

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator

Chapter 121

“I don’t even let people off the hook when I’m in the wrong.”

Rowan barked out a laugh, as if he’d just heard the punchline of some dark joke. “So why should I go easy on anyone when I’m right?”

Out there, everyone said he was ruthless—a devil in a well-tailored suit who didn’t care about anyone.

But even Frank hadn’t expected Rowan to take it this far. Any shred of old friendship was gone, as if it had never existed.

Tension thickened the air, an uneasy standoff.

After a moment, Frank glanced toward the bedroom. “Maybe we should hear what

Elissa wants to do?”

Inside, Elissa stood with her hand on the doorknob. Hearing her name, a cold smile

flickered across her lips. She opened the door and stepped out.

Rowan relaxed a little when he saw her, putting out his cigarette and about to wave her over. But she looked straight at him, her voice flat and distant. “Let’s just drop it.”

Rowan’s brow furrowed. “What did you say?”

His tone was steady as a frozen lake, but it sent a chill through her anyway.

Elissa’s hands trembled; her face seemed to lose all color. “I said, let it go.”

“You’re sure?”

Her lashes lowered, barely visible, trembling just enough to betray her nerves. “Yes.”

Rowan let out a cold laugh, rising to his feet. His dark eyes locked on her, unblinking, for so long she almost lost her balance.

“Don’t ever think the world owes you anything,” he tossed out, voice light and careless. “Every mess you’re in? You made it yourself.”

With that, he strode out, his people following behind.

Rex hadn’t expected things to end like this. He handed Elissa a small bottle of medicine. “Take another dose before bed tonight. You should feel mostly better by morning.”

She took it with a quiet “Thanks.”

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She’d met Rex before. Back then, she’d noticed—of all Rowan’s friends, Rex was the closest. But Rex hardly ever visited their home, especially when she was around.

After Rex left, Elissa closed her eyes, drawing a slow, steady breath. She waited for her strength to return, then got ready to leave.

Frank came over, reaching out to steady her. “Elissa, I want to thank you on Marcia’s

behalf...”

“For what?” She dodged his hand, looking him square in the eye, voice thick with irony. “Didn’t you set this up? Let her thank you instead.”

Earlier, she’d been jolted awake by a string of calls from Carmela—one after another. Carmela’s warnings had been both sweet and sharp. “Marcia’s still officially part of the Atwater family and Hickey’s mother. She can’t afford any stains on her reputation.”

Then the threats: if Elissa didn’t play along, Carmela would tell Matriarch Paige Murphy about her divorce.

Funny, really. She was almost assaulted, and yet, somehow, she was the one being

threatened.

Frank looked at her, puzzled. “What are you talking about?”

Before she could answer, his phone rang. He stepped aside, speaking quietly, then hung up and glanced back at her, anxiety flickering in his eyes.

“Something’s come up. Will you be okay getting home by yourself?”

Fake concern.

Elissa’s lips curled into a cold smile. “If I said no, would you actually drive me? Or would you just dump me in some empty office again and disappear?”

“Elissa, I really do have to go.” Frank tried to look sincere, softening his voice for her sake. “That painting from today’s auction—the organizers will deliver it to Juniper Road in the next couple days. Make sure you sign for it, okay?”

“Got it.” Her voice was flat.

Frank sighed in relief and checked his watch. “You should head home early. I have to go.”

After he left, Elissa leaned against the wall, closing her eyes. Her face, pale and drawn, looked utterly broken.

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On the phone earlier, she hadn't agreed to Carmela's demands. She'd told her to go ahead and tattle to Matriarch Paige Murphy. Worst case, she'd just kneel in apology for a few days.

But then Carmela had changed her tone: "I heard you killed your own dog once. Now, you're trying to seduce her favorite grandson. Tell me, Elissa—if Paige Murphy hears about this, what else might you lose? Maybe that best friend of yours—the lawyer?"

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A chill ran straight through Elissa, leaving her frozen in place.

She used to love animals—especially dogs. They'd always been her favorite.

But Rowan was allergic to dog hair, so having one was out of the question.

Then, on her sixteenth birthday, Rowan shocked her by giving her a border collie puppy. She named him Max.

It didn't last. Not long after, Rowan abandoned them both, leaving Elissa and Max to

fend for themselves.

Still, Max stayed by her side—a loyal companion when she had *no one* else.

But happiness was always fleeting. One day, she came home from school and Max

was gone.

The Murphy family's butler told her Max had died.

He explained it was because she hadn't finished her breakfast that morning. She'd secretly thrown out the egg whites she hated and fed the yolks to Max.

She hadn't been obedient.

And Max had paid the price for her disobedience.

For days, Elissa was haunted by nightmares, sobbing in her sleep as she apologized

to Max over and over.

If only she hadn't been picky, Max would still be alive.

It was all her fault.

After that, every morning, Butler Murphy would set out five hard-boiled eggs for her—nothing else.

Eggs were the one thing she despised. Still, she forced herself to choke every one down, only to rush to the school restroom and vomit them up.

She understood now: Matriarch Paige Murphy didn't care whether she ate the eggs or

not.

What mattered was whether Elissa would obey.

She couldn't be herself—she could only be a puppet whose likes and dislikes were dictated by someone else.

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It had been that way when she was a child.

And nothing had changed.

Elissa opened her eyes and stared at the empty hotel suite. Suddenly, she collapsed to the floor, sobbing uncontrollably.

Rowan strode out of the hotel, his footsteps sharp and purposeful.

Rex hurried after him, grinning. “You looked cool as ice upstairs, but *now* you look like you’re about to explode. What happened?”

“Shut up,” Rowan shot back, his voice cold as steel.

Rex sighed, purposely needling him. “Come on, little Elissa just wants to keep the peace. You’re trying to help her, and she’s worried Frank will get caught in the middle. She’s dragging you down, sure, but she means well.”

“Never realized she had such a one-track mind when it came to love.”

Rowan stopped dead in his tracks and cut Rex a warning glare. “Are you done yet?”

“Nope.”

But Rex knew when to back off. “If you care so much, why couldn’t you be a little more patient with her? Just ask her why, for once.”

Back when Rowan took care of Elissa, he used to speak gently, always willing to listen to the girl.

But in recent years, he'd grown colder, more distant, as if even exchanging a few kind words would cost him his life. Maybe he'd climbed so high it just felt impossible to

stoop anymore.

That attitude worked in business—he was Rowan, after all. He didn't need to bend; others would scramble for a way to reach him.

But relationships didn't work that way.

Especially not with someone like Elissa, who always responded better to kindness than to force.

Rowan's expression hardened. "She made her choice. Why should I be patient?"

Even as he spoke, his gaze darted to something nearby, and suddenly his eyes sparked with fury.

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Before Rex could react, Rowan stormed over and landed a punch squarely on Slate, who'd just started to come to.

Slate opened his eyes only to meet Rowan's murderous glare. He didn't even dare to cry out in pain—he dropped to his knees on instinct.

“Boss! I messed up, I know! It was a moment of stupidity. It was that woman—Marcia from the Atwater family—she led me into this mess!”

Rowan grabbed him by the collar, his eyes cold and merciless. “When did you start planning this?”

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“Rowan, I swear, I didn’t do anything—please, just let me go...”

Rowan’s voice was cold as a blade. “If you won’t talk, I’ll find out myself.”

Slate squeezed his eyes shut, blurting out, “It was back in middle school!”

Rowan’s grip on Slate’s collar tightened, his knuckles turning white, veins bulging at his temple. He looked ready to explode, but Slate broke down, sobbing, “But I never dared! Rowan! She was still under your roof back then. I might have had the thought, but I’d never have the guts!”

Rowan’s eyes narrowed, something unreadable flashing across his gaze. “Is that why you left for the States six years ago?”

Slate’s heart nearly stopped.

He hadn’t expected Rowan to piece it together so quickly.

Back then, Rowan didn’t have nearly the power he wielded now. That night, their grandmother had put a lid on the whole thing. In the Murphy family, the matriarch still

called the shots.

Seeing Slate squirm like a duck with its neck in a vise, Rowan didn't need any more

confirmation.

Six years ago.

Elissa had only been eighteen.

And this—this wasn't the first time she'd been put through hell like this.

A surge of rage shot through Rowan. He yanked Slate up and, without warning, slammed his foot into him.

Slate screamed, rolling across the floor, clutching himself in agony, sobbing and breaking out in a cold sweat.

Rowan turned to Ian, his voice ice-cold. "Find somewhere quiet. Take care of him."

Ian didn't look surprised; he was about to nod when Rex spoke up, frowning. "Don't

listen to him."

Ian hesitated.

Rowan shot Rex a glare. "Since when did you start taking his orders over mine?"

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"Rowan," Rex said quietly, understanding, but steady, "Slate has to go. But not now. If he dies tonight, the old lady will lose it, and there's no telling what she'll do to Elissa."

He was right.

Even without Slate's blood on their hands, Matriarch Paige Murphy turned her fury on

Elissa just the same.

Elissa stayed at the hotel for a long time, trying to compose herself before finally calling a cab home.

“You’re finally back! I figured you didn’t eat enough at the dinner, so I ordered us some late-night food-”

Tanya Foster heard the elevator and leapt from the couch to open the door. She stopped mid-sentence when she saw Elissa—her dress wrinkled, makeup smudged, and a man’s suit jacket draped over her shoulders.

“What happened? Are you okay? Did something happen at the hotel?”

Elissa kept her answer vague, not wanting to worry her. “There was just a bit of an...

incident.”

Tanya eyed her, unconvinced. “Just a bit of an incident?”

Elissa forced a small smile. “Look at me—I’m fine, aren’t I?”

Both she and Tanya Foster were about as ordinary as people came in this city. It was only because the Murphy family had taken her in all those years ago that Elissa ever brushed against that world. And she still hadn’t fully escaped it.

But she had no intention of dragging Tanya into that mess. She didn’t even want Matriarch Paige Murphy to know Tanya existed.

Telling Tanya what had happened **tonight** would only make her worry, and there was nothing either of them could do about it.

Tanya’s eyes filled with tears as she pulled Elissa inside. “Who hurt you this time?”

Elissa didn’t answer, just lowered her gaze and went straight to the bathroom. She scrubbed herself from head to toe, especially her face, washing it over and over before finally wiping down with an alcohol pad, as if she could erase what had happened.

The dress Slate had touched went straight into the trash. As for Rowan’s suit jacket, she made a note to have it dry-cleaned.

Tanya seemed to have guessed something happened, but didn't press for details. She just waited outside the bathroom door, refusing to leave. As soon as she heard Elissa finishing up, she quickly wiped her own tears away and spoke like nothing was wrong. "Come on, the food's getting cold. This place has the best lamb—*goes* great with a beer, too."

"Sounds good," Elissa said quietly. She knew she wouldn't sleep tonight anyway.

She thought she'd hidden everything well, but later, after a few drinks, Tanya leaned against her, voice thick with determination and more than a little slur, "Ellie, I'm really trying to get stronger. Someday... I swear, I won't let any of those bastards hurt you ever again."

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Tanya Foster nestled against her shoulder, whispering, "If it really doesn't work. out—well, we're not stuck in Vistapeak City. Once I've saved up enough, we'll go. somewhere else, just the two of us."

She patted Tanya's head and smiled, warmth in her eyes. "Alright. I believe you. We'll go somewhere new."

Tanya had thrown herself into work since starting her job, recently even showing signs of a promotion and a raise.

She truly believed Tanya's future would only get brighter.

That's why she didn't say, "It's no use."

Because it wasn't.

Even if Tanya made partner at the law firm—or owned it outright—none of it would matter in the face of those people.

And leaving? That wasn't an option.

She'd tried, long ago. When it came time to apply for college, she'd picked nothing but

out-of-state schools.

But in the end, the only acceptance letter she got was from Vistapeak University.

Paige Murphy, the family's iron-willed matriarch, had chained her life to Vistapeak City. There was no escape.

Or maybe—just maybe—there would be, once Matriarch Paige Murphy was gone.

She could feel it, the old woman's hatred—a cold, implacable thing, present from the very start. But she'd never been able to guess why.

At four in the morning, with darkness still pressing against the windows, the phone rang from Murphy Manor like a summons from the grave.

A call from the Murphys at this hour was never good news. Elissa's sleep scattered in an instant, anxiety tightening her chest. "Hello?"

"Miss Elissa,"

It wasn't the matriarch's voice—it **was** Butler Murphy, his tone as flat as ever. "The car is already in Vistapeak Gardens. Please come downstairs."

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A chill ran down Elissa's spine.

So, the family already knew she'd moved out.

And she could guess why—something to do with what happened at the hotel tonight.

Slate—Paige Murphy's favorite grandson.

But it wasn't as if she'd tried to pursue anything...

Elissa pressed her palm into her hand, willing herself steady. "Understood."

She got up, washed her face, and changed into fresh clothes before heading downstairs.

A black Rolls-Royce waited outside the building. Butler Murphy held the door open for

her. “Miss Elissa.”

“Thank you, Butler Murphy.”

She sat quietly throughout the drive, making no attempt at conversation.

In the Murphy family, she was the perpetual outsider.

Butler Murphy was loyal to the matriarch alone—there was no way he’d confide in her.

And if he did say anything, it would be because Paige Murphy wanted her to know. If that were the case, he’d offer it unprompted.

There’d been no snow lately, but the roads were still icy from the cold. The driver took the winding mountain roads slowly and with extra caution.

“Mr. Slate was injured. You know how that happened, don’t you?” Butler Murphy’s sudden question broke the silence as they neared the estate.

Elissa didn’t flinch. She kept her gaze straight ahead, calm and unreadable. “I don’t. After I left the hotel, I just went home.”

“**Miss** Elissa, you know what happens to those who lie to Matriarch Paige Murphy.” Butler Murphy adjusted his **glasses**, his voice low and edged with warning.

Elissa pressed her lips together. “I truly don’t know.”

As the words left her mouth, the car rolled to a smooth stop at the manor’s gates.

Butler Murphy led the way, and she followed, step for step, into the shadowy garden and toward the old woman’s wing.

She’d walked this path countless times.

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Every time, it felt like it drained every ounce of strength she possessed.

No matter how many steps she took, there was never a glimmer of light at the end.

“Matriarch, Miss Elissa is here-”

Butler Murphy’s announcement was cut short as, without warning, a teacup arced straight toward Elissa’s forehead.

She’d seen the old woman’s hand move but made no effort to dodge.

The cup struck her at the hairline, bright blood blossoming across her skin before the cup clattered to the floor, red droplets splashing her ankles.

At least, she thought with a distant sort of gratitude, it hadn’t been filled with hot tea.

The atmosphere in the hall was tense and prickling, and now and then, anguished cries drifted down from the second floor.

“What are you standing around for?”

The old woman’s eyes drooped at the corners, but her anger was unmistakable—a storm waiting for its target. “Get over here!”

“Yes, Grandmother.”

Elissa wiped the blood from her brow before it could drip into her eye, then stepped forward, stopping a meter from the matriarch.

Paige Murphy rose to her feet and fixed Elissa with a cold, assessing look. “Closer.”

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Elissa took two hesitant steps forward, but before she could even steady herself, the old woman’s hand came down hard across her face.

Even after that slap, the old matriarch’s fury didn’t wane in the slightest. She launched into a tirade, voice trembling with anger. “Slate was hurt so badly, and you claim you had no idea? Elissa, do you have any conscience at all?”

Spit flew with every word.

Her digestion was terrible these days.

Her temper, even worse than before.

If this kept up, she wouldn't last a few more years.

Elissa bowed her head, trying to keep her voice steady as she spoke. "Grandma, I really don't know what happened."

Under the old woman's withering glare, Elissa had no choice but to put on a show of concern. "What happened to Slate? How badly is he hurt?"

The matriarch ground her teeth. "Go upstairs and see for yourself!"

"Yes, ma'am."

Elissa kept her head down and started for the stairs.

She'd barely reached Slate's bedroom door when a pained scream rang out from inside.

The room was crowded with nurses and paramedics working frantically to tend to Slate's injuries.

Elissa's gaze dropped—and when she saw the blood-soaked mess between Slate's legs, she couldn't help but let out the briefest flicker of a smile.

Slate caught it instantly.

He glared at her, face flushed with rage. "Get the hell out! Who the fuck let you in here?!"

"Grandma asked me to come check on you."

Sensing the nurses' eyes on her, Elissa shifted back to her obedient mask. She

stepped up to the bedside, stuck a straw in a paper cup, and leaned over *to* offer it to

Slate.

“Slate, congratulations. Guess you’re on track to take Butler Murphy’s job *now*—might even beat him to becoming a eunuch.”

The medical staff were too focused on treating Slate *to* notice anything else. Elissa’s face was all gentle concern; no one would have imagined such words coming from her lips.

She bent lower, voice barely more than a whisper, but Slate heard every syllable.

“Elissa, you fucking bitch!”

Twisting with pain and fury, he smacked her hand away. The cup tumbled from her grasp, splashing its water straight onto his bloody wound.

The sight was horrific—a fresh wave of blood, more than anyone wanted to see.

The room erupted into chaos.

Slate screamed in agony.

Elissa clapped a hand over her mouth, wide-eyed and trembling, stammering out apologies. “I’m sorry, I’m so sorry... Slate, I didn’t think you’d be so upset. I swear, I had no idea you were hurt!”

Butler Murphy, who’d been standing guard outside, rushed in at the commotion. His face was thunderous as he grabbed Elissa by the arm and hustled her downstairs.

Eyes reddened, Elissa barely reached the old matriarch before dropping to her knees. “Grandma, who could’ve done this? Whoever it was... they went way too-”

Too far, she wanted to say. But she caught herself, just in time. The old woman’s eyes narrowed, suspicion flickering across her face.

“You’re sure you know nothing about this?”

“I swear I don’t!”

Truthfully, Elissa had no idea who'd attacked Slate. A name flickered through her mind—Rowan—but he'd left the hotel last night looking like he never wanted anything to do with her again. Why would he suddenly go after Slate, his own cousin?

Then again, in all of Vistapeak City, who else would dare to hurt Slate this badly?

She couldn't think of a second person.

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The old woman studied Elissa's face for a long, silent moment before finally speaking, voice low and cold. "Take her outside. She can kneel."

This was directed at Butler Murphy.

"At once, ma'am." Butler Murphy's expression was unreadable as he *looked* at Elissa. "Miss Elissa, this way, please."

Something wasn't right. Usually, she'd just be ordered out to kneel on her own. This time, Butler Murphy was to escort her personally.

It didn't take long for Elissa to realize what the old woman had planned.

Butler Murphy led her out to the lakeshore behind the house. "If you'd be so kind."

The message was clear: she was to kneel on the ice.

Elissa clenched her fists, then carefully shrugged off her down coat, laying it on the ground so if she fell in, she wouldn't be dragged under by waterlogged feathers.

Only then did she step cautiously onto the ice.

The sky was still pitch-dark, and she couldn't see which parts of the ice were thin or thick. She had no choice but *to* feel her way forward, trusting nothing but luck.

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It was pointless anyway.

The lake behind the old manor was vast and natural, with only a small section stretching into the backyard. Vistapeak City was cold, but not so cold that the entire lake froze solid. Even if she was lucky enough to kneel on the thickest patch of ice, human bodies radiated warmth.

Before long, the ice would begin to melt beneath her, and she'd plunge into the freezing water below.

If the old woman wished it, Elissa could die out here, and no one would ever know.

Within minutes, her whole body was shivering. As *soon* as she knelt, Butler Murphy spoke up from the shore. "Matriarch Paige Murphy instructed that once you kneel, you're not to move again."

A cold heaviness settled in Elissa's chest.

Then she heard him add, "Later tonight, someone will bring you to the chapel for the family punishment."

A tiny breath of relief escaped her.

So, they weren't planning to kill her—at least not tonight.

Still, in the heart of a brutal winter, after falling into the lake, she'd be dragged to the chapel for a whipping. Either way, she'd barely make it out alive.

Elissa knew perfectly well that it didn't matter whether she'd had anything to do with Slate's injuries, or whether she knew anything at all. The old woman just needed someone to absorb her rage.

Already her teeth were chattering uncontrollably, and she could feel the ice beneath her knees slowly giving way.

Paige Murphy's cruelty had reached new heights.

Kneeling on the familiar pebble path, the pain was sharp but straightforward—there was nothing to think about but enduring it. Out here, every second was a fresh terror, the fear of suddenly crashing through the ice and into the water gnawing at her.

It was the uncertainty that made it unbearable.

Butler Murphy, bathed in moonlight, returned to the main hall and approached the old

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woman.

“She’s kneeling now, Matriarch.”

“She didn’t say anything?”

Paige Murphy lifted her teacup, brushing away the stray leaves floating on top.

Butler Murphy answered honestly, “No, ma’am. You know Miss Elissa, she’s always obedient.”

The old woman gave a sharp, bitter laugh, slamming her untouched cup down on the table. A storm cloud passed through her eyes. “Obedient? She’s got all of you wrapped around her finger with those innocent looks!”

Butler Murphy let out a soft sigh, trying to soothe her. “Don’t upset yourself, ma’am. She’s not worth risking your health.”

“How can I not be upset?” Paige ground out, voice trembling with anger. “Did she say something to provoke Slate? The doctor just left—said he’s completely ruined now. There’s not even a chance to save him!”

“I was outside the door, didn’t hear anything,” Butler Murphy replied. “But Mr. Slate did lose his temper.”

“For the family punishment tonight, you’ll do it yourself.” Paige’s eyes narrowed, her tone icy. “Just make sure she doesn’t die here. That’s all.”

Butler Murphy flinched, but didn’t dare protest. “Yes, ma’am.”

He had barely finished when the manor’s landline rang, shrill and urgent.

He hurried to answer. Before the caller finished, his face went pale with shock. He stammered, “Understood. There were no casualties? I’ll report to Matriarch Paige Murphy right away.”

“What happened?” Paige demanded, her glare sharp. “Why are you so flustered?”

He swallowed, “Ma’am, the high-rise development under Mr. Slate’s name—the one set to open next week—a building was just blown up, ten minutes ago.”

He rushed to add, “It happened in the dead of night. No one was hurt.”

“What did you say?!”

Paige shot to her feet, disbelief etched on her face.

Who? Who would dare pull something like this on a Murphy family project?

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She’d bought that plot three years ago, paid top dollar for it. The upscale condos sold

out the moment they hit the market.

Now, with a building destroyed, not only would they miss the handover, the financial

blow would be massive.

Paige felt her mind go blank.

Butler Murphy hesitated. “Odds are, it’s the eldest son’s doing...”

“Outrageous!” Paige finally snapped.

Only Rowan—her wild, lawless grandson—would dare act so recklessly, so brazenly!

Her head buzzed with fury as she slammed the table over and over. “Go! Call him right now. I want to *know* exactly what he thinks he’s doing!”

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Following instructions, Butler Murphy put the call on speaker.

He dialed several times before someone finally picked up. It wasn’t Rowan’s voice. “Butler Murphy, it’s Ian. The boss is busy. He asked me to remind you: calling in the middle of the night is a good way to get yourself struck by lightning.”

The old woman's face darkened even further. She looked ready *to* flip the table right

then and there.

Butler Murphy cleared his throat, hurrying to the point. "Ilan, could you ask the young master—just now, the team at the city outskirts called about—"

Ilan, who'd spent too long shadowing Rowan, interrupted in a drawl that mimicked his master's careless tone, "That was our boss. He did it."

Both Butler Murphy and the matriarch were momentarily speechless.

They hadn't expected such a blatant, unapologetic admission—no effort to hide it at

all!

Even a subordinate dared to speak this way now!

Under the matriarch's withering glare, Butler Murphy pressed, "So what does the young master mean by this?"

“Nothing much,” Ian replied, tone unchanged. “That’s just how the boss is—anyone hurts his people, he makes sure to pay them back.”

“Oh, and by the way, there are more bombs in the other buildings. They’re on timers.”

Ian sounded almost helpful. “Might as well wait till it’s all blown up before you send the workers in to rebuild. Wouldn’t want anyone getting killed.”

“What did you just say?!”

The matriarch couldn’t take it anymore. Her voice was thunderous. “Ask Rowan what exactly he’s trying to do!”

If the whole project was demolished, everything would be ruined—billions in losses, years of work down the drain.

“But Ma’am, the boss is busy, Ian replied, the sounds of a card game faintly audible in the background. “But he did say before, the final losses on this project—it all depends

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on how you handle things.”

“How I handle things?” the matriarch demanded, then suddenly realization dawned.

Traitor. Turning on your own family!

She slammed the phone down, her face clouded with rage. “Get that girl cleaned up with a hot shower—now! And have the doctor take care of that cut on her forehead. At least make sure she looks presentable before she leaves this house!”

“Move!” she barked, firing off orders so quickly Butler Murphy stood frozen for a

moment.

Then she turned on him, teeth clenched. “Can’t you see what all this is about? Why do you think he went to such extremes?”

She'd dragged Elissa here in the dead of night, a direct slap to Rowan's face. The boy who once wouldn't dare cross her openly had grown into someone utterly defiant.

She only blamed herself for being too soft-hearted back then—giving Rowan the chance to grow his claws.

The lake ice was thawing. Elissa had just dipped a foot into the freezing water, bracing herself to climb out, when Butler Murphy waved her over to the shore.

A whole crowd came to haul her up.

No punishment followed, no family discipline. Butler Murphy was unusually attentive, even arranging a driver to take her home.

Once the car had sped away, Butler Murphy hurried back inside. "Matriarch Murphy, I'll call the young master right away."

"No need," the old woman said, rubbing her temples and letting out a cold laugh. "Before you even pick up the phone, I'm sure he'll already know what happened."

Elissa sat silently in the backseat, unable to guess what had prompted the matriarch's sudden bout of mercy. There'd never been any leniency before—her punishments only

ever escalated.

As her thoughts drifted, her eyelids grew unbearably heavy, feverish heat spreading through her body.

It was the dead of winter, the middle of the night, kneeling on thawing ice—anyone would be laid out sick, and she hadn't expected the matriarch to suddenly change her mind. She'd even taken off her coat, afraid it would weigh her down if she fell into the

water.

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By the time she stumbled home, dawn was breaking. Tanya Foster had already left for work but had set out breakfast for her on the table.

Elissa had no appetite. Her head was spinning, her whole body weak. She downed some fever medicine and collapsed onto her bed.

Her sleep was restless, plagued by strange, feverish dreams.

Near the end, she dreamed she was kneeling on the ice again. Dreamed she fell into the lake, weeds wrapping tighter and tighter around her, and when she finally crawled onto the shore, it felt as if half her life had slipped away.

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Murphy, the butler, hadn't held back at all when he whipped her in the chapel.

The pain was unbearable.

It hurt so much she thought she might die.

She missed her dad, her mom.

Even Rowan drifted through her mind.

It was like she was begging him again, pleading with him not to leave her behind.

He was saying something, maybe trying to explain, but before she could make out the words, her phone rang, dragging her out of the nightmare.

Her lashes and skin were damp with sweat. She glanced at the caller ID, still dazed, but answered anyway. “Hello?”

As soon as she spoke, she realized how hoarse her voice sounded—raw and burning with every word.

“Dr. Elissa!”

A warm, enthusiastic voice greeted her on the other end. “It’s Mrs. Garrett—do you remember me? Janice? I was one of your clinic patients.”

“Of course, Mrs. Garrett. Is everything alright?”

“Oh dear, what happened to your voice? Are you sick?” Janice’s concern was

immediate.

Elissa’s reply was thick with congestion. “Caught a chill, I’m afraid. Is there something bothering you?”

“No, no, nothing like that.” Janice chuckled kindly. “I’m making pies today and wanted to ask what kind you like. I’ve got an appointment with you in a couple of days, so I thought I’d bring you something homemade.”

The gentle affection in the older woman’s voice warmed Elissa from within.

She managed a small laugh. “That’s so thoughtful, but you should keep them for yourself-”

“Nonsense,” Janice replied in that firm, grandmotherly way. “You’re home alone, aren’t you?”

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“I am.”

“Then let me come over—I’ll bring some groceries and meat, and we can make the

pies at your place!”

Janice’s enthusiasm was contagious. “You’re sick and probably don’t have the energy to cook. I’ll fill your freezer with pies, and you can just heat one up whenever you’re hungry.”

Before she quite knew how it happened, Elissa found herself reciting her address.

It was strange.

She’d always thought of herself as someone cautious, guarded.

Maybe it was because Janice really did seem like the sweetest old lady.

Or maybe it was because she’d rarely been on the receiving end of this kind of genuine care. Janice, even just over the phone, felt a little like family.

Despite the fever, Elissa suddenly felt a bit more present, a bit more alive. She dragged herself out of bed, washed her face, and changed the dressing on the cut on

her forehead.

She'd barely finished freshening up when Janice bustled in, arms full of groceries.

"Feeling any better?" Janice set the bags down, washed her hands, and reached out to feel Elissa's forehead. "Still a bit warm. Go rest in your room, sweetheart. I'll call you when the pie's ready."

"I've slept enough. Let me help you," Elissa replied, her voice still soft from sleep, making her seem even gentler than usual.

Janice's eyes softened, looking at her as fondly as if she were her own

granddaughter. "Alright, but why don't you relax on the couch for a bit while I prep the dough and filling?"

"Okay," Elissa agreed easily, then perched herself on the back of the couch to watch Janice's busy figure in the kitchen.

The winter sunlight streamed in through the kitchen window, silvering Janice's white hair, trailing down to the gentle curve of her spine as she worked.

For a fleeting moment, Elissa didn't feel quite so alone.

Just for now, it felt as if she had family again.

She'd never made pie before, but she was quick to pick things up, and soon her

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attempts looked almost as good as Janice's.

As they worked, Janice glanced at the bandage on Elissa's head. "How'd you end up hurting your forehead?"

Elissa smiled lightly, lips pressed together. "Just an accident."

Janice's hand brushed affectionately over the bandage. "Don't you have any family here in Vistapeak City?"

"I... don't have any family," Elissa replied, her hands still busy shaping the dough. "My parents passed away when I was young."

Her grandparents had died even earlier.

Janice's hands stilled for a moment.

A flicker of pain crossed her eyes, as if she was remembering something. "My grandson's parents died young, too. You and he... you're both such brave kids."

"He used to have a little girl living with him for company, but something happened in their family. He was afraid of dragging her into it, so all these years, he's been on his

own."

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator

Elissa paused, caught off guard by what she'd just heard.

Raising a little girl...

It sounded oddly familiar—almost like her and Rowan, though she still had *no* idea why Rowan had treated her that way back then.

But it was Mrs. Garrett's earlier comment that truly surprised her.

She couldn't quite put her finger on what felt off about it.

Shouldn't a boy's parents just be Mrs. Garrett's son and daughter-in-law?

Janice seemed to notice her confusion. "My son, well, he's not officially my son on paper. So, technically, I'm not my grandson's legal grandmother, either."

"You..."

Elissa had a vague sense of what Janice meant, but she didn't press. Instead, she

tried to steer the conversation elsewhere.

Janice smiled, a little wistfully. "You were cheated on after your wedding. As for me, it happened before I even got married."

"He was powerful and well-connected back then. The day my son was born, I didn't even get to hold him once before they took him away and registered him under his father's wife—the one he married properly, in the church."

Elissa took a moment to piece together the implications.

In short, decades ago, Mrs. Garrett had gone through the heartbreak of being “the other woman.”

Back then, that kind of thing was deeply shameful.

And this grandson’s grandfather had probably been even more of a scoundrel than Frank.

When Elissa fell silent, Janice rushed to reassure her. “Don’t worry, my grandson didn’t inherit any of those bad genes. He’s just a little reserved, but he’s a good person in every other way.”

Elissa couldn’t help but laugh. “You’re still thinking of setting me up with your

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grandson?”

“Absolutely!”

Janice beamed at her. “After your clinic hours in a couple of days, do you have time in the afternoon? I could arrange for you to meet him.”

“Grandma...”

“Just one meeting. That’s all.”

Janice was easygoing about it. “If you’re not interested after that, I promise I’ll never bring it up again, alright?”

Mrs. Garrett really was a lovely woman.

Elissa mulled it over, then nodded. “Alright. But we agree—it’s just *one* meeting, and after that, we drop the subject.”

“Deal!” Janice’s face lit up in delight.

Her own taciturn grandson might not say much, but with those looks, he could sweep any young woman off her feet.

She had a feeling Dr. Elissa would like him, too.

The afternoon flew by in a flurry of activity. After dinner, the leftover pie nearly filled

Elissa's freezer to bursting.

Maybe worried Elissa would get bored of eating the same thing, Janice had even baked three different flavors so she could mix things up.

Elissa felt a bit embarrassed. "Mrs. Garrett, I can't possibly eat all this. Why don't you

take some home?"

"No, no, keep it! I can always whip up more."

Janice waved her off, slipped on her shoes, and headed out the door, calling back, “If you ever get a craving for anything, just message me on WhatsApp. I’ll make it and bring it right over!”

For a split second, Elissa had the ridiculous thought—With a grandmother this wonderful, as long as the grandson isn’t mute, maybe he’d be worth a try?

The moment the idea crossed her mind, she shook herself and gave her head a little slap.

Not a chance.

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It was nowhere near that point...

On the day she went to the clinic, she still wasn’t fully recovered. Her fever had broken, but she was still coughing.

She pulled her mask up tight and got started with her appointments.

Janice was her first patient. After picking up her prescription, she hurried to say, “Dr. Elissa, I’m heading home now to get things ready. Once you’re done here, come straight over—I’ll be waiting to serve dinner!”

She’d already sent Elissa her address before leaving Vistapeak Gardens the other day.

Elissa smiled. “Alright, I’ll be there.”

A sleek black Bentley rolled to a stop outside the garden villa.

Inside, Ian glanced at his boss in the back seat and urged, “Sir, if it’s meant to be, there’s no dodging it. Even the toughest bachelor can’t escape a matchmaking

dinner.”

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator

Rowan opened his eyes, his usual sharpness softened for once. He was just about to get out of the car when the door swung open.

Janice grabbed his arm and practically yanked him out. “You’re free for lunch today, right? I need to talk to you. No arguments,” she said, leaving him *no room* to protest.

He looked at his grandmother, his patience on full display. “What’s going on?”

They walked into the house together. The rich aroma of food drifted from the kitchen, and Rowan glanced toward the dining room, one eyebrow raised in surprise. “What’s with the feast, Grandma? Feeling guilty and decided to spoil me all of a sudden?”

Janice was never one for extravagance. No matter how good things got, lunch was always two simple dishes and a bowl of soup. If it was just Rowan, she’d often hand him a plate of pasta and call it a day.

“Keep dreaming! It’s not for you. That girl is coming over,” Janice said, barely able to hide her excitement before schooling her features into seriousness. “Now listen—whatever happens, you’re going to cooperate today. Be polite. Got it?”

She’d worried herself sick over her grandson’s love life. Not that anyone else cared; the rest of the Murphy clan probably wished nothing more than for Rowan to stay single forever.

Rowan frowned. “Which girl?”

Janice shot him a look. “Which girl do you think? The young doctor. I invited her for lunch. And you’d better *not* give her that frosty attitude of yours.”

Rowan’s expression stayed *cool*. “If you’re setting me up, you could’ve at least warned

me.”

“It’s not a setup,” Janice said, deadly serious. “I just want her to meet you. If she happens to like you, well, that’s your good luck!”

Rowan arched an eyebrow, unconvinced.

Across the *room*, Ian tried to hide a smirk. He couldn’t help but wonder if Grandma’s doctor had slipped something into her prescription—some kind of brainwashing agent, maybe.

Rowan’s gaze grew thoughtful. Suddenly, he asked, “Didn’t you say she was getting divorced?”

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Chapter 130

Elissa and Frank's separation flashed through his mind. Elissa was a doctor *too*. Could it possibly be...?

Janice busied herself in the kitchen. "That's right. I asked her a couple of days ago-she's already got the papers."

Rowan's lips quirked into a near-smile, then his expression hardened.

"Her ex-husband had it coming. Word is, he already has a kid with another woman," Janice said. She hadn't heard it from Elissa directly, but she'd caught mention of it when she overheard Elissa's phone call at the clinic.

Rowan pressed his lips into a thin line. "I have something *to* do later-I'll have to leave early."

Janice set down her spatula and grabbed his arm, thoroughly annoyed. "I don't care if the sky falls. You are staying right here until she's had a good look at *you*!"

"If she's not impressed, then you don't need to bother coming back here ever again!"

Rowan let out a silent groan, rubbing his forehead.

With the holidays approaching, there were fewer patients than usual. For once, Elissa managed to leave work on time. She grabbed her bag and drove to the address Janice had given her—a peaceful, secluded neighborhood of cottage-style houses not far from Juniper Road. It was the kind of place perfect for settling down after

retirement.

Worried she'd be kept waiting, Janice had stationed herself at the entrance to the neighborhood.

Elissa couldn't help but laugh. "You didn't have to come out for me, Grandma. I could've found it just fine—now, hop in."

Janice slid into the passenger seat, beaming. "It's your first time here. I didn't want you to get lost. Next time, you'll know the way."

"Take a right up ahead; you can park there."

Following Janice's directions, Elissa eased her foot on the gas and glanced over. "Careful getting out, Grandma. The sidewalk might be icy."

At her age, a slip was the last thing anyone wanted.

“Alright, alright, I’m careful,” Janice replied, hurrying out as soon as the car stopped. She didn’t waste a second before taking Elissa’s arm and ushering her inside. “My grandson’s been waiting for you all morning.”