

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator - Lullaby 171[694 words]

Elissa had never experienced anything like this before—her slender waist held firmly in a man’s grasp, his touch casual, almost playful.

Every muscle in her body was taut, even her toes curled in tension. When she heard his low command, she blinked, stunned, and glanced up at Rowan. “What?”

Her eyes were clear and bright, wide with confusion, shining with such innocence that it would tempt anyone to push further.

Rowan gave her a gentle swat on the hip. “I said, kiss me.”

This time Elissa understood, and in an instant, her face flushed scarlet, turning as red as a boiled shrimp.

Rowan, dressed in an impeccably tailored suit, looked every bit the cool and reserved professional at first glance—someone strictly in control.

No one would ever guess those hands could act so teasingly.

Elissa remembered the agreement they’d made just last night. There was no point playing coy now. Steeling herself, she hooked her arms around his shoulders and leaned in toward his thin lips.

As she moved closer, even the tips of her ears turned bright red.

Rowan, like a man used to being obeyed, watched her without a flicker of emotion. Just as she was about to kiss him, his hand tightened at her waist, lifting her slightly..

His gaze was dark and intense. He bent his head, and instead of her lips, pressed a restrained, lingering kiss to her chin.

Working up the nerve to kiss someone was one thing. Actually being kissed—unexpected and real—was something entirely different.

It was as if a jolt of electricity shot from her chin through every nerve in her body. Elissa froze, eyes squeezed shut, only to feel him nip gently at her jaw, almost as if he was dissatisfied.

He leaned in, his breath warm against her ear, voice low and rough, full of restraint. “That’s not the attitude you had when you were begging me last. night.”

The room was perfectly soundproofed. As his words faded, Elissa could hear nothing but the frantic pounding of her own heart, her breathing quickening.

Ding dong-

The doorbell rang, sharp and sudden.

Rowan scowled in annoyance, and Elissa, as though released from a spell, pushed him away in a panic. “That must be Tanya and Rex—they’re done talking.”

Rowan caught her by the ponytail she’d carelessly thrown up in her hurry to get out this morning. “Wait.”

“What is it?”

She turned to look at him.

He held out his hand, palm up. “Your phone.”

Elissa hesitated, unsure of his intention, but obediently handed it over.

His long, deft fingers worked the screen. She saw him open WhatsApp, do something she couldn’t quite catch, and then he handed it back to her, issuing his verdict like a king. “You can go.”

Not daring to linger, Elissa snatched her phone and hurried out.

Sure enough, Tanya Foster was waiting for her outside the door.

Feeling guilty, Elissa grabbed Tanya and dashed back to her own apartment. Only after locking the door behind them did she finally relax. and let out a long breath.

She glanced down at her phone, and noticed she had a new contact on WhatsApp.

Rowan had just removed himself from her blocked list, and pinned his

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own chat to the very top.

“Why’s your face so red?” Tanya asked suddenly, picking up on Elissa’s flustered state.

Elissa pulled her over to the sofa, checking her pulse as she babbled the first excuse that came to mind. "It's hot-Rowan cranked the heat up way.

too high."

"He's a grown man..." Tanya muttered, her fever making her drowsy but the subject perking her up. "Are you sure he's not just... weak?"

"He's not," Elissa blurted out.

A second later, she realized her mistake: Tanya was eyeing her, all curiosity. "And how would you know he isn't?"

Elissa was silent.

She couldn't exactly say she'd checked.

Or that she'd just experienced it for herself.

Quickly, she got up to make Tanya some pie and brew her medicine. After Tanya finished eating and drinking, Elissa didn't give her a chance to interrogate further-she simply tucked her into bed and insisted she rest.

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She was running a fever, so Elissa, worried, decided to work from home instead of heading to the lab.

By noon the next day, Tanya Foster's fever had finally broken. Only then. did Elissa leave for work.

As soon as she opened the door, she saw Rowan waiting by the elevator.

He stood tall and lean, sunlight pouring in from the glass window behind him, softening the sharpness of his features and the chill in his

demeanor.

Hearing her approach, Rowan cast her a glance. "Headed to the clinic?"

"To the lab," Elissa replied, pulling the door closed behind her.

The clinic had already closed for the holidays. Now, she could throw herself completely into the drug research project.

They rode the elevator down together. Ever since that night two days ago, Elissa felt a constant tension whenever she was around Rowan.

Before, they were proper siblings—estranged siblings, at that. Every encounter left them sparring, every conversation edged with barbs..

But now...

She was his lover.

The leap from one relationship to the other was almost impossible to grasp.

Stepping out of the elevator, Elissa felt a small measure of relief and headed toward her car. Just as she was about to get in, she noticed the right rear tire was completely flat.

She had no idea when it had gotten punctured.

A

glance at her watch told her she didn't have time to change it. There. was an important department meeting that afternoon, and she couldn't

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afford to miss it.

"Get in,"

A Bentley rolled up beside her just as she was weighing her options. The rear window slid down, revealing Rowan's sharply handsome face.

Elissa hesitated—she could still call a cab and make it in time.

Rowan gave her a sidelong look, his voice cool. "We have a contract, remember?"

—

One clause: always at each other's beck and call.

She climbed in, offering a quick explanation. "I know. I'm just... still adjusting."

Brother.

Lover.

She needed time to bridge that gap.

Rowan glanced at her, noting how she seemed to shrink away from him. “Adjusting to what?”

Elissa pressed her lips together. “Adjusting to being your lover.”

He held out his hand. “Give me your hand.”

After a slight hesitation, she placed her hand in his, barely daring to move.

Rowan’s brow creased. “Were you this tense holding Frank’s hand? I’m holding your hand, not about to chop it off. What are you so nervous about?”

Elissa blinked, staring at her lap in silence.

She and Frank had never held hands like this. At public events, she’d simply taken his arm—no real contact, not skin to skin.

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The last time she’d held hands with a man was with Rowan, years ago.

Back then, she was still little, used to him leading her everywhere, always. holding her hand.

He was her brother. She was his kid sister.

It wasn’t like this..

And after all these years, of course she was nervous.

She said nothing, but Rowan could feel it: the soft, delicate hand in his palm was slowly, awkwardly **trying** to relax.

She really was trying to get used to this new version of them.

Rowan toyed absentmindedly with her fingers. He glanced at the wide gap between them on the seat—a gap big enough to fit two more people. The corner of his mouth quirked up almost imperceptibly, and then, suddenly, he tightened his grip.

Elissa was still busy convincing herself not to be so stiff when, without warning, he tugged her toward him.

She tumbled helplessly into his arms, the air in the car growing thick and charged.

“Still nervous?”

Rowan tilted her chin up, his voice gravelly, the edge of a threat lingering in his words. “I’m not a patient man. If this keeps up, I don’t mind cutting.

to the chase.”

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Elissa’s wrist was pinned by his grip, her other hand braced against his thigh—she understood, things between them had shifted. They were no longer equals in this tangled relationship.

Now, Rowan held all the power.

She nodded. “I understand.”

As she spoke, the car rolled to a gentle stop in front of Murphy Group headquarters.

A knock sounded at the window.

It was Lorraine.

Even through the tinted glass, Elissa’s reaction was instant—she pulled her hand free, quickly retreating to her own seat. When she caught Rowan’s displeased gaze, she replied, all business: “We’re at work now.”

He almost smiled—she really knew how to draw the line between work and personal life.

Rowan didn’t bother with a reply. He opened the door and stepped out, every movement exuding that cold, aristocratic air.

Gone was any trace of the man from moments before.

Lorraine was about to say something, but as the car door hung open, she caught sight of Elissa still in the backseat and raised her brows in

surprise. “Elissa, are you heading to R&D?”

Elissa nodded. “Yeah, that’s right.”

Lorraine grinned, then turned to Rowan. “Mr. Murphy, where were you this morning? The shareholder meeting had to be rescheduled at the last

minute...”

Elissa couldn’t help but feel there was something odd about the dynamic between Lorraine and Rowan.

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But she couldn’t quite put her finger on it.

Most secretaries wouldn’t dare question their boss so directly about his whereabouts.

Rowan shot Lorraine a cool glance. “Remind me, who’s the boss here?”

Blunt, even bordering on rude—but perfectly in character for Rowan.

Lorraine seemed unfazed, as if she was used to it. She turned to Elissa instead, teasing, “What do you think, Elissa? Is that any way for your brother to behave at work?”

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Elissa wasn’t about to get caught in the crossfire. She seized the moment—since there weren’t many people around, she slipped out of the car. “I’ve got a meeting in R&D. I should get going.”

And with that, she made her escape.

She arrived at the R&D department just in time for the meeting. Pushing aside the morning's distractions, she quickly immersed herself in work.

At first, Zachary Jones—like most others—had his doubts. Elissa seemed so young; how could she possibly lead the Traditional Medicine Unit? Surely she wasn't up to the task

But after working with her these past weeks, he'd been proven wrong. Her capabilities were extraordinary—if the rest of the team would just put in the effort and follow her lead, they'd learn a great deal.

As the meeting wound down, Zachary listened to Elissa present her latest research proposal. He nodded in approval. "Ms. Drummond, it looks like you really might develop a zero-side-effect cancer treatment. It's rare to see someone so young achieve so much in traditional medicine."

Elissa smiled. "Not might—I will."

She was determined to make it happen.

Her confidence took the room by surprise. Some people even looked at

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her with thinly veiled skepticism.

To them, Zachary's praise sounded mostly like polite encouragement, and Elissa's bold declaration seemed downright arrogant.

Zero side effects? Yeah, right.

But Zachary caught the spark of conviction in her eyes and found himself watching her more closely. "Well, I'll be waiting for the good news."

If she'd said that on her first day, he never would have believed her.

But anyone who'd worked alongside Elissa, honestly and without bias, would see just how deep her expertise ran. She was no ordinary graduate of Vistapeak University's Department of Traditional Medicine.

When the meeting ended, Elissa stepped out of the conference room and found Lorraine waiting outside.

Lorraine had brought afternoon coffee for everyone, telling the others to help themselves.

Then she personally handed a cup to Elissa, her tone warm and friendly. “I’m free this evening–want to grab dinner after work?”

Elissa thanked her for the coffee but shook her head. “Sorry, I can’t tonight. I need to get home early.”

Tanya Foster still hadn’t fully recovered, and Elissa wanted to be there for her.

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She really didn’t see any need to get closer to Lorraine.

Maybe it was the bluntness of her rejection, but for the first time, Lorraine–normally so deft at navigating social situations–let her expression tighten for a second.

Others in the common area glanced over, curiosity piqued by the shift in atmosphere.

Lorraine’s face smoothed again into polite indifference. “Alright then. Maybe next time.”

“Sure.”

Elissa nodded, watching as Lorraine walked away.

She had just reached the lab door when voices drifted over from the common room, edged with mockery. “She really thinks she’s something, huh? Not even giving Secretary Lynn the time of day.”

“Yeah, no kidding.”

That second voice was familiar–a colleague from the Traditional Medicine Unit. “Doesn’t she realize who Secretary Lynn is? She’s almost certainly going to be the future CEO’s wife.”

Elissa paused mid-step.

The comments kept coming. “Honestly, you all in Traditional Medicine Unit should quit while you’re ahead. If she’s brave enough to offend the future CEO’s wife, who knows how long your team will last?”

Expression hardening, Elissa spun on her heel and strode straight toward them. She slammed her coffee cup onto the table with a thud. “If the only way you know how to do research is by sucking up and playing favorites–”

“-then honestly, you might as well just pack it in right now!”

A roomful of grown men sat there, stunned into silence by her blunt

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reprimand, each wearing a different shade of embarrassment.

By the time they found their voices again, Elissa had already disappeared into the lab, pouring herself into her work.

Zachary Jones raised an eyebrow. “Doesn’t she have a point?”

“Well, what are you waiting for? Get back to work! It’s embarrassing enough to be outpaced by a young woman—don’t make it worse.”

Elissa ignored whatever else they were grumbling about. She focused entirely on her research.

The sooner she developed this treatment, the more lives she could save—and the more hope she could give to desperate families.

And for herself, it meant strength. Freedom.

On her way home that evening, she made a detour to pick up dinner from a little cafe that Tanya Foster loved; their nourishing chicken stew was Tanya’s favorite comfort food.

Elissa had a real gift for traditional medicine, and was competent in most other things too.

Cooking, however, was her Achilles’ heel.

Back in her student days, when she was too broke for proper meals, she’d lived on instant noodles—three times a day, without complaint.

After marrying Frank, who always kept her at arm’s length, she’d thought maybe cooking for him would help close the distance between them.

It ended with a meal even the bravest wouldn’t dare swallow.

Edna had begged her to just stick to prescribing herbal remedies—there were plenty of staff for kitchen duties, and no need for her to torture anyone with her cooking.

After dinner, Elissa watched Tanya finish her medicine before clearing the table, bundling up the trash to take downstairs.

Back at home, she took a quick shower and changed into a nightgown.

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Tanya's voice, hoarse from her illness, called out from the couch, "Put a coat on, will you? Don't catch a cold too."

Elissa, who hated the dark and never went near the garbage cans in the basement garage, always took the trash out to the main level.

Tonight, the wind outside was howling, cold enough to cut straight through you.

Heeding Tanya's advice, Elissa wrapped herself in a long *down* coat, grabbed the trash, and opened her apartment door—only *to* halt suddenly.

Across the hall, just outside Rowan's apartment, a woman was standing.

Even from behind, Elissa recognized Lorraine instantly.

She watched Lorraine punch in the door code with practiced ease and let herself in.

Elissa quickly shut her own door, a strange discomfort prickling beneath her skin.

Lorraine came and went from his place like she lived there.

The sensation was foreign, unpleasant—like someone had sliced open a lemon and, drop by drop, was forcing the juice past her lips, down her throat, leaving a sourness that spread through her whole body.

Even her fingertips tingled with the ache of it.

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The law firm had granted her a rare week of paid sick leave, so for once, Tanya Foster wasn't burning the midnight oil at her desk. She was curled up on the couch, gaming, when the sound of the front door caught her attention. She glanced up.

"What's up?"

"Nothing," Elissa replied, shaking her head.

Tanya's gaze flicked to the garbage bag in Elissa's hand. Without pausing her attack in the game, she asked, "What about your trash? Aren't you taking it out?"

"I just suddenly feel exhausted. I don't want to go downstairs."

Elissa set the bag by the shoe cabinet, shrugged out of her puffy coat, and collapsed onto the sofa beside Tanya.

The last thing she wanted was to run into Lorraine, especially now.

Rowan had always insisted there was nothing special between him and Lorraine.

But Lorraine herself—well, everything about her seemed special.

Elissa hugged her tablet, scrolling for a reality show, desperate to scrub away the weird feeling lingering in her chest. Casually, she asked Tanya, "Any plans for New Year's?"

"I'll go back for a couple of days tomorrow," Tanya replied, a flicker of reluctance crossing her face. She finished her game and threw herself over to latch onto Elissa's arm. "If only your birthday landed on New Year's—I could use that as an excuse not to go home."

Elissa's birthday was still a month away. February 9th.

She patted Tanya's head. "Don't worry about me. If you end up having a miserable time, just hurry back and keep me company."

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Across the hall, in 2202.

Rowan heard noise from his study. He got up and walked into the living room, only to find a new face at his dining table. His eyes narrowed, voice icy. “Do you have no sense of boundaries anymore?”

Lorraine shot him a playful glare. “Well, *you* shouldn’t have set a password I could guess.”

His passwords were always easy—always included 0209. No one knew what it meant. Not his birthday. Not a special date.

Expression unreadable, Rowan strode to the front door and changed the code, right then and there.

Lorraine froze, crestfallen. “Are you really going to keep me out like this?”

He ignored her, his tone clipped. “Let’s get to the point.”

“I...” Lorraine forced herself to calm down, placing a takeout bag on the dining table. “I went all the way across town to pick up your favorite

food.”

She unpacked the meal, plate by plate.

Rowan looked like he wanted to say something, but when he caught sight of the honey-glazed ribs and crispy roast pork, his eyebrows lifted slightly. “Alright. It’s getting late. You should head home.”

So quick to show her the door.

Lorraine wilted, her voice small. “I drove all this way to bring you dinner, you know.”

Rowan’s response was glacial. “That’s exactly why I’m letting you leave on your own, instead of calling someone.”

“Rowan-” Lorraine’s frustration boiled over. “We’re engaged, remember? Do you have to treat me this coldly?”

It was Matriarch Paige Murphy herself who had arranged the engagement years ago.

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Lorraine had been overjoyed, but Rowan never acknowledged it.

The only concession he'd made was letting her work at Murphy Group—and even the secretary position was something she'd begged Matriarch Paige for. Rowan opposed it at first, but eventually, he and Paige must have struck some deal, and he relented.

He was notorious for keeping his distance from women. There had never been anyone else but her.

And yet, after three years at Murphy Group, he was still as remote as ever. So remote that Lorraine sometimes wondered if he was even interested

in women at all.

Maybe he just didn't care about anyone.

Rowan pulled out his phone, dialing. He looked at her, voice sharp. "Are you really going to keep dragging this out?"

As she made her way downstairs, Lorraine caught sight of Rowan's bodyguard still waiting by the door.

If Rowan made that call, she'd be escorted out in a way she'd never live down. She took a deep breath, steadying herself. "Fine. I'll go."

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It didn't matter; she still had plenty of time.

As long as there were no other women around him, she believed that persistence would eventually wear him down.

After taking her medication, Tanya Foster grew drowsy and went to bed.

The living room was empty and quiet. Elissa picked up her iPad, ready to unwind in bed with some reality TV.

Just as she stood up, her phone lit up—there was a new WhatsApp message.

Brother: [Come over for dinner.]

She'd always saved Rowan's contact as "Brother." Even after she'd taken him off her block list, she'd forgotten to change it.

Elissa glanced at the clock. Lorraine had only gone over five minutes ago.

Why should she go now?

To be the third wheel?

Elissa typed back: [Already ate.]

In truth, she hadn't. Tanya was sick and had to avoid seafood, so Elissa had ordered the blandest porridge she could find—so plain it barely tasted of anything. She'd only had a couple of mouthfuls herself.

Rowan replied instantly: [Do I need to come get you?]

She could picture his tone through the screen—cold, leaving no room for argument.

Not wanting him to actually come over, Elissa quickly set down her tablet, grabbed her phone, and headed out.

Standing outside his apartment door, she hadn't even pressed the doorbell when her phone buzzed again.

[902079, let yourself in.]

His door code.

She froze, a little caught off guard.

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Her mind instantly wondered under what circumstances he'd given Lorraine that code. Maybe she was just one of many women who knew the way into his

apartment.

She forced herself to stop thinking about it, keyed in the numbers, and stepped inside, slipping off her shoes and changing into her own slippers.

The dining table was set with all her favorite dishes—especially the braised pork ribs

with taro.

Rowan emerged from the kitchen in a black striped lounge set, long and lean, holding two glasses of juice. He set one in front of her.

Elissa pressed her lips together. “Thanks.”

With that, she unwrapped the disposable cutlery and started eating in silence.

Rowan watched her for a good while, his lips twitching with a cold smile. “You come over for dinner, and you look this unhappy?”

“I’m fine.”

She shook her head automatically and picked up a slice of crispy roast pork.

Before she knew it, she’d polished off almost all the taro ribs.

Rowan raised an eyebrow. “Didn’t you say you’d already eaten?”

Elissa set her fork down, at a loss for words.

She couldn’t explain it—ever since she saw Lorraine keying in the door code earlier, there’d been a tight, uncomfortable feeling in her chest.

Rowan frowned, his dark eyes probing as if he could see right through her, but Elissa kept her face blank.

Suddenly, he stood up, pulled her into his arms, and lifted her onto the edge of the table, forcing her to meet his gaze. “So, princess, what’s really bothering you? Would you rather be having dinner with that fake ex-husband of yours?”

He sounded irritated.

Elissa didn’t know how to answer. What was she to him, anyway? Just a lover—no right to ask about Lorraine, or to care. Yet she couldn’t help herself.

Dangling her feet above the floor made her even more anxious. She avoided his eyes. “I told you, nothing’s wrong.”

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The tension hung between them.

Rowan braced his hands on either side of her thighs, caging her in. “Want me to you to bed?”

She couldn’t help thinking where that would lead.

She shook her head. “Can we do that another time?”

Her period was probably not quite over.

carry

Rowan’s face turned cold at her repeated refusals. He stepped back, jaw tight, and jerked his chin at the door. “Then go.”

His voice felt like shards of ice.

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For reasons she couldn’t quite explain, Elissa suddenly felt her eyes sting with heat. Without looking back, she jumped off the dining table and hurried out of the room.

Rowan watched as she practically fled, the urgency in her step making his chest tighten with agitation.

The moment the front door slammed shut, he kicked over a dining chair with a sharp, frustrated motion.

It was the day before New Year’s Eve. Tanya Foster was heading home to spend the holidays with her family, and after seeing her out, Elissa crawled back into bed for a few extra hours of sleep.

Half-awake, she vaguely remembered—today was the day Bradley and the others were coming to Rowan’s place for a housewarming.

She'd promised she'd be there.

But now, after her "fake divorce" with Frank, she wasn't sure if Rowan even wanted his mistress showing up in front of his friends.

Sighing, Elissa rolled over and decided to enjoy the comfort of her bed a little longer.

At noon, just as she finished washing up, the doorbell rang.

She set down her things and hurried to answer it. "Com-"

The door swung open. She froze for a moment, a sudden emptiness blooming inside her, though her smile stayed perfectly in place.

"Mrs. Garrett! Happy New Year! What brings you here? Come in, come in."

Janice Garrett stepped inside, her face warm and kind. As she changed into her house slippers, she said, "Happy New Year, dear! I made some fried treats for the holiday and thought I'd bring you some. There's meatballs and vegetable fritters."

Elissa felt a gentle warmth spread through her. "I thought you'd be busy celebrating with your grandson! I was planning to visit you in a few days to wish you a happy new year myself."

"Oh, don't even mention it." Janice feigned irritation and began stacking the boxes

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neatly in the fridge. "He's so busy, he barely has time for me. I don't even know if he'll be home for dinner tomorrow night."

"He's really that busy?"

Janice let out a sigh, worry momentarily clouding her features. "He is, I tell you! And, well..." She hesitated, then continued, "This is really my fault. When I tried to set him up before, I didn't realize he already had someone he liked. He's probably busy courting her as we speak."

“Oh?” Elissa grinned. “You have nothing to apologize for! That’s wonderful news. Now your grandson can be with the one he wants, and you don’t have to worry about his love life anymore.”

As for the matchmaking, Elissa had never taken it to heart. The last time she visited Mrs. Garrett, she simply wanted to make it clear she wasn’t interested—so Mrs. Garrett wouldn’t bring it up again. When she arrived and found no one there, she realized Mrs. Garrett must have felt the same way.

“That’s true,” Janice said with a sigh, clearly still troubled. “But I don’t know what the girl thinks about all this.”

“Why not?”

“I told him to bring his girlfriend home so I could meet her, but he refused. He said they’d just made it official, and that she was still adjusting. He’s worried bringing her home too soon would scare her off.”

For some reason, Elissa suddenly remembered what she’d said to Rowan in the car the other day.

She was still “adjusting.”

But their situations couldn’t be more different. Mrs. Garrett’s grandson had a real girlfriend; she and Rowan were... something that lived in the shadows.

Elissa smiled and offered, “Maybe young people just need to go at their own pace. Don’t worry—he’ll bring your future granddaughter-in-law to meet you soon enough.”

“Let’s hope so,” Janice said, not hiding her concern. “He’s all talk, but soft-hearted. I just hope he doesn’t scare her off with that stubborn streak of his.”

Elissa couldn’t help but laugh.

Her thoughts drifted briefly to Rowan—he was stubborn too, but his heart was

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anything but soft. If anything, it was made of stone.

Since it was the holidays, Janice didn’t linger long. As she was leaving, she invited, “Elissa, why don’t you come over tomorrow night and join us for New Year’s dinner?”

Elissa knew Mrs. Garrett was worried she'd spend the holiday alone, but she was used to it. She smiled. "Thank you, but I'll be fine. I wish you a wonderful new year and hope you meet your granddaughter-in-law soon."

After seeing Janice out, Elissa returned to the kitchen and opened her overflowing fridge. She couldn't help but smile. Before Jacqueline left for her trip abroad, she'd dropped off a whole load of food as well.

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For the past couple of days, Elissa had made it her morning ritual to call her teacher and check in on Jacqueline's recovery. The news was always reassuring-Jacqueline was doing well, and the worst had passed.

Ding-dong-

Just as she closed the fridge door, the doorbell rang again.

Assuming Janice must have forgotten something, Elissa hurried over to answer it. But as soon as she cracked the door open, Max darted inside, weaving between her legs and rubbing against her affectionately.

She scooped Max up and glanced outside, expecting someone to be there, but the hallway was empty. Even the apartment across the hall was shut tight.

She ruffled the dog's head. "Did Rowan lock you out again?"

"Woof woof!"

Max nuzzled her a bit, then-as if suddenly remembering something

important-grabbed the hem of her dress in his teeth and tugged her toward the hallway.

"Where are you trying to take me?" Elissa laughed despite herself, hurriedly shrugging on a jacket, snatching her phone and purse, and following him out.

But Max didn't lead her anywhere new. Instead, he headed straight back toward home.

Now, woman and dog stood in front of Rowan's apartment door.

Max looked up at her with those deep, soulful eyes, then glanced meaningfully at the doorbell, clearly urging her to ring it.

Elissa raised an eyebrow. "Can't you press the doorbell yourself?"

Max seemed to understand. He made a valiant leap, but no matter how hard he tried, his paws couldn't reach the button.

Elissa blinked. So... the doorbell at her place earlier-

She pressed the doorbell for him. After a moment, Rowan finally opened the door.

He leaned against the doorframe with a relaxed, almost lazy posture, his gaze cool and unreadable. "Forgot the passcode?"

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"I'm not as close to you as Secretary Lynn is," Elissa shot back without thinking.

Rowan arched an eyebrow. Suddenly, he leaned forward, wrapped a long arm around her waist, and pulled her inside, shutting the door behind them with a smooth motion.

He pinned her gently but firmly against the door, his hand tightening around her waist, effortlessly lifting her a little. His voice was low and rough, almost intimate. "So, you were upset last night because Lorraine has my apartment code?"

Elissa felt her cheeks flush. He'd seen right through her.

With her toes barely touching the ground, she found herself pressed close to him, her lashes lowering to avoid his direct, intense gaze. "I-I just think... we're not that close."

"We've lived under the same roof for nine years. You still think we're not close?" Rowan bent closer, their breaths mingling in the thick, charged air between them. "Tell me, Elissa. What counts as close, then?"

At that, Elissa looked up, and their eyes met-his so dark and intense, the distance between them almost nonexistent. His warm breath caressed her cheek, and she

was enveloped in his familiar, woodsy scent.

She opened her mouth to reply, but before she could speak, he closed the distance and claimed her lips with his own. Her whole body went rigid, eyes wide with shock.

She forgot to breathe, just staring at the man in front of her—his deep, searching gaze, his impossibly long lashes.

Her heartbeat thundered in her ears, so loud she couldn't tell if it was hers or his.

It lasted only a few seconds before Rowan drew back, his nose brushing against hers, his voice husky. "Now, does that count as close?"

Elissa's mind was a complete blank. Her lashes fluttered. "I... I guess it does..."

"Guess it does?" Rowan's lips curled into a knowing smile, and before she could react, he pulled her into another kiss—this one fierce and all-consuming.

There was nothing gentle or practiced about it. He kissed her like a man who'd been waiting far too long, one hand holding her up, the other cradling the back of her head, leaving her nowhere to escape.

The sensation was utterly foreign to Elissa—she felt like prey caught in his arms, completely at his mercy.

Her breathing grew ragged, her body melting beneath his touch.

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Ding-dong-

The doorbell exploded through the haze, followed by the muffled voices of Frank and the others carrying in from the hallway.

They'd come to help Rowan celebrate his new place, but here she was—inside his apartment!

A jolt ran through her, and her already unsteady legs threatened to give way.

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Thankfully, Rowan's arm was steady as steel around her waist.

He acted as if he hadn't heard a thing, utterly absorbed in the kiss, his lips moving insistently over hers. The doorbell kept ringing, but Elissa managed to push him back just enough to catch her breath. "Someone's here..."

Rowan's eyes, dark and intense, were clouded with desire. His fingers squeezed her waist, sliding upward as he kissed her again. "Ignore them," he murmured, his voice husky and dangerously enticing.

No one answered the door, and the person outside was quickly losing patience. The ringing turned to loud knocking, punctuated by muffled, confused voices.

"What's going on? Did Rowan forget we were coming today?"

"No way."

That was Frank's voice.

Panic fluttered in Elissa's chest. She glanced up at Rowan, her eyes wide. "Frank and the others are here..."

"So what?"

Rowan pressed another kiss to her lips, his face tightening with a flicker of coldness. He tilted her chin up. "Afraid he'll find out you're cheating on your husband?"

"That's not it..."

It was just-awkward.

Frank was out there ringing the doorbell, and she was tangled up in Rowan's arms.

-In her brother's arms.

But all Rowan saw was her fear of being caught.

He stepped closer, caging her in, a mocking smile twisting his lips. "So, who's the better kisser, me or him?"

Elissa stared at him, baffled by his logic. “What are you even talking about? I just-”

Before she could finish, the lock beeped—the sound of someone rapidly punching in the code.

As the last digit was about to be entered, Elissa bolted for the hallway, but Rowan

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caught her, pulling her back and locking eyes with her, refusing to let it go. “Answer me.”

Her cheeks burned, her heart thundering. She gritted her teeth and muttered, “You. You’re better, way better.”

It was the truth—she’d never even kissed Frank. Rowan was her first.

Satisfied, Rowan let her go, lips quirking with a hint of smugness. He arched a brow, then turned to open the front door.

Elissa darted into the bathroom, closing the door behind her and taking deep, shaky breaths to calm herself.

Rowan swung the door open, glancing coolly at the group outside. “What brings you guys by so early?”

Bradley grinned. “We just wanted to meet your girl, that’s all.”

A couple nights ago, Rowan had dropped a bomb in their group chat—hinting, not so subtly, that he was finally seeing someone. So of course, the guys decided to show up early, hoping to catch a glimpse of Rowan’s mysterious girlfriend.

Bradley sauntered inside with a bag in hand, but stopped dead, staring at Rowan as if he’d seen a ghost. “Rowan, is that... lipstick on your mouth?”

The others turned to look, eyes zeroing in on the unmistakable smear of lipstick at the corner of Rowan’s lips.

The evidence was obvious—there was no hiding what had just happened inside.

Rex raised a brow, shooting Rowan a knowing look. “No wonder you said we were early. So your girl really is here, huh?”

Frank looked unsurprised. He remembered seeing Rowan waiting downstairs in the parking lot last time—clearly for someone he cared about. With Rowan’s looks, charm, and determination, there wasn’t a woman he couldn’t win over. The only reason he’d stayed single all these years was because he simply hadn’t wanted to date.

But now, Frank was genuinely curious. What kind of woman had finally caught Rowan’s eye and heart?

He smiled, asking, “Is she the one you were waiting for downstairs the other day?”

Rowan nodded slightly, ignoring the other two. Only then did he seem to realize, rubbing his thumb across his lips and noticing the telltale stain of lipstick. He licked

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his lips, almost relishing the taste.

Frank, being a man himself, recognized the signs. He chuckled, teasing, “Looks like we’ll be toasting at your wedding soon, huh?”

“Wouldn’t count on it.”

Rowan stuffed one hand into his pocket, tossed each of them a cold beer, and spoke with a cryptic half-smile.

Bradley popped open his can, took a sip, and shot Rowan a mischievous grin. “What do you mean? Is there actually a woman out there who doesn’t want to marry you? Or...” He grinned wider, voice lowering in mock scandal, “Don’t tell me you’ve got your eye on a married woman, Rowan?”

Elissa stepped out of the bathroom just in time to hear that last line, her mind going completely blank.

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“Whoa, so the sister-in-law really is here?”

Bradley and his two buddies stood up in unison, glancing toward the bathroom. As soon as they spotted Elissa, disappointment flickered across their faces.

Feeling tense, Elissa greeted each of them politely. “Hi, Bradley...”

“Hey there, little Elissa.”

Bradley didn’t seem at all surprised to see her at Rowan’s place. “So, you’ve finally patched things up with your brother?”

Elissa was still scrambling for a believable excuse for being here. Hearing his question, she nodded quickly. “Yeah, uh, we’re good now.”

“Elissa’s already here?” called out Frank’s voice.

Elissa turned and saw Frank looking over from across the room. He was dressed down for the informal get-together, yet still managed to look sharp and handsome. Marcia stood by his side.

This was the first time Frank had openly brought Marcia along to a friends’ gathering—almost like a declaration.

Not that Elissa cared; soon enough, she’d have the divorce papers in hand.

She smiled. “Yeah, I live right across the hall. Just came over to, you know, warm up my... brother’s place. That’s okay, right?”

Hearing her actually call him “brother,” Rowan’s lips twitched in amusement, almost imperceptibly.

Rex, quick to catch on to the odd tension between the two, jumped in to smooth things over for Elissa. “Of course it’s fine.”

“Absolutely,” Bradley agreed, unable to hide his nosiness. He’d been rooting for her and Rowan to make up for ages. He leaned in, curiosity piqued. “So, little Elissa, where’s your sister-in-law? Is she in the other room? Go get her to come join us!”

Elissa shot a desperate look at Rowan, mortified. What was she supposed to say? There was no “sister-in-law.” The lipstick on Rowan’s mouth was her doing.

Rowan caught her silent plea but remained unmoved, watching with interest to see how she'd explain their relationship to everyone else.

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Left to fend for herself, Elissa mustered a small smile and blurted out, "No more sister-in-law. He just got dumped."

"What?"

All three guys stared at her, dumbfounded. "Didn't they just start dating?"

"Yeah, that's what I heard."

Elissa, not entirely sure who they were talking about, assumed they meant Rowan's most recent ex, and just kept improvising. "When I got here, he still had lipstick on his mouth. Must have been a breakup kiss."

Laughter erupted around the room, everyone shooting Rowan teasing *looks*.

The famous Rowan Murphy, dumped after only a few days of dating?

Rowan let out a low, incredulous laugh, pressing his tongue against his cheek. "I've heard of breakup sex, but where'd you come up with a breakup kiss?"

"Guess it's trendy now?" Elissa replied, forcing a grin.

Rowan fixed his gaze on her, a sly smile playing at his lips.

Breakup sex.

Hearing those words from him, Elissa's mind went straight to places it shouldn't.

Before she could say anything else, Bradley's eyes flicked to Rowan's waist, then back to Elissa. "No way your brother and his girlfriend broke up. Couples fight, that's all. Just a little drama to spice things up."

Elissa frowned, confused. "Huh?"

Bradley jerked his chin toward Rowan. "Look at his belt. That's not a brand he'd ever buy for himself. Must have been a gift."

"And you know what kind of relationship involves giving a man a belt?" he continued,

all knowing.

Elissa followed his gaze and realized—Rowan was wearing the belt she'd given him the last time she'd ruined his suit.

Her smile grew strained. “What kind of relationship?”

“Obviously, a romantic one,” Bradley declared, clicking his tongue. “Who else would buy a guy a belt, right?”

Elissa instinctively glanced at Rowan, only to find him watching her with mocking

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amusement, making no effort to bail her out.

She cleared her throat awkwardly. “Oh, I... I see.”

Before she could finish, Marcia gave her a strange look, eyes lingering on Elissa's lips. Suddenly, Marcia dropped a bombshell.

“Hey, Elissa, isn't that lipstick you're wearing today the exact same shade that was on Mr. Murphy's mouth just now? It looks identical. You're not... you're not his girlfriend, are you-”

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