

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator

Chapter 141

Marcia froze, her movements abruptly halting as she fought to steady her trembling emotions. “What are you trying to say?”

This bitch—could she possibly know something?

Back then, she’d dropped out of high school, with no hope of ever making it to college. Most days, she hung around with a rough crowd, never knowing where her next meal would come from.

It was Frank who recognized her—or rather, recognized the jade pendant hanging around her neck.

That moment turned her entire world upside down.

Suddenly, she was treated like royalty.

Frank doted on her. At the slightest hint of tears in her eyes, the golden boy born with a silver spoon would bend over backward to make her

smile.

She knew, no matter what she did, Frank would always forgive her—his loyalty had no limits.

So, she married his older brother, Spencer.

If she stayed with Frank, she'd only ever claim half of the Atwater family's wealth. But with Spencer... that was a different story.

That way, every last bit of the Atwater fortune—Frank's, Spencer's—would

be hers.

But then Spencer's sudden death forced her to change her plans.

And now, Frank's affection wasn't what it used to be.

If Elissa really knew something...

Marcia's body tensed, her gaze sharpening despite herself.

Elissa caught every subtle shift in her expression, a knowing smile

tugging at her lips as she spoke, her words slicing through Marcia's,

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you.”

If Elissa had been mostly sure before, now she was certain.

Marcia was, without a doubt, the same girl who used to bully her in the orphanage all those years ago.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about!” Marcia snapped, voice quivering with emotion, her jaw clenched tight. “I’ve worn this pendant since I was a child. You have no proof it isn’t mine!”

“Proof...” Elissa leaned back, exuding a calm confidence that made her seem far superior even from her seat. “Isn’t your anger proof enough?”

“Who’s angry?” Marcia shot back, forcing down her agitation. The thought that Elissa might actually know something sent another wave of panic through her. “What makes you think this pendant isn’t mine? What could you possibly know?”

Everything she had now—every luxury, every door opened—she owed to the path Frank had paved for her.

And she knew all too well: Frank had only helped her because of this pendant.

Because he’d mistaken her for someone else.

To this day, she still didn’t know exactly what kind of connection there was between that prissy little princess from the orphanage and Frank.

She'd stolen the pendant in secret back then; no one had seen her do it.

So how could Elissa know?

Could she have known that girl...?

The more she thought about it, the more rattled Marcia became.

Elissa watched her spiral and couldn't help but find it odd. "It's just a piece of jewelry. It's not like you'd go to prison for taking it. Why are you so nervous?"

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Something didn't add up. It had been years—there was *no* way to find proof now, and even if Marcia had stolen it, Frank would still protect her.

So what was Marcia so afraid of?

Realization dawned on Marcia as well. As long as Frank never found out, what did she have to worry about?

She drew a deep breath, forcing her voice to steady. “Why would I be scared? I just can’t stand being accused of something I didn’t do. Isn’t what you’re saying basically calling me a thief?”

Elissa’s tone was cool, almost indifferent. “You didn’t mind being the other woman. Why be so afraid of being called a thief?”

Marcia choked on her retort, then let out a derisive laugh. “You’re just mad because you can’t win your own husband’s heart. Looks like you’re the one who’s really losing it.”

“You’re right,” Elissa replied lightly, unconcerned. She grabbed her purse and stood to leave.

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Marcia felt as if she'd punched a pillow—Elissa's airy indifference left her fuming, stomping her foot in frustration.

But when she glanced down and saw the jade pendant tossed into her purse, she quickly regained her composure.

She couldn't just sit back and wait for things to happen.

That jade pendant alone wasn't enough—she needed another card up her sleeve, and soon.

Elissa strode toward the parking lot, fingers curled tightly around the pendant in her coat pocket. The familiar weight steadied her heart.

The one she'd handed to Marcia was a replica, commissioned from Hayley.

She'd kept the original.

Now, at last, it was back where it belonged.

Holding the only thing her parents had left her filled Elissa with a quiet satisfaction. She was just about to get into her car when a large hand pressed down on the door, stopping her.

The hand was broad, with long, clean fingers—smooth and pale like

carved marble.

Elissa didn't even have to look up to know whose hand it was.

Annoyance flickered across her face as she licked her lips. "I already gave the pendant back to Marcia. What more do you want?"

Her gaze stayed downcast, as if she couldn't even be bothered to look at

him.

Once upon a time, she'd always looked at him directly, her eyes bright and full of laughter. Now, it was like she'd become someone else entirely.

Frank had no idea how things had come to this between them.

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But one thing he was sure of: she would always be his wife, and he had enough patience to win her back.

His voice was gentle. “That’s not why I’m here.”

“I overheard some of what you said to Marcia...” He hesitated. “Did you tell her the pendant wasn’t really hers?”

“That’s right.”

Elissa finally turned her head to look at him, her tone unwavering. “I saw that pendant when I was a child, but it wasn’t on Marcia.”

Frank's eyes widened, and he grabbed her arm. "Are you sure?"

His grip was tight, more intense than usual.

"Why would I lie?" she shot back, frowning. "What would I get out of it?"

"I'm not saying you're lying..." Frank tried to keep his voice calm. After everything that had happened lately, he understood why she might not trust him. "I just wondered if you might be mistaken. Those pendants all look pretty similar."

Even now, he was still looking for excuses for Marcia.

Elissa gave a soft, almost mocking laugh. "Frank, what are you really trying to say?"

"I..." Frank glanced over toward the clinic entrance, his expression clouded. He looked back at her. "Where exactly did you see it when you were little?"

"On a friend," Elissa replied.

She didn't mention that the friend was herself.

With Frank's history of favoritism, he'd only think she was picking a fight

with Marcia because of what happened at the hotel.

Frank's brow furrowed. "Where did you see it?"

"At Cresthaven."

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The moment she said those three words, Frank's hand trembled where it gripped her arm.

Elissa winced, trying to pull away, but his grasp was too strong.

"Where in Cresthaven?" he pressed.

“The orphanage on Pine Hill.”

She spoke with little patience. “Can you let go of me now?”

Frank seemed frozen, his usually steady eyes distant and unfocused.

“Frank?” Elissa prompted.

“...Sorry.” He snapped out of it, releasing her arm. His lips parted, his voice unsteady. “Can you tell me your friend’s name?”

“Little Nine.”

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The moment Elissa finished speaking, she saw a brutal edge flash across Frank’s face. His eyes narrowed, every line of his jaw taut with

suppressed violence.

He stared her down, voice low and hard. “You’re certain—you’re not mistaken?”

Elissa had never seen him look at her like that. Instinctively, she shrank back until her shoulders pressed against the car door.

“I’m sure. Absolutely.”

The hand Frank planted on the door tightened, knuckles whitening as the veins stood out.

He fought to keep his temper in check. “Then... do you and this friend of yours still keep in touch?”

He didn’t really expect much. After three years of marriage—and knowing Elissa even longer—he’d practically never seen her with any friends her own age besides Tanya Foster.

But Tanya was a Vistapeak City native.

Elissa couldn’t figure out what he was getting at, so she just said, “No, we’ve lost contact.”

She tugged on the car door. "I have things to do. Let me out, please."

"...Fine."

Frank slowly released his grip. He waited until her car disappeared down the street before his face darkened. Pulling out his phone, he dialed a number.

"Bernard, get me the records from Pine Hill Orphanage for that year."

"All of them?" Bernard sounded surprised.

Frank's gaze sharpened. "Just the children who were about a year older or

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younger than Marcia."

“Sir, I’m already working on that,” Bernard replied. “I’ve combed through the orphanage records from back then; there weren’t many kids close to Ms. Carson’s age. Even fewer who fit the criteria you gave me. But there was one little girl who matches—local to Cresthaven, five years old. Before the police brought her to the orphanage, she lived near Moonlake Park...”

Frank cut him off. “Moonlake Park?”

“Yes, that’s right.” Bernard hesitated, then continued, “But her situation was unusual. I found out through some contacts that she was the orphaned child of narcotics officers—both parents killed in the line of duty. When she was brought to the orphanage, the police changed her name completely to protect her from possible retaliation by criminal gangs. There’s no trace of her original name anywhere.”

Frank felt a vein throb at his temple. “Where is she now?”

“No idea yet,” Bernard admitted. “She was adopted just two months after arriving. I tried to follow the trail based on the adoptive family’s info, but I’ve hit a dead end.”

Frank’s frustration boiled over. He slammed his fist into the side of the car, leaving a dent.

Bernard’s voice was still coming through the phone, but Frank’s mind had drifted far from the conversation.

Twenty years ago, he'd been ten, visiting his grandfather's house in Cresthaven with his parents for New Year's.

But snow had made the roads slick, and just outside Moonlake Park, a

truck skidded across the center line, crushing the driver's side of their

car.

His father died instantly. His mother was left unconscious. Frank, banged up in the back seat, was terrified and helpless—until a little girl tugged a policeman by the hand and ran over.

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“Daddy, Daddy, please help this boy...”

The officer pulled Frank out first, then called for backup.

Frank sat on the curb, numb, watching as they hauled his father's body from the wreckage. The same small hands that had tugged the officer over now gently covered his eyes.

"It's okay," she whispered. "Don't be scared."

Later, while his mother recovered in the hospital, the girl and her father visited them several times. The last time Frank saw her was the day his mother was transferred back to Vistapeak City.

The little girl cried her heart out, chubby hands wiping at her tears as she tried to act brave. "You have to come find Little Nine and play with me, okay? Promise!"

How could he forget?

Frank slammed his fist onto the car again, eyes burning.

If Marcia isn't her...

He couldn't bear to finish the thought, couldn't imagine what he might do.

His fist clenched so tightly his knuckles cracked, and just then, the sharp click of heels echoed behind him.

Marcia, mind still reeling from what Elissa had told her, forced a calm she didn't feel as she walked up quietly. She poked Frank's back and gave a half-hearted little huff. "Well, look at that. Haven't picked me up from work in ages. You're really pulling out all the stops today."

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"Yeah."

When Frank turned back, the shadows had vanished from his eyes. "You're done for the day?"

"Uh-huh."

Marcia slipped her arms around his, leaning into him with a playful pout. "I'm exhausted. Mr. Garcia's patients were swarming all morning."

Working under William did have its perks—she was learning a lot, but it was a grind.

She honestly had no idea how Elissa managed to handle that many patients on her own day after day. How did the woman not collapse?

Then again, people get what they deserve.

They weren't the same.

Frank studied her quietly, his gaze unreadable. "Did you get the jade pendant from Elissa?"

"Got it!" Marcia beamed, tugging him toward the car. She muttered as she went, "No idea what her problem is—maybe she's still holding a grudge about what happened at the hotel. She flat-out claimed the pendant

wasn't mine."

"Seriously, what's wrong with her?"

She worried that Elissa would eventually catch on and run straight to Frank with the truth. Better to plant a seed now and get ahead of it.

Little did she know, Elissa was always one step ahead.

Frank paused for a split second, then smiled softly, his tone gentle. “Hey, Marcia, do you remember which hospital my dad was admitted to all those years ago?”

Marcia froze, then let out a laugh. “Wasn’t it your mom who was in the

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hospital back then?”

She’d heard the story from the housekeeper. Frank’s father had died instantly in a car accident. Carmela, his mother, had spent a long time recovering in the hospital.

Pressing her nails into her palm, Marcia feigned concentration, tilting her head as if trying to recall. “But honestly, it’s been so many years—I couldn’t tell you which hospital it was.”

That afternoon, Elissa headed to the lab as usual.

But when she ran out of a rare ingredient, she wrapped up early and went

home.

On her way, Tanya Foster called. “Oh, honey, I almost forgot! The realtor called about your other place. It got rented out yesterday.”

After the divorce, Elissa had ended up with two apartments in Vistapeak Gardens—one she lived in, and the other directly across the hall. It was a two-units-per-floor design, so they rarely crossed paths with neighbors.

Elissa had asked the agency to rent out the spare place as soon as she’d moved in. But with its prime location and huge floor plan, the rent was steep, and she’d only allow full-apartment leases. So far, no takers.

Elissa was surprised. “That was fast.”

“Right?” Tanya was driving home herself. “Agent said the renter was super decisive—didn’t even check out the place in person. Just heard the apartment number and signed.”

‘...They’re normal, right?’

Tanya hesitated. “Well, I hope so. Agent said they thought the number was... lucky,”

Unit 2202, Building 2.

What was so lucky about that? Who even thinks like that?

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Elissa got her answer soon enough. She took the elevator up, and as the doors slid open she saw the apartment across the hall wide open.

The entryway and elevator landing were crowded with expensive

furniture.

Even the mattress looked like it cost a fortune—seven figures, easy.

Elissa's mouth twitched. How did she, of all people, end up as a landlord to someone with this much money?

Just then, a dog bounded out of the apartment, tail wagging.

It spotted her and froze, jet-black eyes fixed on her.

Elissa stared back.

It was a border collie, its markings uncannily like a blown-up version of

Max.

The dog made the first move, darting over excitedly and leaping up to plant its front paws on her. It sniffed her eagerly, nose working overtime.

Exactly like Max used to greet her when she got home from school.

Elissa was caught off guard by the wave of nostalgia. She knelt down, rubbing the dog's head. "Hey, little guy. Did you mistake me for your

owner?"

"Max, get back here!"

A familiar voice called out. Rowan strolled out, one hand in his pocket, his tone casual and teasing. It was hard to tell if he was talking to the puppy or to her. "Didn't you hear her? She says you've got the wrong person. Guess your mom's done with you."

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Max.

Elissa jolted, looking up at Rowan in surprise. "What did you just call him? Did you say his name is Max too?"

Rowan walked over, meaning to ruffle the dog's head, but the dog burrowed even deeper into Elissa's arms, completely ignoring him.

Ungrateful little thing.

He gave a wry half-smile, his tone casual. “Yeah, he’s Max.”

“Really?”

Crouched on the floor, Elissa’s eyes lit up instantly. The last rays of winter sunlight washed over her, making her seem to glow from within.

Deep dimples framed her brilliant grin; she looked so alive, so radiant.

Rowan had meant to tease her—the words were already on his lips—but seeing her like this, he let it go.

He nodded slightly. “When have I ever lied to you?”

And that stubborn girl, for all her resolve, suddenly had tears welling up and spilling down her cheeks.

Because Rowan truly never had lied to her.

She hugged the dog tighter, burying her face in his fur, then pulled back and looked at him, half-laughing, half-crying. “Max, is it really you?”

“Woof!”

“Max?”

“Woof!”

Her joy was irrepressible. Elissa looked up at Rowan, her eyes crinkling into crescent moons. For a moment, she forgot all about the grievances she once harbored, eager only to share her happiness. “Rowan, he still

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remembers me!”

She was beautiful, her features delicate, but in that moment, smiling like this, she was dazzling, vibrant—no hint of the hardships she'd endured.

It was as if she'd always been that sheltered, pampered girl he remembered.

Rowan's gaze lingered on her soft, pink lips. His Adam's apple bobbed. The rimless glasses on his nose did a fine job of masking the storm in his eyes. "And what did you just call me?"

Elissa, still giddy with happiness, snapped back to herself. "Mr. Murphy."

Rowan didn't respond.

Not what he wanted.

Every time in the past, whenever she'd called him by his full name, he only had to remind her, and she'd stubbornly—but sweetly—call him "brother."

But Elissa's attention was all on the dog, missing the subtle shift in him. Her voice was still thick with emotion. "Back then, Butler Murphy told me

Max-”

“Ian saved him,” Rowan interjected smoothly, then beckoned to the dog. “Max, come on. Time to go home.”

Only then did Elissa realize with a start—her new tenant was Rowan.

She jumped to her feet, licking her lips, her voice full of disbelief. “Mr. Murphy, you... you moved in here?”

“Mm.”

Rowan glanced at the apartment across the hallway, lifting a brow as if the realization had just struck him. “You’re living right across from me?”

“That’s right.”

After years of being beneath his thumb, Elissa finally felt a little like the

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tables had turned. She grinned and reminded him, “I’m still your landlord, you know.”

“Good.”

Rowan nodded thoughtfully. “So if there’s ever a problem with the apartment, I’ll be sure to come find you.”

Elissa regretted speaking up. As she watched Rowan about to head inside with the dog, she blurted out, a little sheepishly, “Max... he’s mine, isn’t he?”

Rowan didn’t deny it. He just fixed his eyes on her, his tone slow and even. “So, after all these years of me taking care of him for you—how do you plan to thank me?”

Elissa froze.

She didn’t have much to offer—and whatever she could give, Rowan didn’t

need.

She squeezed her palm and asked bluntly, “Well, what do you want?”

As long as it wasn’t something insane, she’d do anything for Max.

“I’ll have to think about it.”

As he watched her brace herself like she was walking to the gallows, Rowan’s eyes flickered. Taking advantage of his height, he took two long strides forward, cornering her gently against the wall.

He leaned in slightly, and his gaze, sharp and intent, flicked briefly to her lips. The urge to touch her was almost overwhelming.

A subtle scent of sandalwood enveloped her, making Elissa inexplicably

nervous.

She turned her face aside, mumbling, “Well, have you thought of something or not? If not, then-”

Her tone, usually cool and distant, now carried a hint of flustered

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irritation. Her cheeks flushed a rosy pink.

Rowan’s throat worked as he swallowed. “Yeah, I’ve thought of something.”

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“Go ahead.”

The man hesitated, falling silent for a moment before speaking. His voice sounded rough, like gravel scraping against steel. “You could consider paying me back with your-”

“Babe, I’m home!”

elevator doors slid open with a chime, and Tanya Foster stepped out, purse in one hand and a takeout bag of spicy food in the other.

She barely got the words out before her voice cut off, like a duck being grabbed by the neck.

Elissa startled, snapping upright as she looked at Rowan. “What did you just say?”

“Nothing.”

Rowan’s tone was neutral. He glanced at Tanya, then took a step back and called the dog to follow him inside.

Tanya clapped a hand over her mouth, shooting Elissa a look: What on

earth was that?

“What do you mean, what was that?”

Elissa grabbed Tanya's hand, dragging her inside.

Tanya replayed Rowan's look in her mind and shook her head. "There's no way that was 'nothing.' The way he looked at me just now—he looked like he wanted to kill me."

"What did he say to you?" she pressed.

"He never finished. You walked in before he got the chance."

Elissa took the takeout bag from her and began unpacking dinner on the table.

Rowan's voice had been so low she hadn't really caught any of it, but

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whatever it was, she doubted it was anything good.

The next day was Saturday—no shifts at the clinic, and the lab was empty. Elissa decided to pull an all-nighter, retracing her research from scratch to look for a breakthrough. The more she thought, the more awake she became. By the time the sun was high, she finally dragged herself off her chair, dizzy and lightheaded, and collapsed into bed.

Somewhere between sleep and waking, her phone buzzed on the nightstand. She groped for it, barely able to pry her eyes open, not even checking the caller ID. “Hello?”

“When are you replacing my suit?”

The man’s voice on the other end was cold and curt, like a debt collector.

Elissa roused a bit, but exhaustion dragged her back under. “Tonight, okay? I’m going back to sleep.”

She didn’t say another word.

Rowan was about to hang up when he heard her breathing—soft, even, fading into sleep.

His finger hovered over the hang-up button, then paused. He lowered his hand, his long lashes veiling whatever shadows flickered in his eyes.

He moved quietly to the living room, slipped on a pair of headphones, and returned to his study to work.

He lost track of time. At some point, the doorbell rang.

Almost reflexively, Rowan muted the call on his phone before getting up to answer the door. He frowned when he saw who it was. “What are you doing here?”

Rex brushed past him. “Your line’s been busy all morning. I had no choice

but to come over.”

“What do you want?”

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Rowan flopped onto the couch, legs crossed, looking every bit the disgruntled host.

Rex eyed him but didn't get to the point. "What's up? Hiding a girlfriend already?"

"Yeah, right. Hiding your own sister, more like."

"Funny, but you really do want to hide your sister."

Rex leaned on the doorframe, peering into the wide-open, obviously empty bedroom, and shook his head. "Too bad—your sister doesn't want to be hidden."

Rowan shot him a withering look. "With gossip like that, you'd make a great tabloid reporter."

Rex grinned. "My old man would break my legs if I tried a stunt like that."

The Wilkinsons were legendary for their strict family values. His grandfather was a big name in the military, his uncles all in government. Even letting him go into medicine was a stretch—no way he'd survive any wild career moves.

Through his headphones, Rowan could hear the faint sound of a girl shifting in her sleep.

His face softened slightly. “So, what did you actually come for?”

“Housewarming.”

Without waiting for an invitation, Rex picked out some coffee beans and started the espresso machine. “Bradley and the rest heard you moved in. They’re insisting on coming over tonight.”

“Not happening,” Rowan replied without missing a beat.

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Rex looked intrigued. “Why not this week?”

“Next week,” Rowan replied, dodging the question.

He still owed Bradley a favor over that fountain pen—he had to show

some respect.

“Frank will probably show up too,” Rex reminded him.

“Good,” Rowan said simply.

He listened to the steady, even breathing in his headphones and glanced toward his front door. His eyes were dark and unreadable—there was something deeper there.

Now, between him and her, only this door remained.

Rex picked up on the undertone in Rowan’s voice and chuckled. “Aren’t you worried Frank will see right through you?”

Even as he asked, he realized it was a pointless question.

When had Rowan ever cared what others thought?

Sure enough, Rowan didn't even bother answering. He glanced at his

watch and stood up. "That's all, right? You can see yourself out."

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Rex clicked his tongue but didn't budge. "What's up with you tonight, anyway?"

The more secretive Rowan was, the more suspicious it seemed.

Rowan couldn't be bothered. He strode off to the bathroom, long legs eating up the distance.

Left alone, Rex ruffled the dog's head. "Max, be a pal and tell your uncle what your dad's up to, huh?"

Since when did he and Rowan start keeping secrets from each other?

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But Max was fiercely loyal, and wouldn't let Rex touch his head for long. With a shake, he pulled away and padded over to his bed by the window, sprawling out without a care.

"You little traitor..."

By the time Rowan came out of the shower, dressed and ready, Rex finally figured out what was off.

He stared. "How did you manage to get your little sister to agree to go out with you so quickly?"

Usually, Rowan was all about those tailored three-piece suits, hair perfectly styled, every detail immaculate.

But tonight, he was in casual clothes for once, hair artfully tousled, and even his watch was different.

A man in his thirties, but he'd styled himself more like a college kid.

Clearly trying to close the gap between their ages.

Rowan caught Rex's eye, raising an eyebrow. "Who said it was a date?"

Not a date, technically. But the girl in question was definitely his little

sister.

Rex grinned. "Oh, so what is it, then? Father-daughter bonding?"

"Screw off," Rowan shot back with a laugh. "She's taking me shopping."

"Shopping? Who's buying for who?"

Rowan straightened his jacket, his eyes flashing with amusement. “Obviously, she’s buying for me.”

Rex looked at him in disbelief. “Weren’t you obsessively germophobic? Since when do you buy clothes out in public?”

Young Master Murphy’s wardrobe had always been custom or designer, everything washed and sanitized before even coming near his skin.

“Mind your own business.”

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Rowan grabbed a jacket and, instead of kicking Rex out, tossed him a

task. “I’m heading out. Since you’ve got nothing better *to* do, take Max for a walk—half an hour, minimum.”

Before Rex could protest, the door slammed shut.

Traitor. Chasing after a girl and leaving your friends behind!

Elissa was half-asleep when the doorbell started ringing nonstop.

She threw the covers over her head and pressed her ears shut.

“Ellie, it’s almost six,” came a deep, clear voice from the hall.

She instinctively grumbled, “I don’t care what time it is, I’m not getting up...”

Mid-sentence, she jolted upright.

Wait. That’s not right.

This wasn’t eight years ago.

Back then, she was terrible about getting up—no alarm could budge her, and Rowan was always the one to drag her out of bed. He’d show up

looking half-asleep himself, toothpaste already lining up her toothbrush, cup of water in hand.

She'd be grumpy about it, but there was always a bit of fear mixed in—so she'd scrub her teeth angrily, but obediently.

Every time, Rowan would say, “If you don't want your teeth, I'll have them all pulled out for you. That way, you can sleep in for two extra minutes.”

He was always sharp-tongued.

Elissa shook off the memory and grabbed her phone, blinking at the seven-hour call duration on the screen.

She needed a minute to make sense of it. Then she remembered what she'd promised before falling asleep.

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Clearing her throat, she mumbled, “I-I slept like a rock. Give me a

second.”

She hung up, rushed to wash up and get dressed.

Opening the door, she found Rowan leaning lazily against the wall. When he saw her, he straightened, his tone as dry as ever. “I thought you’d skip out just to save a few bucks.”

“...Please. I can afford a suit,” Elissa replied, shrugging on her coat as she stepped out.

“Then let’s go.”

As Rowan pressed the elevator button, Elissa slipped on her jacket and stood beside him, waiting. For a fleeting moment, they looked just like a married couple heading out together.

The elevator arrived quickly. Inside was a young couple—the girl snuggled in the guy’s arms, his hand resting on her waist. When Rowan and Elissa entered, the guy smiled sheepishly but didn’t move.

They looked every bit the newlyweds.

Rowan stepped in first, and as he turned, his eyes briefly lingered on

Elissa's waist.

The girl, bubbly and outgoing, glanced at Elissa. "We just moved in upstairs. Haven't seen you and your husband before—did you just move

in too?"

A flicker of amusement crossed Rowan's eyes.

Elissa shook her head vigorously. "Oh, no, he's just my neighbor. My husband doesn't live here."

Rowan, without missing a beat, asked, "So, which mall are you taking me to for my new clothes?"

As soon as Elissa finished clarifying, Rowan's question landed like a ton of bricks.

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She glanced up at him, only to catch the young couple exchanging a meaningful look.

Apparently, in their eyes, her "neighbor" story wasn't fooling anyone.

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At first, she'd assumed they were just an ordinary married couple.

Now, look how things had turned out—she was married, but having an affair with the guy next door.

Everything went fuzzy for a moment—she couldn't tell whether Rowan was teasing her on purpose or just being careless, but she scowled at him anyway. "Want to go to the wholesale market and get you a hundred suits? Would that be enough?"

That's what she said, but the truth was, Elissa knew better than anyone how particular he was. So instead, she drove them straight to an

exclusive, members-only designer boutique.

They stopped at the entrance to the men's section. A familiar sales associate spotted them, and after a quick glance in Elissa's direction, she nervously looked away and stammered, "Mrs. Atwater..."

Elissa frowned. "*Is something wrong?*"

"N-no, nothing at all."

The associate shook her head, but couldn't help herself; she lowered her voice and offered a quiet warning: "Mr. Atwater was just here... with someone else."

She didn't spell it out, but Elissa understood immediately.

Frank had just been here—with another woman.

Elissa only smiled, as if it didn't matter, and glanced at the man by her side. "Well, I'm here with someone else, too."

The associate was momentarily speechless. Working for a top luxury brand, she was no stranger to the scandals of the upper crust, but these two never failed to surprise her. She composed herself as best she could and said, “I thought you were here to shop for Mr. Atwater again.”

As soon as she spoke, she could feel the atmosphere shift—there was a

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sudden edge to the handsome man standing beside Elissa, as if he didn’t appreciate the implication.

She was sure he’d never been here before. A man with looks and presence like his—she’d have remembered.

“No, today I’m shopping for my brother...” Elissa started to explain instinctively, then hesitated. She wasn’t even sure what her relationship with Rowan was supposed to be now—business partner? Neighbor?

She decided to skip the explanation altogether. “Where are the new arrivals?”

“Right over here. Let me show you.”

Elissa followed the associate and started picking out suits for Rowan.

After all, she was the one making it up to him; she owed him at least a little sincerity, or he’d accuse her of being stingy again.

She picked out a dark pinstripe suit and brought it over. “Want to try this one? I have a feeling it’ll look great on you.”

The associate was certain it wasn’t just her imagination—when Mrs. Atwater asked that question, the man’s intimidating presence softened, and even a hint of interest flickered in his eyes.

The two of them looked every bit the newlyweds from a business family, still getting used to their marriage.

But Mr. Atwater... Well, Mr. Atwater was hardly a saint himself. Mrs. Atwater was probably heartbroken, and who could blame her for finding comfort in a man this stunning?

Rowan didn't refuse. "Sure, I'll try it on."

With his broad shoulders and narrow waist, Rowan was the very definition of an athletic build. Add to that his height and striking features, and the suit looked even better on him than on the model in the photos.

Suddenly, Elissa understood why those wealthy women were always so eager to spoil their pretty boys.

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When it was time to pay, Elissa's heart ached at the price, and Rowan casually added a leather belt to the pile. "Add this in. She's paying."

Elissa shot him a look. "I only agreed to buy you a suit."

Rowan tilted his chin and asked the associate, “Doesn’t the belt count as part of the suit?”

His good looks didn’t soften the force of his presence one bit. Technically, he wasn’t wrong, so the associate nodded. “Yes, it does.”

Resigned, Elissa let him get away with it.

After they finished shopping, the two of them headed upstairs for dinner. As they ate, Elissa noticed more than a few women sneaking glances

their way.

Eight out of ten were clearly checking out Rowan.

That’s when she realized—he’d dressed so casually today, and sitting here with the relaxed confidence of a college heartthrob, he looked nothing like the cold, distant man she was used to. The contrast was startling.

A group of girls even seemed to be working up the courage to come over and ask for his WhatsApp.

But someone beat them to it.

“Elissa?”

It was Cliff.

Elissa smiled and set down her fork. “Cliff, you’re here for dinner too?”

“I was just passing by, saw you two, and thought I’d say hi.” Cliff grinned.

He didn’t seem at all surprised to see her with Rowan. Whatever disagreements they’d had over the years, they were siblings, after all. Sharing a meal wasn’t exactly out of the ordinary.

“Want to join us?”

“Sure.”

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Cliff took a seat, and Elissa visibly relaxed in his presence. After all, he'd helped raise her—no matter how grown-up she was now, she still felt at ease with him.

Rowan's phone buzzed. He glanced at the screen, then said in his usual calm voice, "I'll step out and take this."

"Okay." Elissa nodded quickly, then waved down a server to order more food.

Cliff smiled, seizing the chance to bring up work. "What did you think of the idea I sent you this afternoon?"

Elissa had barely skimmed his message earlier—Rowan had woken her up and she hadn't had time to think it over. She nodded, considering it. "I did, but I think we could adjust the dosage and see how it goes..."

"Elissa? Dr. Riley? It really is you!"

Marcia and Frank appeared, arm in arm. Marcia shot Frank a look and said meaningfully, “See, I told you Elissa and Dr. Riley are close. You never believe me.”

Frank clearly hadn’t expected to catch Elissa and Cliff out together.

His expression didn’t change. “Elissa, come with me for a moment.”

Not wanting to make things awkward for Cliff, Elissa stood and followed him out of the restaurant.

The moment they were outside, Frank’s eyes turned cold. He grabbed her wrist and pulled her toward the elevator. “Come home with me–now.”

AIA

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator

“Why should I go home with you?”

With people all around them, Elissa flushed in embarrassment and tried to wriggle free from his grasp. “Frank, can’t you be reasonable for once?”

Frank frowned. "I'm not being reasonable?"

He couldn't explain it himself—just seeing her laughing so easily with another man left him utterly restless.

Marcia had insisted on going shopping today, and he hadn't wanted to arouse suspicion, so he accompanied her as usual.

He never expected to stumble upon a scene like this.

Elissa was his wife. He could accept that her job meant she sometimes crossed paths with other men.

But seeing her so close to someone else even during her time off—that

rattled him to the core.

Elissa's tone was icy. "Is double standards your idea of 'reasonable'?"

He could come and go with Marcia as he pleased, but if she so much as had lunch with a man, he lost his composure.

Frank's tone left no room for argument. "Marcia's already moved out. I'm taking you to Vistapeak Gardens now to pack your things and come home."

"And what if I refuse?"

"Elissa, this isn't your decision to make."

As he spoke, the elevator doors slid open. Frank kept hold of her, intent on ushering her inside.

"Mr. Atwater—"

A steady, commanding voice cut through the tension. Rowan's words were cool as ice. "So this is where my sister ended up? I step away for a

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phone call, and she vanishes, only to be dragged off here?”

Frank’s brow twitched, but a wave of relief washed over him. He turned to Elissa. “You were having dinner with Rowan?”

She nodded. “Yes.”

With Rowan standing there, Elissa felt her embarrassment deepen. She yanked her hand free from Frank’s grip.

Her skin was delicate; even after that brief struggle, a red mark circled her fair wrist.

Rowan’s expression darkened, his gaze cold and unreadable. “She can’t even have dinner with someone if she wants?”

“Of course she can,” Frank replied, forcing himself to sound calm and reasonable. “I just worry she’ll run into someone with bad intentions. I’d hate for her to get hurt without even realizing it.”

“If she’d told me she was meeting you, I wouldn’t have worried at all,” he added.

Everyone in their circle knew how fiercely protective Rowan had always been of his little sister.

Elissa had been adorable since she was a child, and by the time she was in middle school, boys were already lining up to give her love notes.

Rowan had thrown every single one straight into the trash without

exception.

He never liked anyone casting greedy eyes on his precious sister.

With Rowan keeping watch over Elissa, Frank couldn't feel more

reassured.

Rowan took Elissa's hand, inspecting the red mark and gently brushing his thumb across it. His eyes softened, dark with concern. "She's an adult now. She has every right to choose the company she keeps."

Elissa froze for a second.

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It was as if Rowan had reverted to the brother who always shielded her from harm, never allowing anyone to bully her.

Frank finally realized he'd gripped her arm too tightly and felt a pang of guilt. "I got too worked up. I'm sorry."

"Oh, right—Rowan just moved into a new place. We're all going over next week for his housewarming. You should come too," Frank offered, slipping seamlessly into his usual way of smoothing things over.

It was his favorite tactic—giving her a way out, an olive branch in front of

others.

She, meanwhile, was thinking that this would be the perfect excuse to see Max openly. “Alright.”

Hearing her agree, Frank’s gaze softened even more.

Most of the time, she really was so well-behaved.

Later that day, Elissa went to her clinic as usual.

Red lanterns and festive garlands decorated the entrance and parking lot, filling the air with the warmth of the holidays. Other clinics were nearly empty by now, but as soon as her appointments opened, they filled up in

seconds.

Her nurses were caught in that bittersweet space between frustration and delight.

Other clinics had already let their staff off for the holidays, but her team would have to work straight through until the day before the festivities began.

Still, every year, Elissa paid them triple wages out of her own pocket before anyone else. Benefits like that were unheard of even in the best hospitals.

Mindful that her patients were eager to be home for the holidays, Elissa postponed acupuncture treatments whenever possible, letting them pick

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up their prescriptions and head straight home.

“Elissa, after your shift, just come straight to the house, alright?”

Midway through the afternoon, Jacqueline–Aaron’s wife–called her.

Elissa smiled. “Today’s the professor’s birthday. Even if you didn’t invite me, I’d still show up with a big smile and a gift.”

Aaron was renowned for his skill as a physician. If he wanted, the line to his door would start days in advance.

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A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator

But he never cared for these social gatherings.

Every year on his birthday, he only wanted Elissa there. Lately, Cliff had started coming too.

His son lived abroad, and to them, Elissa was as good as family.

“Your mentor will be over the moon when she hears this,” Jacqueline said,

her voice warm with affection.

Jacqueline adored Elissa’s sweet, considerate nature. “Blaine and I are at the grocery store right now—anything you’re craving?”

Elissa played along, her tone gentle and obedient. “It’s her birthday today. Whatever she likes, I’ll just have the same.”

“Listen to you—always knowing the right thing to say,” Jacqueline laughed, sharing the moment with Aaron as she walked through the seafood aisle, making a mental note to grab the salt-baked shrimp Elissa liked. “Alright then, you and Cliff come over after work.”

“Okay.”

Elissa agreed without hesitation, hung up the call, and moved on to the

next customer.

Cliff was at a meeting with the Department of Health, so after work, Elissa waited for him in the car, heater running against the winter chill in the parking lot.

She’d been pulling late nights for a research project, and the comforting warmth quickly tempted her into drowsiness.

Cliff was still twenty minutes away. Elissa figured she might as well close her eyes for a bit. But just as she reclined the seat for a quick nap, someone knocked sharply on the window.

She blinked awake, spotting Marcia standing outside.

Rolling down the window, Elissa's voice was weary. "What is it?"

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Marcia glared at her, anger simmering. "Did you say something to Frank?" Frank hadn't acted any differently toward Marcia lately—on the surface. But underneath, he was probing, testing her at every turn.

Paranoia gnawed at Marcia. She needed to know exactly where she stood.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Elissa replied, already guessing this was about the jade pendant.

She'd decided to play dumb. After that mess Marcia stirred up at the hotel, Elissa still felt unsettled. She wanted no part in Marcia and Frank's drama.

Marcia's brow furrowed. "Don't play stupid. I'm talking about the pendant. Did you say anything to him or not?"

"No," Elissa answered coldly. "Why would I? Frank always takes your side. Whether that pendant is really yours or you stole it from someone else, does it even matter to him?"

Truth was, she *had* told Frank the pendant wasn't Marcia's. But just the other day, he and Marcia were out shopping together as if nothing had changed.

Suspicion flickered in Marcia's eyes. "Really?"

"Marcia," Elissa suddenly smiled, considering her, "what, is there some dirty secret hidden in that pendant?"

Why else would Marcia be so obsessed, so afraid of Frank finding out the

truth?

"It's just a stupid piece of jewelry. What secret could it possibly hold?" Marcia scoffed, feigning indifference as she took a step back. "I'll just give you a word of advice—mind your own business."

Elissa wasn't interested in dragging out the conversation. She rolled up the window.

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Marcia stormed off, heels clicking furiously as she made her way back to her own parking spot. But just as she turned the corner, a rough hand shoved her hard against the wall.

Slate grabbed a fistful of her hair, eyes blazing with fury. "You little bitch. Been dodging my men for days. Did you really think I wouldn't come find you myself?"

She was clever—too clever for her own good.

At Old Mrs. Atwater's birthday banquet, she'd come to him with a proposal: mutual benefit. But the night of the auction, at the hotel, Marcia had used the Atwater family as cover and slipped away, leaving him to deal with the fallout alone.

He'd sent people to track her down these past days, but she'd either holed up at home or stuck close to Frank.

Marcia's scalp burned where he gripped her hair. "I haven't been avoiding you. The hotel job fell through—not my fault."

She'd planned everything perfectly.

Even if Rowan's men were quick, it should've still been enough time for Slate to ruin that woman's reputation. If anyone was to blame, it was Slate for screwing up—not her.