.

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All the frustration boiling inside her suddenly morphed into resentment.

If it weren't for this wretched woman, she would've married Frank long ago.

Elissa, throughout the entire evening, barely even bothered to look up. These kinds of events had never interested her, but she still managed *to* carry herself with ease.

When someone came by to greet her, she responded with a polite smile and a few pleasant words. If no one approached, she scrolled through her phone or flipped through the glossy auction catalog, killing time.

Before long, the auctioneer stepped onto the stage and the event officially began.

The first item up for bid was a rare antique painting from the 19th century, with a starting price of a million dollars. Marcia's eyes lit up—items like this could easily be resold for a hefty profit.

She was about to whisper something to Frank, but he glanced at Elissa instead, his voice gentle, “Do you like it?”

Truthfully, Elissa didn't care at all. But when she caught the hungry gleam in Marcia's eyes, a memory flashed through her mind—one of that jade pendant. Suddenly, she changed her mind. “Yes. I do.”

Barely a few exchanges later, the price had already climbed to three million. Frank raised his paddle. “Five million.”

A hush fell over the *room*.

Who in their right mind jumped the price by two million in a single breath?

A few determined bidders tried *to* rally, pushing the price higher, but in the end, it was Frank who claimed the painting—for eight million.

Elissa turned her head just enough to catch Marcia's eyes, red with anger, and a small, satisfied smile curled on her lips.

The angrier Marcia became, the more certain Elissa felt.

That jade pendant hadn't simply fallen into Marcia's hands by chance. Marcia was the one who'd slashed her favorite dress, put tacks in her little shoes, and stolen the pendant in the first place.

And now, Elissa had no intention of letting her get what she wanted so easily.

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Bitch.

Marcia was seething. Elissa dared to provoke her right in front of Frank.

The next few auction items were nothing special.

Then, a hundred-year-old ginseng root was placed on the stage, and Elissa's eyes brightened.

The paintings and antiques were just to spite Marcia, but this ginseng—she genuinely wanted it. Her mentor's birthday was coming up, and this would make the perfect gift. He would love it.

The starting bid was one hundred thousand—not out of her reach.

Elissa was the first to raise her paddle. “One hundred and twenty thousand.”

She hadn't consulted Frank, making it clear she intended to win it herself.

Marcia hadn't even cared about the ginseng at first. Herbal remedies didn't mean much to her. But she wasn't about to pass up a chance to humiliate Elissa—and besides, what nerve Elissa had, spending over a hundred thousand of the Atwater family's money on some root!

Marcia tugged Frank's sleeve, her voice sweet and plaintive. "Frank, I want that ginseng. Hickey's been feeling weak since his injury..."

She turned, feigning innocence as she looked at Elissa. "Elissa, could you let me have it? Don't fight me for this one, okay?"

Elissa almost laughed.

She was the first *to* bid, yet somehow Marcia twisted it to sound like Elissa was the one stealing from her.

Elissa lowered her gaze, ready *to* let it go, when Frank suddenly raised his paddle.

"Three hundred thousand."

"Elissa, you don't really need this, do you? Just let Marcia have it. I already got you the painting. You can take turns, all right?" he said, trying to play peacemaker.

Elissa only smiled,

Before they'd come, he'd promised to make it up to her, said he'd get her whatever she wanted tonight. Now, he was urging her to step aside.

As if she hadn't heard, Elissa called out, "Three hundred and ten thousand."

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"Do you really have to do this?" Frank frowned, genuinely confused. He'd already spent eight million on the painting for her—wasn't that enough?

Elissa nodded. "Didn't you say I could have anything I wanted tonight?"

He was the one breaking his promise.

"But Marcia said she wants it for Hickey's health. Are you really going to fight her and a child over this?" Frank pressed, raising the bid. "Four hundred thousand."

"Four hundred and ten thousand," Elissa answered instantly, a wry smile on her lips.

“Yes, Frank. I am.”

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In truth, this price had already long surpassed what Elissa was willing to pay.

Spending millions on a gnarled, less-than-perfect century-old ginseng root? She wasn't that much of a fool.

But to Frank, this kind of money barely registered.

Within minutes, the bidding had soared to ten million.

Elissa hesitated. If she kept going, she'd certainly annoy them, but if Frank decided to stop, she'd be stuck with a massive loss.

Marcia glanced her way, feigning innocence. “What's wrong, Elissa? Why aren't you bidding anymore?”

“I’m out,” Elissa replied serenely.

Marcia arched a brow. “Is it that you can’t afford it, or just don’t want it?”

Her smugness was all but dripping onto the floor.

Frank, making a show of standing up for her in front of everyone, was a clear signal. Marcia was dying to see if those gossips from earlier would finally figure out whose side they ought to be on after tonight.

“Ten million, going once.”

“Ten million, going twice.”

“Ten million, thr—”

Just as the auctioneer was about to bring the gavel down, a sudden commotion rippled through the crowd.

“Oh my God, someone’s lit the sky lantern!”

“Who did it?”

“You seriously don’t recognize him? Think about it—other than the Murphys, who else in Vistapeak would dare cut in on Mr. Atwater’s bid so openly?”

Elissa turned at the noise and saw Rowan Murphy, dressed head-to-toe in a **tailored** black suit, strolling forward with one hand in his pocket, utterly unhurried.

The staff trailed nervously behind him, not **daring** to direct **him** to **any seat—everyone** knew, Rowan would simply sit wherever he wished.

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Rowan Murphy—who in the business or political world didn’t know that name?

He was heading straight toward her. Elissa quietly looked away, just as Frank’s laughter rang out. “Not even a little courtesy for me?”

Frank knew Rowan's attitude was hardly surprising. After all, Rowan had never liked him marrying Elissa when he already had someone else in his heart. But this wasn't just dislike—Rowan wasn't even pretending to keep the peace in front of so many people.

Rowan nonchalantly undid the top button of his jacket and spoke with lazy ease, "It's not about disrespecting you. Someone took a shine to it. If I don't win it for her, I wouldn't be able to explain myself."

Their onlookers broke out into whispers, eyes wide in shock.

"Wow, he's gorgeous! Who said he was some sort of grim reaper? He seems pretty obedient to me—so dreamy!"

"That's just because you've only seen this side of him. Trust me, when he's ruthless, everyone in Vistapeak is terrified."

"Who do you think he's buying it for? He sounded kind of indulgent... Could it be that secretary of his? I heard her father's just recovered from a serious illness and is still convalescing."

Speculation buzzed through the room.

Meanwhile, Elissa quietly rose to her feet, unwilling to be any part of this farce that no longer *involved* her.

The ballroom offered a buffet, but most guests were still inside the auction hall, so it was nearly deserted outside.

Elissa picked at a piece of cake, drank half a glass of juice, and decided to leave early.

But as she set her glass down, something felt wrong.

She pressed two fingers *to* her wrist, instantly on guard—the food she’d just eaten was drugged.

Even at a gathering packed with Vistapeak’s elite, no one would dare poison the whole buffet. This was aimed at her.

Without hesitation, Elissa pulled a silver needle from her purse and stabbed it into an acupoint to slow the drug’s effects, then strode quickly toward the elevators.

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She didn’t know who’d targeted her, only that she had to get out now.

“I-” Ian stepped out of the restroom and spotted Elissa. He barely had time to call her name before she hurried off, her face tight with urgency.

At the elevator, Elissa stabbed the button over and over, silently begging for it to arrive faster.

Only inside her car would she be safe.

Thankfully, the elevator arrived quickly. The doors slid open, revealing an empty car. Elissa finally allowed herself to exhale and stepped inside.

She never saw it coming—a pair of hands clamped over her mouth and nose from behind.

Before she could struggle, her consciousness began to slip away.

Somewhere behind her, the auction hall erupted in cheers. Most likely, Frank or Rowan had just won something else for the woman on their mind.

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All she could do was cling to the last shreds of consciousness and press the thin

silver needle beneath her skin.

When Elissa finally woke, she found herself sprawled on a hotel bed, her limbs heavy and useless. The room was empty except for her.

There was no time to think. Instinctively, she fumbled for her phone and dialed the number etched into her memory.

She forced herself upright, struggling for strength, and had barely swung her legs off the bed when the door swung open.

Slate strolled in with that familiar, careless swagger. He looked surprised *to* see her awake. “Impressive for a med student. That sedative should’ve kept you out for hours, and you’re up already?”

Elissa realized the needle had done its job—just barely.

Still, the drug was strong enough to sap every ounce of strength from her body. Escape was impossible.

He was determined not to give her the slightest chance to get away.

Elissa kept her hands hidden beneath the blankets, wary eyes fixed on Slate. “What do you want, Slate?!”

He raised his brows, grinning as he sauntered closer. “Isn’t it obvious?”

Elissa glared at him, her voice cold and raw. “You’re insane!”

Slate clicked his tongue, feigning disappointment. “If I’d known you’d sound this sweet, even after a dose like that, I wouldn’t have waited all these years.”

He leaned down, breathing in the scent of her hair, his desire barely contained. “Even your hair smells incredible, little dove.”

“Rowan and Frank are still downstairs!” Elissa’s voice shook, but she forced herself to sound strong.

Slate just smirked, determined and utterly shameless. “So what? The elevator’s been out for three minutes. We’re on the twenty-first floor.”

“By the time they climb up here, I’ll be done with you.”

Slate had pulled stunts like this before.

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If every affair had to be some mutual dance, what was the thrill in that?

Everyone knew Frank’s heart belonged elsewhere. For the sake of the Murphy and Atwater families’ future partnership, there was no way he’d risk it all *for* a wife in name only.

As for Rowan–Slate feared him, sure. But even Rowan would have to get past Grandma if he wanted to kill him.

Worst case? A brutal beating. But Slate didn't care. As long as he got what he wanted.

His obsession with Elissa had become an addiction–the less he could have her, the more desperate he became.

The auction had just ended, and the host was buttering Rowan up when his phone

buzzed.

Rowan's brows drew together in a barely perceptible frown. He was about to answer when the call abruptly cut off.

His expression darkened. Without a word, he turned and strode out, dialing the number back. No answer–her phone was off.

"What's wrong, sir?" Ian, Rowan's right hand for years, immediately sensed something was off.

Rowan's voice was low and sharp. "Have you seen her?"

Ian instantly knew who he meant. "I saw Miss Elissa about ten minutes ago heading toward the elevators. She should've left by now."

He hesitated. "But..."

"Out with it!" Rowan barked.

"She seemed...off. Rushed. Like something was wrong." The more Ian thought about it, the more uneasy he felt.

Just then, Frank and Marcia emerged from the hall. Frank caught the tension in the air. "What's going on?"

Rowan fixed him with a hard stare. "Has Elissa called you?"

Beside him, Marcia's heart leapt into her throat.

She'd planned everything to perfection—except for Rowan showing up at the auction

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today.

Her reputation for ruthlessness preceded her, but it took all her willpower to remain calm and not give herself away.

Then, remembering something, she allowed herself a cold, secret smile.

So what if Elissa was missing? No matter how frantic they were, Elissa was doomed

tonight.

Frank checked his phone and shook his head. “No.”

Rowan's face was like stone. He didn't hesitate. "Get Evan to lock down the entire hotel and pull up the security footage. You—take a team and search every floor!"

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"Yes, sir!"

Ian's expression tightened as he spun on his heel and hurried out. He didn't ask for details—he just ran as fast as he could. Something must have happened to Miss Elissa. He was certain of it.

Marcia's fingernails dug sharply into her palm. "Mr. Murphy, she's just not answering her phone right now. There's no need to—"

Before she could finish, Rowan's hawk-like eyes flicked over her, cold and lethal, silencing her with a look. Marcia instantly shrank back, biting her tongue.

Frank thought Rowan was blowing things out of proportion. “Rowan, aren’t you overreacting a bit?”

“I’m not just having them search,” Rowan said, his voice pitched low and icy, every word forced through clenched teeth. “I want answers. I want to know exactly who’s been sneaking around under my nose.”

Floor twenty-one.

Elissa was shaking all over, forcing herself to stay calm, but the fear at her core was suffocating. The truth was, she was terrified of Slate—and for good reason.

No girl could go through what she had—barely a teenager, showering, only to have a man suddenly burst in—without being traumatized. She was scared, but there was nothing she could do.

It had happened too many times, only now Slate had gotten smarter. He knew to drug her first.

She could still feel the effects of whatever he’d slipped her; the only way she could keep herself conscious was by biting her tongue until she tasted blood.

“If Rowan comes looking, aren’t you scared? You know what he’s like. Do you really think your grandmother can protect you?”

The truth was, Elissa could barely remember when things had soured between Rowan and her grandmother. It must have been after she was sent back to her

grandmother's estate. The two of them were family, but you'd never know it—for the past few years, they'd barely spoken, and every encounter ended in a fight. The *old* woman had no love for the young, and the young had no respect for the old. Just another Murphy family tradition.

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Slate hesitated at that, but then shrugged it off, reckless as ever. “Even if Rowan wants to come after me, you think he’ll let me off if I let you go now?”

“I won’t tell him.”

He snorted. Slate had been burned by her before—he didn’t believe her for a second. He reached out and slapped her cheek, the softness of her skin sending a fresh surge of heat through him.

He started yanking at Elissa's clothes, eyes wild as she tried to squirm away. "Elissa, I might not be Rowan, but I'm not that much worse than Frank, am I? If he can have his fun, why can't I? What, is it such a hardship for you?"

"I'm scared!" Elissa was shaking like a leaf. The moment he pressed in close, her whole body trembled uncontrollably.

Slate scowled. "What the hell are you scared for? Still think you're some innocent princess?"

"Slate..." Elissa's eyes were red, her voice barely more than a whisper. "I really am

scared... I-I've never been with Frank..."

"What did you say?"

Slate's eyes lit up, shock and delight mingling on his face.

"You know he's in love with someone else. That's why... he never touched me."

Elissa bit her lip, her voice tinged with bitterness. Her eyes shimmered with tears as she looked up at him. “Slate, could you...”

The way she kept repeating his name made Slate’s bones go soft. “Could I what?”

If this little girl dared ask him to let her go, he’d have her right here and now—he didn’t have patience for games.

But Elissa didn’t ask for that. She just looked at him with pleading eyes and whispered, “Could you... not be so rough?”

Slate hadn’t expected to be her first. That kind of request was easy enough.

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He agreed instantly. “Of course I can.”

As he spoke, his hands slid eagerly behind Elissa, fumbling to unzip her dress.

If her face was this delicate, her body had to be even more incredible.

Elissa looped her arms around his shoulders, her slender fingers weaving through his hair. Her voice was soft and enticing. “The zipper’s not in the back. It’s on the side.”

Every word was gentle, almost melting.

Her body, too, was soft and yielding.

Slate was completely entranced. He bent down, searching for the side zipper, and the moment his fingers brushed it, a sudden, sharp pain shot through his head.

With a furious snarl, Slate shoved her away. “You bitch! What the hell-!”

Elissa crashed into the wall, her body limp and powerless. She nearly collapsed to the floor before managing to steady herself.

For a moment, all she could do was watch Slate roar, still full of rage. Nervous, she curled her fingers into her palm. She was so weak now—maybe the sedative hadn’t worked as well as she’d hoped.

Slate clutched his head, snarling as he stalked toward her. “You really want to make me-”

He didn’t finish the sentence. Instead, he collapsed with a heavy thud.

At that exact moment, a loud crash sounded at the hotel room door.

But Elissa could barely register it. All she knew was that Slate wasn’t going to wake up anytime soon.

Her mind went blank. She slid down to the floor, slumping against the nightstand, her body trembling uncontrollably from the shock.

Rowan burst through the door and took in the scene:

A girl, shivering, soaked in cold sweat, hair plastered to her neck, her face ghostly pale, eyes glazed and unfocused as she curled up on the floor.

Just the sight made Rowan's blood boil.

He forced down the urge to put a bullet in Slate's head, walked over quietly, and

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wrapped his suit jacket around her torn dress. Kneeling beside her, he stroked her hair gently. "It's alright, little Nine. You're safe now."

"I'm here."

Anyone else in the room would have heard the tremor in Rowan's voice.

He was scared too.

Hearing someone call her name, Elissa's mind cleared for a split second. When she looked up and saw Rowan's face, she finally realized she was truly safe.

She stared at him, stunned. Then, without a sound, she broke down in tears—silent but overwhelming, each drop falling into Rowan's palm, scalding his skin and stoking the fury inside him.

She hadn't always cried like this. As a child, her sobs had been loud and dramatic, as if she wanted to make sure Rowan heard every bit of her misery—waiting for him to comfort her.

But now, she just hugged her knees, small and silent, like a wounded fawn.

Out in the hallway, Frank sensed something was wrong. Fearing Elissa really was in danger, he moved to rush inside.

Ian stepped forward, blocking his way, face expressionless. "Mr. Atwater, no one goes in without our boss's say-so."

"I'm Elissa's husband!" Frank's voice was cold as ice, eyes narrowed in warning.

He was, after all, the head of the massive Atwater Group, and when he turned stern,

even the bravest would hesitate.

But Ian had been with Rowan too long to be intimidated. “You might want to ask around—see who people really think her husband is.”

Thinking about how Miss Elissa had ended up in such a filthy situation, Ian had no patience for Frank. If he’d been even half a decent husband, she never would have been left alone tonight.

Meanwhile, Marcia, waiting outside, nearly wanted to pop a bottle of champagne in celebration.

That Slate really was something.

In just a short span, he’d already gotten the job done.

2/2

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator

Chapter 119

It was only then that Marcia realized just how much Rowan cared about whether Elissa lived or died.

He'd just swept through the building, leading the search himself—quick, commanding, unstoppable. The force of his presence swallowed the entire floor; in his eyes, there was room for no one but his little sister.

A man like that... If only he could care about her the way Frank did. What would that

even feel like?

But Rowan paid no mind to the commotion outside. He gently brushed the tears from Elissa's cheeks. "It's okay, little one. You're safe now. If you need to cry, go ahead—let

it all out."

As he spoke, his gaze drifted to the dark bruises marring Elissa's arm. His tone hardened. "Was it Slate? Did he hurt you?"

Elissa, still dazed, lifted her head and followed his eyes to her arm. She shook her head, tears streaming down, her voice barely more than a hoarse whisper. “I did it myself.”

Normally, a needle embedded under the skin should be carefully removed with tweezers. But she hadn’t had tweezers—or the luxury of time. It was no wonder her arm was so badly bruised.

Still, it was that needle, pressed into the right nerve, that had saved her life tonight.

Rowan stayed by her side, waiting until her sobs quieted and her breathing steadied. Only then did he scoop her up, one arm under her knees, the other around her waist. “Let’s get you *to* another room. I’ll have the doctor take a look.”

“Okay.”

She didn’t resist. With the sedative finally out of her system, her body felt limp and

boneless.

By the time Rowan carried her out of the room, his face had returned to its earlier, icy calm. He strode down the hallway, his long coat wrapped protectively around Elissa.

Even though Rowan's jacket concealed most of her disheveled dress, Frank saw at a glance how shaken she was. He rushed to catch up. "What happened? Who did this?"

A chill crept up his spine. Thank God Rowan had been vigilant—if not, he didn't dare

11:13

Chapter 119

imagine the consequences.

Marcia, when she saw them, froze in place.

What the hell?

Elissa's evening gown was crumpled and askew, but it was clear that Slate hadn't actually succeeded. That idiot! The girl had been handed *to* him on a silver platter, and he couldn't even get his pants off.

Marcia stared daggers at Elissa, her jealousy burning so hot she could barely contain

1. it.

That wretched girl! How could she be so lucky? Of all nights, Rowan had to be here.

Otherwise...

Marcia clenched her teeth, barely holding back her fury.

“Who did it?” Frank demanded.

Rowan shot him a mocking look. “And what, are you going to do something about it?”

Frank’s jaw tightened. “What kind of man do you take me for? She’s my wife. You think I’d just stand by and let this happen to her?”

Rowan gave a cold, humorless laugh. “Honestly, standing by is the best you’ve ever managed.”

“Rowan-” Frank pressed, clearly catching the implication. “What are you trying to say?”

“Just what I said.”

Inside the penthouse suite, Ian had already prepared everything. Rowan set Elissa down gently on the bed and turned to Rex. “She’s yours.”

He didn’t trust anyone else with her care—not after a night like this.

For once, Rex dropped his usual playfulness. He glanced at Elissa, who had slipped into unconsciousness, and nodded. “Don’t worry. I’m a lousy gambler, but I’m a damn good doctor,”

Rowan didn’t respond, just turned and left the room.

Rex slipped a dissolvable pill between Elissa’s lips, then examined her quickly. He instructed his female assistant to dab ointment on the bruises. “Stay with her. If she wants to shower, wait outside the door in case she needs help.”

11.12

Whoever drugged her had meant real harm. If Elissa hadn’t been a doctor herself and acted quickly, there was no telling what might have happened.

“Understood,” the assistant said.

“If anything comes up, get me right away,” Rex added, before heading out to join the others.

Just beyond the bedroom door, the atmosphere in the living room was stifling.

Rowan lit a cigarette, the smoke curling around his sharp features. His dark eyes flickered to Marcia, lingering on her just long enough to make her skin crawl.

Marcia tensed, feeling as though she were being stalked by a deadly predator, waiting for the perfect moment to strike.

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator

Her heart hammered in her chest—she just wanted to get out of there as quickly as possible. “Mr. Murphy, everything’s fine now. Can we go?”

“Anyone not involved is free to leave.”

Rowan leaned back on the arm of the sofa, long fingers twirling a cigarette whose tip glowed a sinister red. “Ms. Carson, you’re not free to go.”

His voice was cold, utterly devoid of warmth. The chill sent a shiver down Marcia’s spine, and regret gnawed at her.

If only she’d known Rowan would show up today, she never would have made a move. This man was terrifying.

Frank, sensing Rowan’s hostility, stepped in front of Marcia and faced him. “What’s your problem?”

Rowan flicked ash from his cigarette, looking almost bored. “Didn’t you just say you wanted justice for Elissa?”

He gave Ian a subtle nod. Ian immediately strode out, returning moments later with two hotel staff members, whom he practically threw at Marcia’s feet. “Ms. Carson, what exactly did our Miss Elissa ever do to you, for you to go to such trouble to hurt

her?”

When Marcia recognized the two servers, her whole body shook.

How? She'd destroyed the security footage herself. How had Rowan managed to get to the bottom of this so quickly?

His arrival had upended everything—nothing had gone according to her plan.

She forced herself to feign composure. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

By now, Frank had pieced together what was happening. He frowned, his voice stern. "Assistant Murphy, you can't just throw accusations around."

Rowan smirked, malice flickering in his eyes. "You're defending her without even asking what really happened? Frank, do you remember what you promised me before you and Elissa got married?"

Frank froze for a moment.

Back then, Rowan had objected to the marriage, but Frank had needed a wife, and

Elissa was perfect in every way. He couldn't have found someone more suitable. So he'd promised Rowan he would treat Elissa like his own sister, never letting her

suffer.

"I kept my word," Frank said quietly.

He truly believed he hadn't let Elissa suffer. Any misunderstandings, he'd always apologized for. Every time, he'd waited for Elissa to say she forgave him before letting it go. Even recently, when Elissa wasn't as gentle or accommodating, he'd never once thought about replacing her.

"But that doesn't mean I'll stand by and let you throw dirt on Marcia's name," Frank added.

At this, Rowan's expression hardened, his gaze icy as it swept over to Marcia. She shrank back unconsciously.

He let out a cold laugh. "If it's all lies, why is your loving wife so afraid?"

Frank glanced back at Marcia. After all these years, he thought he knew her well. His brow furrowed, and without waiting for her to respond, he pulled her out of the room.

A few minutes later, he returned alone, looking grim. "I'll make sure Elissa gets an explanation for what happened today."

Rowan caught the subtext, raising an eyebrow. "So you're only brave enough to pick on the easy target, huh?"

Frank, realizing he had no advantage here, softened his tone. "Rowan, do me a favor—let's not make a spectacle out of this."

The charity auction tonight was full of Vistapeak City's most influential people. With Rowan making such a scene, everyone would know exactly what had happened, and Marcia would become an outcast. With Rowan's standing in the city, no one would dare associate with her after this. She'd have no reason to stay in Vistapeak.

Rowan gave a humorless smile. "Did you ever do me any favors?"

He was, of course, talking about Frank marrying Elissa.

Frank pressed his tongue to the inside of his cheek, trying to keep his cool. "Come on, Rowan. We're friends. No need to drag up old history."

“And besides, nothing really happened to Elissa tonight. Why push things so far when no real harm was done?”