

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator

“I heard you were coming, and he was thrilled. He even told me to make extra good food for you...”

Janice’s cheerful voice trailed off as she walked into the living room and found it empty.

She glanced out the window, only to realize the car was gone too.

That rascal!

He must have slipped away while she was outside welcoming their guest. Janice felt both annoyed and embarrassed. She gave Elissa an apologetic smile. “Dr. Elissa, my grandson...”

“Grandma, it’s a workday. He probably had something urgent to deal with. Please don’t be upset,” Elissa reassured her, actually feeling relieved. She turned to the dining table, which was spread with an impressive array of dishes, and complimented Janice, “I had no idea you could cook more than just pies—everything looks amazing!”

There was roasted salmon with lemon, a rich lamb stew simmering in a pot, and garlic butter scallops still sizzling in their dish—each one more tempting than the last.

Elissa's appetite was instantly roused.

Janice knew Elissa was giving her a way to save face, so she grumbled about her grandson internally while pouring Elissa a glass of sparkling water. "Dig in! See if it suits your taste."

"Thank you."

With only the two of them at the table, Elissa felt much more at ease. Worried Janice might feel awkward about her grandson's absence, she ended up eating until she was stuffed.

By the end, hardly anything was left on the table.

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But the food was truly delicious—everything was just what she liked.

Seeing Elissa eat so heartily, Janice couldn't help but laugh. "If you like my cooking, you should come by more often! I live here alone anyway. You're welcome anytime."

“You live by yourself?” Elissa asked, surprised.

Janice sighed. “He’s always busy with work. When he gets a spare moment, he’ll drop by to check on me.”

Elissa smiled. “Then I’ll visit you more often.”

After all, she lived alone herself.

Her mentor and Jacqueline always looked forward to her visits, but sometimes she worried she was intruding on their alone time.

That was why she didn’t go over every chance she got—she wanted to give them space to enjoy their lives together.

Janice’s eyes crinkled with joy. “Really?”

“Really.”

After the meal, Elissa offered to wash the dishes, but Janice wouldn't

hear of it. She pulled Elissa over for a cup of herbal tea instead.

It was after three when Elissa finally got a call from the dry cleaner—Rowan's suit jacket was ready for pick-up.

He'd actually stood up for her that night, a rare act of kindness, and she'd brushed it off. He probably hated her by now.

And this jacket—she'd worn it. He'd probably be disgusted just seeing it.

But it wasn't hers to keep; she didn't get to decide.

After picking up the suit, she hesitated, then messaged Ian: [Ian, do you know when Mr. Murphy might be free? I'd like to drop off his suit a bit later, if that's okay?]

He was almost certainly busy. He'd probably just tell her to toss it in the

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trash.

Elissa's car was already parked next to the trash bins; if lan gave the word, she could just roll down the window and toss it in.

lan was surprised when he got her message. He knocked on the door of the study upstairs.

"Sir, Miss Elissa just texted me-

He stopped mid-sentence as he saw Rowan standing by the window, speaking into his phone with perfect composure. "Grandma, I swear I didn't bail on you on purpose. I really had work to do."

"Don't be upset, or your blood pressure will go up."

“Yes, this week has been crazy. I feel like I’m being pulled in two directions.”

“You’re right, at this rate I’ll end up a lonely old man.”

Han thought to himself, There’s no one else in Vistapeak City who gets this kind of consideration. Only Grandma could make the boss so patient.

Rowan spotted Ian, wrapped up the call after a few words, and his expression turned cold. “Why did she message you?”

“She wants to return your suit.”

But then Ian cleared his throat, trying to sound brave as he went on, “But since you’re so busy, maybe I should tell her not to bother, so it doesn’t take up your time—”

Rowan shot him a glare. “Have her bring it over.”

“When?”

“Now.”

“...Sir?”

You’re not busy anymore?

Ian kept his thoughts to himself and quickly replied, “Understood. I’ll let

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her know right away.”

As Ian headed downstairs, Evan crunched a candy in his mouth and muttered, “You didn’t need to go ask. The boss is such a neat freak—he’s got more suits than he can wear. Like he’d want one that’s been out to a dry cleaner.”

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“Grandfather said Miss Elissa should deliver it herself.”

Ian looked at the messenger as if he’d lost his mind. “And he said it has

to be now.”

[Miss Elissa, Mr. Murphy is available right now. Please bring it over.]

[We’re at Rivercross Estate.]

Elissa blinked at the two messages, momentarily stunned.

They seriously meant it?

Still, after everything that happened that night, she owed Rowan a thank you, face to face. This was as good an excuse as any.

She carefully folded the suit jacket, grabbed her keys, and drove toward Rivercross Estate.

Somehow, despite the high security, the guards waved her through without a single question.

She took the lakeside drive straight to the mansion, her nerves tightening

as the house came into view.

To Rowan, her actions that night must have seemed utterly pathetic. He probably had her pegged with every lovesick label in the book. She braced herself—he'd be sure to mock her again today.

"Miss Elissa, you're here!"

Ian hurried out the moment she pulled up, opening her car door. "Would you like some coffee or juice? Any desserts you're craving? I can have something prepared."

Ian treated her just as he always had, back when she'd lived in the Murphy household—a mix of brotherly affection and respectful deference.

For a fleeting moment, it felt like nothing had changed, as if she were simply coming home like she used to.

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Elissa hesitated, picking up the suit jacket as she got out of the car. “Juice is fine, thank you, Ian.”

“No need for thanks,” Ian replied with a smile, not wanting her to be so formal. “We’ve looked after you since you were little. That’s just how it’s always been.”

They’d all been handpicked by Rowan from the orphanage—loyal, with no weaknesses. When Rowan first brought Elissa home, everyone was fascinated by the sweet, quiet little girl and treated her like a cherished younger sister.

Despite everything that happened later, to them, Elissa would always be their Miss Elissa. That had never changed.

Suddenly, Elissa felt a tightness in her chest and glanced away, blinking back the heat in her eyes. “Yeah. You all have taken care of me for so many years.”

Ian caught her sadness and gestured upstairs. “Go on—Mr. Murphy’s waiting for you.”

“Alright.”

Elissa glanced up at the second floor, anxiety curling in her palms as she squeezed them together.

She’d known every inch of Rowan’s old house—even down to the ant hills in the backyard. But this was her first visit to Rivercross Estate. Everything here was unfamiliar.

Just like her relationship with Rowan now.

She climbed the stairs and paused at the study door, raising her hand to knock. “Mr. Murphy, I brought your suit back.”

“Come in.”

The space was new, but the voice was achingly familiar. Rowan’s cool, detached tone drifted from inside. Somehow, it steadied her nerves a bit. She turned the handle and stepped in—then stopped short.

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The study was decorated almost identically to his old one: the same crisp, minimalist style, radiating an air of aloofness.

Except for one thing. Hanging above the tall windows was a powder-blue seashell wind chime—completely out of place among the severe lines

and dark wood.

That-

The summer before she started middle school, Rowan had just finished his college entrance exams, and he'd taken her to the coast for a few days. She'd collected shells, tinkered with them after they got home, and made that wind chime. Rowan had frowned and called it ugly, but he'd still let her hang it in his study.

Now Rowan sat sprawled in his chair, following her gaze to the wind chime. His voice was as dry and indifferent as ever. "Well, Miss Elissa, aren't you here to return my suit? Cat got your tongue?"

“...Right.”

Shaking herself, Elissa set the suit on the sofa nearby. “It’s been dry-cleaned,” she added, remembering his need for cleanliness. “But if you’d rather, Mr. Murphy, I can buy you a new set—though it probably won’t match your custom tailoring...”

“That’ll do.”

He cut her off before she could finish.

Elissa blinked, caught off guard that he’d actually accept. “Alright, I’ll find time in the next couple of days to pick one out.”

Rowan’s lips twitched in a barely-there smile. “You know my measurements?”

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Rowan's train of thought always seemed to catch Elissa off guard.

She felt her cheeks flush with heat and quickly averted her gaze, avoiding his inexplicable look. "I-I'll just tell the clerk your height and weight. They're experienced with this kind of thing..."

"Oh?"

Suddenly, Rowan stood up and walked over, stopping right in front of her. He gave a teasing smile. "You know my height and weight?"

"..."

That old sense of unfamiliarity swept over Elissa once again.

Of course. For so many years now, they'd been nothing but strangers—eight years, a full third of their lives, completely disconnected. She hadn't bought him a gift or picked out clothes for him in years.

How on earth was she supposed to know his measurements?

Eight years was a long time. If Max were still alive, he'd have grown into a teenager by now.

And Rowan—just his shoulders alone were broader than they'd been eight

years ago.

Elissa braced herself and tried, "If you tell me, Mr. Murphy, I'll know."

"No."

Rowan's expression was cool. "You need to try the clothes on. Just picking a size based on height and weight won't fit right."

He was right.

She'd forgotten that for him, tailored suits were as natural as breathing—custom-made, perfectly fitted, the norm for a man in his

position.

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The fact that he'd even let her buy something off the rack was already a

concession.

Elissa couldn't quite figure out what he meant by all this.

If he expected her to have a bespoke suit made, that would be way out of her budget.

The suits he wore on a regular basis easily started in the five-figure range. The one he'd lent her that night was even more outrageous.

Still, it was because of her that he'd wasted a suit.

"So what do you want to do, then?"

She didn't want to take advantage, so after a moment's hesitation, she bit the bullet. "Or...where do you usually get your suits made? I can—"

Rowan cut her off with a flat voice. "When are you going to the store?"

"Huh?"

She realized then he wasn't expecting her to spend a fortune. Quickly, she answered, "I'm not sure yet. I need to check the clinic's schedule first."

"Let me know when you've decided."

"What?"

"I'll go try them on myself."

He shot her a chilly glance, his tone as detached as always. Impossible to

read.

It wasn't just about getting the size right—he didn't trust her taste, either.

Well, it was just a suit. How long could it take? She nodded. "Okay."

She hesitated, long lashes lifting as she peeked up at Rowan, unable to hide her unease.

"About what happened at the hotel—thank you."

Even though she'd managed to knock Slate out herself, if Rowan hadn't

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shown up when he did, there was no telling what Marcia might have had up her sleeve.

Besides, she'd been drugged. She might not have made it out on her own. He had saved her, though she'd cost him a suit. She could only imagine how he'd mock her for it.

Rowan leaned against his desk, silently watching her.

The girl in front of him had a delicate, heart-shaped face—probably not even as big as his hand—and striking, innocent features. Yet the slight upward tilt of her eyes gave her an air of mischief.

Still, her gaze was clear and bright. As long as she kept up the act, no one would ever notice that hint of trouble.

Rowan rested his hand casually on the desk, his long fingers tapping idly on the polished surface. “So you’re only thanking me for what happened at the hotel?”

Elissa had been unsure, but now she knew: it really had been Rowan who dealt with Slate.

She smiled faintly, pointing to her still-healing forehead. “Mr. Murphy, next time you decide to play hero on my behalf, could you leave me out of the crossfire?”

When titans clash, it’s always the little people who get hurt.

And she was definitely the little person.

Rowan couldn't help but laugh—a half-scoff, half-smile as he looked at her. “You think I did it on a whim?”

Elissa's voice was calm and cool. “Didn't you?”

All those years—no matter how much she'd begged, no matter that Slate had forced his way into her room again and again, Rowan had never spared her even a glance.

Then, out of nowhere, he'd decided to settle the score for her.

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Sure, Slate got what was coming to him, and it was satisfying—but she'd almost paid with her life.

She'd had time to think these past days. The old woman had changed her mind at the last minute and let her go. That was probably Rowan's doing, too.

Matriarch Paige Murphy couldn't do anything to her for now, but if Rowan ever turned his back on her, the old woman would collect every debt, with interest.

Rowan pressed his tongue to the inside of his cheek, looking for a moment like he might explode, then tamped it down and leaned closer, his eyes level with hers.

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“Who told you I was just acting on a whim?”

Elissa froze.

She'd always been quick-witted; she understood exactly what Rowan meant beneath the surface.

If she just played along, softened her stance, she could once again become Rowan's cherished little sister—at least for a while.

He'd shield her, just like he had during those nine years in the past.

But...

When would the next abandonment come? If she nodded now, she'd probably lose sleep every night from now on, waiting for the ax to fall.

She pressed her lips together and took a measured step back, putting some space between them. "You must be joking, Mr. Murphy."

Unbelievable. She was probably the first person in Vistapeak City daring enough to repeatedly bruise Rowan's ego.

The study fell so silent you could hear a pin drop. The air was thick with

tension.

Rowan had always known she was stubborn, but he hadn't realized she could be this unyielding.

In the past, whenever she was upset, she'd act just like this. He'd offer her an out, but she'd refuse to take it, insisting he lower his pride and coax

her.

He was the eldest son of the Murphy family—he'd never had to placate anyone. But if he didn't, she'd cry. And not just once—she'd cry on and on, until his head was pounding.

But now, she didn't even bother to cry anymore.

All that remained was her stubbornness.

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Elissa half wondered if he was silently considering the best place to

dump her body, when suddenly the man spoke. "I thought you were going to thank me. Or was that just for show?"

She blinked, momentarily thrown off. But she quickly caught his meaning. "How about... I treat you to dinner next time I'm free?"

“No need to wait for next time.”

Rowan glanced down at his watch—a piece worth as much as a

downtown apartment—and regarded her with a rare air of magnanimity. “I’ve got time now.”

He’d become so powerful that he couldn’t even be bothered to distinguish between empty pleasantries and genuine invitations.

He hadn’t always been like this, had he?

Elissa was just about to protest that she was busy. But Rowan, as if seeing straight through her intention, cut in, “Ms. Drummond, surely you weren’t just making empty promises, were you?”

Elissa felt her toes curl in embarrassment. Her scalp tingling, she forced herself to respond, “Of course not. I just... haven’t decided which restaurant would be best.”

“I know a place.”

He grabbed the suit jacket draped over the back of his chair and tossed it over his arm with practiced ease. “Let’s go.”

Elissa’s brow twitched. Resigned, she followed him downstairs.

There was no way Rowan would stoop to riding in her car. She didn’t even wait for him to suggest otherwise, simply fell in step behind him and slipped into the back seat of his Bentley.

Rowan spoke casually, almost as if making small talk. “You haven’t been

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to the lab these past couple of days?”

“Mmm.”

Elissa assumed he was checking on her progress, so she explained without thinking, “But I haven’t delayed any of the work. I’ve attended every research meeting online.”

She’d also been in constant discussion with Cliff about potential side effects of the new drug.

Cancer patients were already so fragile—she wanted to maximize the treatment’s effectiveness and minimize any side effects.

Ideally, she wanted to achieve zero side effects.

The rest of the team thought her expectations were unrealistic, but she refused to give up.

That’s what it meant to be a true doctor.

When people talked about physicians, those were the words that came to mind—she wanted to live up to them.

She wanted to have a clear conscience.

Rowan listened to her quietly. Instead of reacting like everyone else, he simply raised an eyebrow. “If you need any support from the company—funding or anything else—tell Ian. Any time.”

Elissa looked at him in surprise. “You don’t think I’m being naive?”

Rowan’s tone was cool, matter-of-fact. “It’s only money. I have more than enough for you to chase your ideals.”

Alright then.

Money talks.

But that was only to be expected. If the research succeeded, Murphy

Group would become a top global medical company, and this drug alone

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would secure its legacy for generations.

If it failed, he'd only lose a little money.

Money was the one thing he'd never lack.

Elissa was about to say something when her phone suddenly rang. As she pulled it out, a strange tension seemed to fill the car.

She answered Frank's call, her tone cool. "Hello?"

Frank's voice was warm, tinged with confusion. "Elissa, are you not home right now?"

She didn't answer directly. "Why?"

"The courier in charge of delivering your painting called me. He said he can't reach you."

Frank was always patient. “I happened to want to check in on you, so I came over to your place to sign for the painting. I’m at your front door now—when will you be back?”

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Elissa frowned. “I’m busy right now.”

Frank chuckled. “So should I just head in?”

He didn’t think much of it. Even though Elissa had moved out, she was still his wife. Once he got Marcia settled in and Elissa cooled off, everything would fall back into place—just like it always did. In his mind, it was perfectly normal for him to walk into her place alone. He only mentioned it beforehand out of politeness.

Elissa suddenly remembered she’d never changed the smart lock code after moving in. Annoyance prickled at her, and she blurted out, “No, wait—I’ll be right back.”

Ever since she left Greenwood Manor, she’d avoided entangling her daily life with Frank’s, apart from the unavoidable obligations. To her, home was a private space, somewhere only her closest people could come and go as they pleased. The thought of Frank just waltzing in unsettled her, like some boundary had been breached.

After hanging up, she glanced up guiltily—only to find Rowan watching her, perfectly composed, an amused glint in his eyes. His expression practically spelled out: Try ditching me and see what happens.

Elissa hesitated. “Could you drop me at Vistapeak Gardens first? I need to pick up a delivery.”

Rowan’s lips quirked, his tone cold and faintly mocking. “A delivery? You mean Frank?”

“He’s not a package,” Elissa shot back, exasperated.

Frank into her apartment was out of the question; the idea of

going for him” didn’t even come close. Rowan gave her a sidelong look and it dropped, turning to Evan with a chilly drawl. “Take the princess **me first**. Let her have her little lovers’ rendezvous.”

Elissa fell silent, not bothering to protest. Rowan had her pegged as

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hopelessly lovesick; unless she slapped divorce papers in his face, anything she said would just sound like excuses. Not that she could even get her hands on those papers.

Maybe Rowan just found her embarrassing. He slouched in his seat, radiating thinly veiled irritation, as though barely restraining himself.

As soon as they pulled up to Vistapeak Gardens, Elissa wasted no time bolting from the car, desperate to escape that suffocating atmosphere. Rowan watched her hurry away, his gaze darkening.

Evan, oblivious, groaned. “Boss, when do you think Miss Elissa will finally wake up? Even after what Frank did at the hotel with that other woman, she’s still running to him the moment he calls.”

“Why didn’t you ask her yourself?” Rowan snapped, voice like ice as he glared at Evan through the rearview mirror. “What am I, a mind reader?”

Clearly pissed off.

Evan fumbled for words. “I just...didn’t dare...”

He hesitated, then asked, “Are we really waiting here?”

Their boss never waited for anyone.

Rowan didn't answer. He just started tapping the center console rhythmically—one, two, three, four, five, six...

Stepping out of the elevator, Elissa spotted Frank waiting by her door. The soft evening light spilled through the hallway windows, casting a gentle glow. Frank, in a crisp white shirt with his jacket draped over his arm, looked every bit the picture of calm sophistication. When he saw her, he smiled warmly.

"That was quick. You could've taken your time—I don't mind waiting."

"I was nearby," Elissa replied.

She glanced at what he was carrying: a carefully wrapped painting under

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one arm, and a grocery bag filled with fresh ingredients in the other—meat, eggs, and vegetables. For the first time, he actually looked like a husband, not some ethereal figure

above mundane life. She'd always assumed he was detached from the ordinary, but apparently, he could shop for groceries and cook, too.

Elissa took only the painting, her tone cool. "Alright. You should go home

and cook for Marcia."

Frank didn't take offense. He just smiled gently. "You've got it wrong. I know what happened the other day upset you, so I'm here to make it up to you, okay?" He lifted the grocery bag with a flourish. "I bought all your favorites. Tonight, let me cook you a real dinner."

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Elissa was a little surprised.

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In the past, she probably would have looked flattered, grateful for any olive branch, and accepted it right away.

But now, standing in front of Frank, even pretending felt exhausting. “Frank, do you really think that just because you cooked a meal, I should let everything go? That I shouldn’t care anymore about what Marcia did to set me up the other day?”

She was certain that’s exactly what Frank thought.

He’d already bent over backwards—quite literally, for someone as proud as him. Wasn’t that enough? Of course, he expected her to be sensible and just drop it.

Frank’s hand stilled mid-motion. At first he wanted to protest, but then realized—deep down, that was exactly what he’d been thinking.

But he didn’t see anything wrong with that.

He lowered his gaze, voice gentle. “If you’d really been hurt that day, I would have stood by you. But nothing happened, right? What do you want me to do about Marcia? She just acted on impulse.”

“That doesn’t count as harm?”

Elissa rolled up her sleeve, revealing a nasty bruise on her arm. Her laugh was cold. “Or do you think I’d have to actually get raped before you consider it real damage?”

Her clear eyes were fixed on Frank, unblinking.

Frank couldn’t meet her gaze. His eyes flicked to the bruise. “Why didn’t you tell me about this at the hotel?”

“You never asked.”

Elissa’s patience snapped. Her voice was icy as she pressed him: “Did you ever ask me?”

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“...I’m sorry.”

“That’s enough.”

Elissa didn't want to argue anymore. She motioned toward the door, dismissing him. "I have things to do. You should go."

With that, she turned the key and slipped inside, planning to drop off the painting and leave.

But before she could get far, she felt Frank's shadow behind her. He wrapped his arms around her waist, his voice soft, almost coaxing. "Come on, Elissa. Marcia's already packing her things to move out."

"Once she's gone, you can come home."

Elissa froze, a chill running down her spine. She wrenched herself free, her tone crisp and cold. "Mr. Atwater, are you still not getting it?"

"I'm not moving back in. Whatever happens between you and Marcia is none of my business."

"If you need me to play the dutiful wife for the cameras, I'll do it. If another tabloid catches you two together, I'll help clear things up, as always."

“But please, don’t interfere in my life anymore. Alright?”

Frank’s brow furrowed.

How was this any different from all those fake marriages in their social circle, where everyone just kept up appearances?

Since when did Elissa start thinking this way?

He didn’t even pause before objecting. “Elissa, I never-”

Halfway through, his phone rang.

He glanced at the caller ID, then stepped outside to take it. When he returned, his expression was apologetic. “Bradley needs me for something urgent. I can’t cook tonight. Maybe another day—”

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“No need.”

Elissa cut him off immediately. “You should go. The elevator’s about to leave.”

Frank felt a pang of anxiety. “Don’t be mad, okay? I’ll just pretend I didn’t hear what you said earlier.”

“Fine. I’m not mad,” Elissa said, barely bothering to hide her indifference.

What did it matter whether he heard her or not? Soon enough, by the time spring rolled around, not even the pretense of their marriage would remain.

Frank left the building and headed for his car.

Suddenly, a sharp car horn sounded nearby.

Frank turned his head and spotted Rowan sitting in the back of a Bentley.

The last time they'd met—in that hotel—they'd left things tense over Elissa. But business was business; they couldn't avoid each other forever. Frank walked over.

“What are you doing here?”

Rowan grinned, casual as ever. “Waiting for someone.”

As one man to another, Frank immediately caught the nuance in his tone and smirked. “Waiting for your girlfriend?”

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Rowan spoke noncommittally. “What about you? Heading out already?”

“Something came up,” Frank replied.

They ran in the same circles, shared plenty of mutual friends; it was easy enough to keep things from Elissa, but not from Rowan.

So Frank decided to be honest. “My nephew’s come down with a high fever. I need to check on him.”

He handed Rowan a cigarette. “If you run into Elissa later, don’t tell her, alright? No need to get her worrying.”

Rowan took the cigarette, arching an eyebrow in easy agreement. “Sure, no problem.”

Elissa set the calligraphy scroll carelessly on the entryway cabinet. Only after she heard the elevator doors and the hallway fell silent again did she step out, taking a different elevator down.

The lobby was empty. The black Bentley was already gone from where it had been parked. She wasn’t surprised.

Patience was never Rowan’s strong suit. After she’d bailed at the last minute, it made perfect sense he wouldn’t wait around. These days, the line of people wanting to have dinner with Rowan could stretch the length of Juniper Road and then some. He had no reason to humble

himself and wait for her.

She lowered her gaze, turning to head back upstairs, when a familiar Bentley rolled up to the curb. Evan got out and opened the door for her. “Miss, there wasn’t a spot earlier, so I had to park a little farther away.”

Elissa blinked, just in time to see Rowan watching her, looking uncharacteristically upbeat. “Come on, princess. Get in. I’m starving.”

She slid into the back seat, feeling vaguely unsettled. The man who’d looked so put out when she’d gotten out of the car earlier now wore the faintest hint of a smile.

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Rowan broke the silence. “Ran into Frank, by the way.”

Elissa just said, “Mm,” her tone flat, emotionless. No disappointment, no

anger.

Rowan remembered Frank’s earlier request and his expression flickered. “He went to see his sister-in-law.”

Ian, from the driver's seat, nearly did a double-take. Wasn't Rowan supposed to keep this from Miss Atwater? Not only did he spill, he'd skipped the fake excuse and gone straight for the truth. Then again, it made sense; no one took a sick kid to the hospital alone.

Elissa didn't even twitch. "I know."

She'd never bought Frank's story anyway. What surprised her was that he was finally making the effort to lie to her—progress, in a way.

Rowan kept his tone casual, but his words cut deep. "He looked pretty desperate to leave. Nearly broke the speed limit getting out of here."

Elissa frowned at him. "Mr. Murphy, what are you trying to say?"

Was he mocking her for her failed marriage? Or was he judging her because her husband could be summoned away by some mistress at a moment's notice, making her look like a fool?

Rowan regarded her with an odd look. "I'm just surprised, that's all. You're taking this remarkably well."

He meant her tolerance for being cheated on.

Elissa caught the implication and gave a lazy, defiant smile. “Frank and I do our own thing now.”

Rowan’s brow shot up, his voice suddenly edged with cold. “What did you say?”

She met his gaze, face unreadable as she lied through her teeth. “I said, we have an open marriage.”

Rowan let out a low, disbelieving laugh, lounging back and watching her

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intently. “Oh, really? And how exactly does that work?”

She faltered, fingers tightening in her lap as she looked away from his sharp gaze. “It means... we each do what we want.”

“Oh?” He leaned in, bracing one arm beside her on the seat, his *tone* somewhere between teasing and challenge. “So who are you planning to ‘do what you want’ with?”

“I... I haven’t decided yet,” she stammered, chin raised in defiance.

The Atwater family was the textbook definition of double standards—her husband could have his fun, but the moment she even thought about it, they’d have her buried before she made it through the bedroom door. Not that she had the time or inclination; her mind was on the project. If she could pull it off, Matriarch Paige Murphy wouldn’t dare treat her the way

she had before.

By now, dusk had settled. Streetlights cast a soft, golden glow through the windows, painting the inside of the car in warm shadow. Elissa couldn’t read Rowan’s expression in the dim light, but his voice was low and meaningful. “Well, whenever you decide, let me know.”

Something about the way he said it made her heart skip a beat.

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Elissa couldn’t quite read his intentions and shrank back a little. “Are you planning to set me up with someone, Mr. Murphy?”

Rowan's broad shoulders nearly engulfed her as he leaned in, his tone coaxing, "Well, I could. What are you looking for?"

She hesitated, caught off guard by her own words. If she backed out now, Rowan would only tease her more, so Elissa straightened up and tried to sound serious as she thought over her answer.

Her old type had always been someone like Frank—refined, gentle, the textbook gentleman.

But now? That was exactly what she wanted to avoid.

She couldn't quite put her finger on what she actually wanted, but she knew for certain what she didn't. "Just... not the refined, gentle, well-mannered sort. Actually, the complete opposite would be better. And he shouldn't be the kind of guy who's intimidated by the Atwater family."

Evan grinned from the front seat. "Miss Elissa, if you want the opposite of gentle and refined, you're basically asking for someone cold,

sharp-tongued, and unapologetically bold."

He chuckled, glancing at her in the rearview mirror. “You sure you’re not just describing your brother? In all of Vistapeak, he’s probably the only one who isn’t afraid of the Atwater family’s name.”

Elissa froze, her mind going blank for a moment.

He wasn’t wrong.

What was the difference between this and just reading off Rowan’s ID?

But where would she get the nerve to mess around with Rowan?

The car cruised steadily down the street, city lights flickering across Rowan’s face as he leaned in even closer, his eyes narrowing as if to ask

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when she’d grown so daring.

Elissa’s heart

Rowan's low, toned in her chest, and just as she opened her mouth,

Rowan's low, teasing voice drifted down, "So, it's not enough to want an open marriage—you're after a forbidden relationship now too?"

A nine-year sibling bond—yes, that was about as forbidden as it got.

Since childhood, that subtle, familiar scent had always lingered around him, and now it seemed to press in on her from every direction, making her painfully aware of how out-of-bounds these thoughts were.

Her cheeks burned, even her ears felt hot. She shoved Rowan back into his seat, flustered. "Get over yourself. Even if I wanted a forbidden relationship, I'd never dare with you."

Rowan's lips twitched with the barest hint of a smile, but when he met her gaze again, his expression was cool and detached, just as usual. "There's no shortage of people who want me. Get in line."

Elissa couldn't believe how conceited he was. She was so embarrassed she wished the ground would swallow her up. Desperate to change the subject, she glanced at Evan. "Slate, are we almost at the restaurant?"

"Next corner," Evan replied.

As soon as she stepped out of the car, the brisk night air cooled her flushed cheeks, and the tension finally eased from her shoulders.

Rowan had brought her to a classic, old-school restaurant—one of Vistapeak City’s most prestigious. Its reputation wasn’t just about the food but the exclusivity; dining here was a statement. Ordinary folks couldn’t get a reservation without booking months in advance.

The last time Elissa had been here, it was with Rowan too.

It was his twentieth birthday. Elissa had scraped together her own money to treat him and his friends to a feast.

After dinner, his friends tried to shoo her home, saying the next round wasn’t suitable for little sisters. Rowan had just taken her hand and shot them down. “Go have your fun. I have to take her to her lesson.”

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She’d had tutoring that evening.

Back then, Rowan never once missed picking her up or dropping her off.

How quickly time passed. In the blink of an eye, ten years had gone by.

Rowan paused in the entryway and glanced back at her. “Is this place too pricey for you?”

Elissa snapped back to the present and shook off the memories, catching up in a few brisk steps. “I’m not that stingy.”

The restaurant had been remodeled in the last couple of years, all sleek lines and modern touches—no trace of its old self remained.

The owner hadn’t changed, though. He personally led them to a private dining room.

“You order,” Elissa said, sliding the menu—filled with seasonal prices across to Rowan.

He didn’t stand on ceremony. Without even looking at the menu, he rattled off a list of dishes, clearly a regular.

When he finished, the owner raised an eyebrow. “No stuffed bitter melon tonight?”

Rowan nodded toward Elissa and replied in his calm, understated way, “She doesn’t eat it.”

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Chapter 139

Elissa paused for a moment as she rinsed the cutlery.

She hadn’t expected him to remember something so trivial.

A gentle warmth flickered through her chest, leaving a faint, lingering ache.

“Mr. Murphy.”

A composed female voice floated in from the half-open doorway. Lorraine stepped inside, flashing a polite smile when she saw Elissa. “Elissa.”

Elissa quickly regained her composure, smoothing away any trace of emotion. “Secretary Lynn.”

Lorraine walked over to the seat beside Rowan, her tone light and friendly. “Mind if I join you for dinner?”

Elissa smiled. “Not at all.”

The way these two could dine so comfortably in private—especially after Rowan had publicly denied being single last time, and Lorraine had been so eager to find out his likes and dislikes—reminded her of those romantic subplots in novels, where both sides are quietly pining but

neither has confessed.

She was just an outsider; what say did she have?

Rowan’s deep, hooded gaze caught the cool indifference on her face. His brow creased slightly as he turned to Lorraine. “What brings you here?”

Elissa blinked, surprised. Wasn't she here at his invitation?

"A friend mentioned they saw you here," Lorraine explained as she sat down. "I thought you might be stuck at a business dinner, so I came to rescue you from the endless toasts."

"And now you see I'm not?" Rowan leaned back in his chair, his dark eyes unreadable. "You won't be needed for that. You can go."

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The tension became palpable, even Elissa could feel it.

Lorraine's smile faltered. "I..."

"Mr. Murphy—" Elissa, unsure what strange turn this dinner had taken, remembered she was the host and spoke up, "We ordered enough food for an army. One more guest won't make a difference."

Rowan's expression grew colder. He shot her a look and said, "Aren't you generous?"

His words seemed to carry an unspoken meaning.

Before Elissa could puzzle it out, Lorraine sent her a grateful smile, and she could only respond in kind.

The rest of the meal was an exercise in discomfort; Rowan's mood never improved, and Elissa found herself wishing she could disappear.

After they left the restaurant, Rowan glanced down at her, his tone dry and mocking. "Well, Miss Sinclair, anything else you'd like me to do? Should I chauffeur Secretary Lynn home for you?"

Elissa nearly choked. "...No, that's not necessary."

"Oh, come on, Rowan. Don't give Elissa a hard time." Lorraine didn't seem to mind his coldness. She smiled at Elissa. "Thank you for dinner—I'll head out now."

With that, she strolled over to a nearby limited-edition sports car.

Most secretaries could work a lifetime and never afford a car like that.

Elissa couldn't help but glance at Rowan in surprise. Rowan snorted, "What are you looking at me for? It's not like I gave it to her."

"Oh. Right." Elissa replied, then immediately felt how strange the exchange was.

She sounded like a jealous girlfriend, questioning whether he'd given another woman an expensive gift—and Rowan, of all people, actually explained himself.

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The awkwardness lingered as they drove back to Rivercross Residence, where Elissa finally retrieved her own car.

Rex was sprawled on the couch, looking bored out of his mind. When he heard the cars outside, he slid his feet into a pair of leather slippers and ambled out, grinning knowingly. "Well, well, Ian said you were having dinner with your favorite little sister."

Elissa, who was just about to close her car door, froze for a second. That odd feeling from earlier came rushing back, and she instinctively glanced in Rex's direction.

Rex finally noticed she'd come back with Rowan. Under Rowan's withering stare, he forced a casual smile. "Hey, little Elissa, your brother didn't bully you tonight, did he?"

"No." Elissa saw that he seemed perfectly normal, and wondered if she was just overthinking things. She pressed her lips together. "Rex, I'll head home."

"Alright," Rex let out a sigh of relief and waved her off. "Drive safe!"

As the white Mercedes pulled out and disappeared down the street, Rex patted his chest with a dramatic sigh of relief.

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"You brought your sister back with you and didn't even give me a

heads-up?"

Rowan sat stone-faced. "Since when did you get so tactless with your mouth?"

He dropped onto the sofa, lit a cigar, and every movement radiated a kind of simmering aggression.

After all these years as friends, Rex knew the drill. He sat across from Rowan, a knowing look on his face. “Rough dinner?”

Rowan scoffed. “Lorraine showed up.”

“What was she doing there?”

“She joined us for dinner.”

“So, little Elissa’s upset now?”

Rex assumed Rowan and Elissa had argued—nothing new—but Rowan’s voice was cold, almost indifferent. “Upset? She can call Lorraine ‘sister-in-law’ whenever she wants.”

“Like hell she would.”

Rex grinned, twisting the knife. “She barely acknowledges you as her brother these days.”

Rowan shot him a sidelong glance. “Whose side are you on?”

“Yours, obviously.”

Rex wandered over to the liquor cabinet, leisurely selecting a bottle of Macallan. “But honestly, with your attitude, little Elissa will remarry before you ever sort things out.”

“You think I care?”

“Of course, you don’t,” Rex said, voice dripping with sarcasm.

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He poured two fingers of whiskey into a square glass and slid it across the table. “But when Elissa was dead set on marrying Frank all those years ago, who drank himself into the hospital with a bleeding ulcer?”

The room fell so quiet you could hear the clock ticking.

Rowan's eyes dropped, and for the first time, his voice wavered. "You think... back then..."

"You did what you had to," Rex said simply. "Given the circumstances, you weren't even sure you'd survive yourself. Cutting her off was the right call."

He raised his glass, clinking it lightly against Rowan's. "But Elissa loving Frank wasn't wrong either. If you can't move past that, you and she will only keep drifting further apart."

—

A couple of days later, Hayley called Elissa to let her know the replica of the Jade Pendant was finished and ready for pickup.

Before her shift at the clinic, Elissa stopped by Hayley's studio.

Hayley, ever the night owl, was still awake when Elissa arrived. She dropped both pendants into Elissa's palm. "Guess which one's yours?"

Elissa glanced down and noticed Hayley had even aged them to match—right down to the identical gleam of the chains.

But Elissa didn't hesitate. She pointed to the one in her right hand. "This

one."

"How'd you know?" Hayley was genuinely surprised.

Elissa smiled. "Just a gut feeling."

Picking up the pendant took longer than she'd planned. By the time Elissa got to the clinic, she was slipping into the exam room right on time.

One of the nurses teased her as she changed into her lab coat. "First time in years you've cut it this close, Elissa."

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"Really?" Elissa chuckled, then called the first patient.

Time flew by. Just as her last patient left around noon, the exam room door burst open with a bang.

“Elissa, where’s my pendant?!”

It was Marcia.

Elissa looked up, arching a brow. “Your pendant?”

“Don’t play dumb.”

Marcia marched over, snatched up Elissa’s bag, and started rifling through it like her life depended on whatever she thought Elissa had taken.

Without a word, Elissa opened her right-hand drawer and pulled out the Jade Pendant. “Looking for this?”

Marcia snatched it from her, threw it into her own purse, and glared. “How did you convince Frank to give you this?”

“I just told him...” Elissa’s lips curled into a slow smile. “I liked it, so he handed it over. Said I could borrow it for a few days.”

Marcia’s voice was tight with fury. “Impossible. He’s always valued this pendant more than he values me-”

“More than you?” Elissa interrupted, her tone light but her gaze steady. “Are you sure this pendant even belongs to you?”

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