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Carmela truly hadn't expected her son to be this infatuated with Elissa.

She'd thought her plan was airtight, never imagining it would unravel here of all places.

But Elissa hadn't seen any of this coming either.

She never thought Frank would cut ties with Marcia so cleanly, let alone refuse point-blank to divorce her.

Well, at least now it was over.

Once Elissa collected her thoughts, she looked at Carmela. "I only promised to keep

this secret until Valentine's Day."

That left just fifteen days.

"Elissa..."

Carmela knew her son's temperament better than anyone. He might seem gentle and composed, but once he made up his mind, nothing could change it.

If Frank ever found out she'd gone behind his back and pulled strings to finalize the divorce papers with Elissa, he'd probably turn against her completely.

No matter how much Carmela disliked Elissa, she could only soften her tone.

"Let's

call this a favor I owe you, all right?"

"Aunt Carmela,"

Elissa gave a wry smile. "You didn't sound so accommodating when I called you for help a few days ago."

She'd figured Carmela out by now. Deep down, she was just like Mrs. Murphy—unyielding and cold.

They'd already had their falling out. Carmela's momentary compromise today wouldn't make her remember this as a genuine debt.

People like her always thought weakness was just the natural order of things. Why should Elissa bow her head?

For now, Carmela was wary of Frank and wouldn't dare push her too far.

Of course, Carmela remembered how high and mighty she'd sounded on the phone

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just days before.

She'd assumed Elissa would be grateful for any small gesture, but instead, Elissa held her ground, refusing to just take the hint and back down.

Seething, Carmela slammed her palm on the table. "Elissa, do you even recognize your own place? After everything that's happened, you still think you have the right to talk back to me?"

Elissa's tone was steady, almost dispassionate. "But this time, you're the one asking for my help."

She needed to settle things with Frank as soon as possible.

She'd long since had enough of pretending to be Mrs. Frank.

Carmela was about to slam the table again when someone knocked and entered the

room.

Frank strode to Elissa's side and took her hand. He turned to Carmela. "If you have a problem, bring it to me. Don't take it out on her."

"Are you out of your mind?"

Carmela could barely restrain an eye roll as she snapped, "You defend her like this, but do you know what she really wants?"

-She wants a divorce.

Elissa looked at her calmly, unruffled.

If she could say it herself, she would—she honestly would prefer it.

Frank pressed his lips together, his voice even. "I know I've wronged her in the past. Whatever she wants is only fair."

He paused, then added, "I'll take her back to the Murphy house now."

Carmela shot Elissa a cold glance. "She's not even your wife in name anymore. Does she really need you to go back home with her for the holidays?"

She wasn't wrong—Elissa had always gone back alone before.

"She and Rowan have reconciled."

Frank's words, sharp and unyielding, took all the fire out of Carmela.

Her demeanor shifted instantly. "Fine. If you're going, leave early—after all, it's her family."

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With that, she headed downstairs, calling for the butler to help arrange gifts, making a display of courtesy.

As Elissa glanced at the trunk full of neatly packed presents, a thought struck her—power really was a wonderful thing.

Frank held the car door open for her. “What are you thinking about?”

Without thinking, she answered, “Rowan.”

She paused, surprised at herself.

She’d subconsciously equated Rowan with power—and she wasn’t the only one. In Vistapeak City, a lot of people made that same connection.

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator - Lullaby 192[644 words]

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Across town, in the garden villa, the atmosphere was unusually warm—just the two of them, grandmother and grandson.

Rowan reached over and served Janice some food. “Next year, I promise I’ll bring someone home for you to meet for the holidays, alright?”

“Eat your dinner,” Janice chided, giving him a playful look. “And remember, we still have to go to the old house after this. Don’t always butt heads with Paige Jensen. She’s not as simple as you

think.”

Paige Jensen—that was her full name.

Rowan nodded and fell quiet for a moment. Then, out of nowhere, he asked softly, “Grandma, did you ever hate Grandpa?”

Janice was caught off guard by the question.

Years ago, she had been tricked into becoming the other woman. Even her own son had been taken to Murphy Manor to be raised, calling Paige Jensen “Mother.”

Now, even her only grandson’s official grandmother was still Paige Jensen.

All these years, she’d lived in the shadows, never truly belonging.

Janice’s smile was calm, almost resigned. “I used to. But now? I don’t feel much of anything anymore. All I want is for you to settle down soon.”

All she hoped for was that her only grandson could have a peaceful life. Maybe he’d

meet a good woman.

When Elissa and Frank arrived at Murphy Manor, the house was buzzing with activity. The aunts had all come home for the holidays. Out in the garden, children ran through the winter air, laughter echoing. The festive spirit was unmistakable.

Seeing Frank accompanying Elissa, Butler Murphy greeted them with a rare smile. He led them inside, saying, “Mr. Atwater, it’s been so long since we’ve seen you here.”

Frank’s reply was smooth and measured. “Things have been busy. I haven’t been able to spend as much time with Elissa as I should, and I know she’s had to put up with a lot. But that’s going to change.”

His words were carefully chosen—half apology for Elissa’s sake, half a subtle

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reproach to the Murphy family for how she’d been treated.

Butler Murphy was no fool; he caught the meaning and gave a nervous little chuckle.

“Well, I’m sure Matriarch Paige Murphy will be thrilled to see you both.”

Elissa walked quietly beside them, saying nothing.

As they neared the sitting room, she heard the younger cousins calling out “sister-in-law,” which puzzled her. Both aunts’ sons were still *too* young—none of them were married yet. As far as she knew, only Rowan and Slate were old enough for marriage.

Still wondering, Elissa walked inside and saw Lorraine, surrounded by a crowd of younger cousins. Lorraine was dressed in a finely tailored gown, looking elegant and gentle—nothing like her usual sharp, professional self.

As soon as Elissa glanced her way, Lorraine noticed and came over with a bright smile. “Mr. Atwater, Elissa—Happy New Year!”

She turned to Elissa with a chuckle. “The kids were just wondering whether Mr. Atwater would come back with you this year.”

“Happy New Year,” Elissa replied, smiling.

Lorraine took her hand and led her to the sofa. “You two seem so happy together. Any plans for kids?”

Elissa froze, caught off guard. Before she could answer, Frank spoke up, his tone warm and gentle.

“That’s up to her. When she’s ready, we’ll have one.”

Elissa gave a small, self-mocking smile.

She’d wanted a child since their second year of marriage—longed for someone who shared her blood, her family. But Frank had never come close to her, no matter how much she wished for it.

To Lorraine, an outsider, it sounded enviable. “You’re lucky, Elissa. Mr. Atwater treats you so well.”

Elissa forced a smile. “He’s alright, I suppose.”

“Actually...” Lorraine hesitated, looking a little embarrassed. “I have something to confess. I wasn’t just your brother’s secretary. I was also... engaged to him.”

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Elissa’s expression froze for a split second.

She paused, then said quietly, “So that’s how it is.”

So, her relationship with Rowan was even more unspeakable than she’d thought—hidden in even deeper shadows. Suddenly, the way Lorraine and Rowan interacted made perfect sense; it was she, Elissa, who’d never truly understood what was going on between them.

No wonder Lorraine showed up here on New Year’s Eve.

She was here as Rowan’s future wife.

Before Lorraine could say a word, Matriarch Paige Murphy descended the stairs, her face all warmth and affection. “Lorraine, when did you arrive? Why didn’t you have

Mr. Hawkins fetch me?”

She spoke with the unmistakable kindness reserved for a granddaughter-in-law.

Lorraine responded graciously, “Mr. Hawkins mentioned you were taking a nap, so I didn’t want to disturb you.”

Matriarch Paige moved to take her seat at the head of the sitting room. “Are you sure it’s all right for you to be here tonight? I hope your parents don’t mind.”

Lorraine stepped forward and gently took the older woman’s arm, her voice soft and sweet. “Of course not. My parents specifically asked me to spend time with you—and

with Rowan.”

It was the first time Elissa had ever heard another woman call Rowan by his first name with such easy familiarity.

Matriarch Paige patted Lorraine’s hand, visibly pleased. Only then did she turn to Elissa, and upon noticing Frank by her side, her expression softened a fraction.

“Frank, I hope Elissa hasn’t caused you or your family any trouble. She can be a bit...difficult.”

Her tone was that of a doting grandmother, yet every word subtly belittled Elissa. But Elissa was used to it by now. Over the years, the old matriarch had said similar things to plenty of people.

Frank’s brow furrowed. He glanced down at his wife, demure and silent beside him, then spoke in a cool, even tone. “Elissa has never caused me any trouble. No one in

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my family thinks she’s difficult.”

He added, “Actually, she’s wonderful. Both my mother and grandmother are very fond of her.”

At this, Matriarch Paige looked slightly embarrassed. “Is that so? Maybe she only acts up around us Murphys, then...”

“Grandma,” Frank cut in, using the same term of address as Elissa. As he spoke, he slipped his arm affectionately around Elissa’s shoulders, continuing with calm conviction,

“Elissa has the best temperament of anyone I know. Sometimes I wonder what kind of environment could have shaped her into the person she is now.”

“Surely the Murphy family hasn’t treated her as badly as the rumors claim, right?”

At his pointed question, Matriarch Paige’s smile faltered, a crease forming between her brows.

Wasn’t Frank supposed to be indifferent to Elissa—wasn’t his heart elsewhere, with his sister-in-law? Yet here he was, defending Elissa at every turn.

With all eyes on her, Matriarch Paige struggled to maintain her composure. Fortunately, Lorraine interjected at just the right moment. “Mr. Atwater, you’re overthinking things. Even as an outsider, I can see how well the Murphy family treats

Elissa.”

“What’s all this? Sounds lively in here.”

A lazy voice drifted in from the doorway, and Elissa instantly recognized who it was.

The sitting room fell silent for a beat.

There wasn’t a single person in the Murphy family who wasn’t at least a little wary of Rowan.

Frank turned and smiled. “We’re just discussing how the Murphy family treats Elissa.”

Rowan’s expression didn’t change—his gaze swept over Frank’s hand resting on Elissa’s shoulder, a faint, inscrutable smile on his lips. “Isn’t that something you already know?”

Not well.

Frank had known that for a long time.

Back when Elissa was just a little girl and Frank used to visit Rowan at the Murphy house, he’d heard stories, too.

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Yet all these years, he'd never truly paid attention to how Elissa was treated here.

His sudden urge to defend her now seemed almost laughable.

Elissa couldn't tell whether Rowan's words were aimed at Frank or at Matriarch Paige Murphy.

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You could see it in their faces—both Rowan and Matriarch Paige Murphy were distinctly uncomfortable, though each did their best to pretend otherwise.

But age brings cunning, and as long as the peace hadn't been shattered completely, Matriarch Paige Murphy could maintain her dignified composure. She waved Elissa over with a practiced calm. "Come here, Elissa. Why don't you tell everyone how well the Murphy family has treated you?"

She couldn't put Frank on the spot, and Rowan was even further out of reach. So naturally, Elissa became the sacrificial lamb.

Elissa hadn't moved yet, lips parting to speak, when Rowan's voice cut through the tension, sharp and mocking. "Enough already. You've been playing this game—hurting people, then not letting them complain—since she was five. Aren't you tired of it yet?"

He didn't bother to soften the blow. In a few words, he laid bare nearly two decades of

Elissa's life: obedience without protest, no room for resistance, no space even to say it hurt. Only absolute compliance kept her from being punished ruthlessly.

A flicker of confusion crossed Lorraine's face. She hadn't realized how deep the rift ran between Rowan and his grandmother. "I'm sure Grandma meant well..."

Rowan clicked his tongue, obviously impatient. "Then why are you at the Murphy family's Christmas dinner?"

She fell silent, and Rowan's retort made his stance clear—he was picking fights indiscriminately, and in the process, drawing a line between himself and Lorraine.

Matriarch Paige Murphy looked thoroughly embarrassed, and just as the atmosphere threatened to explode, a little cousin from another branch of the family started wailing—loud and sudden.

Everyone seized the opportunity to change the subject and move past the awkwardness.

Even so, a few minutes later, several younger cousins gravitated toward Rowan. It was clear—his sharpness was reserved for Slate and the matriarch; with the others, he could still manage a smile.

Later, dinner was served. Three long tables filled with relatives, the dining room spacious enough that it didn't feel crowded despite the numbers.

After the earlier drama, Matriarch Paige Murphy kept her attention off Elissa, who

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stayed quiet, focused on her meal.

With glasses clinking and friendly chatter floating through the air, the gathering, for once, managed to appear harmonious.

By the time the meal ended and people began drifting away from the table in twos, and threes, night had truly fallen.

With so many young people in the family, Butler Murphy had—as he did every year—prepared boxes of fireworks. After dinner, everyone made their way outside for the show.

“Elissa—”

Just as she was about to leave the table, Matriarch Paige Murphy called her back. “Would you go upstairs to my study and bring down the gifts I set aside?”

Elissa nodded. “Of course.”

It was a Murphy tradition: gifts handed out once on Christmas Eve, then again on Christmas morning. For a family that wanted for nothing, it was more about good wishes than material need.

Her uncle seemed busy pitching some new business idea to Frank, so Elissa headed upstairs alone.

To reach the study, she had to pass a small balcony. Suddenly, a hand shot out from the shadows and pulled her onto it.

Elissa's heart leapt into her throat, but before she could cry out, someone's lips pressed over hers.

The icy night air mixed with the deep, familiar scent of Rowan's cologne. Outside, fireworks burst and crackled, covering the sound of their secret. Still, the yard was crowded; anyone glancing up at that moment would see Rowan kissing her.

Elissa froze, every muscle tense. She managed a muffled protest against his mouth. "There are so many people downstairs!"

Rowan didn't let up, his voice low and rough as his lips moved against hers. "What did you promise me?"

Her eyes shimmered as his kisses left her breathless. "What?"

He tightened his grip on her shoulder, clearly annoyed.

Then Elissa remembered. She whispered, "If I avoided him in front of everyone, it

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would have looked suspicious."

Rowan's arm circled her waist, spinning her so her back pressed firmly to the wall. Their bodies were so close, she could feel the heat radiating through their clothes.

"So," he whispered, breath hot against her ear, "this... is your punishment."

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She let Frank pull her close in front of everyone—didn't flinch, didn't push him away.

So Rowan, right there in front of the same crowd, kissed her.

Downstairs, someone set off a huge firework. But for Elissa, it was her own heartbeat that thundered in her ears, louder than any explosion outside.

She could swear her heart was about to leap out of her chest.

But Rowan had her cornered, giving her no room to escape. "I told you—don't let him touch you."

His voice was low and stubborn, not unlike a child clutching a piece of candy, refusing to let go.

Elissa sighed, her words barely more than a breath, lips soft from his kiss. "He only put his arm around me, over my jacket. That doesn't really count as touching..."

Rowan's reply was simple: "Doesn't matter."

Just then, a scream pierced the air from downstairs. Startled, Elissa flinched and instinctively wrapped her arms around Rowan, burying her face in his chest.

"It's just the fireworks! Look how beautiful they are!" someone called up.

So that was it—just someone admiring the pyrotechnics.

Still shaken, Elissa took a deep, steadying breath. When she looked up, Rowan's eyes caught hers, bright and intense. "You're only allowed to hold me like this,

understand?"

She nodded, barely whispering, "I understand."

He pretended not to hear her, tilting his head and watching her with a lazy, amused smile. "What was that?"

Elissa bit her lip, afraid any noise might draw attention from downstairs. Summoning her courage, she rose on tiptoe, wrapped her arms around his broad shoulders, and whispered right into his ear, "I said I understand."

"Little Nine only hugs her brother like this. She's never hugged anyone else this way."

For a moment, Rowan looked genuinely taken aback. Seizing the opportunity, Elissa ducked out of his arms and made her escape.

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Rowan watched her dart away, a smile playing at the corners of his mouth as he absentmindedly licked his lips. Even his eyes were smiling.

She's always known what he wants to hear.

His little Nine—she's the cleverest girl in the world.

Elissa slipped into the study and immediately spotted a hefty stack of envelopes piled on the desk.

Each one was thick, stuffed with cash—some held five figures, others even more.

She gathered the envelopes and was just about to leave when Slate suddenly blocked the doorway.

She'd been carefully avoiding Slate all day. They hadn't sat together at dinner, and with Frank sticking close by her side, Slate hadn't dared try anything.

But, of course, he still managed to corner her.

Slate noticed her almost instinctively take a step back and smirked. "What, are you scared of me?"

She gave him a cold look. "Not scared. I just prefer to keep my distance from people who can't decide what they are."

"Elissa!" Slate's eyes darkened in annoyance, his gaze lingering on her curves. "Don't worry, I've got plenty of ways to make you feel good."

"Maybe you'd like to try them yourself first?" came a low, dangerously cold voice from the balcony.

Only then did Elissa realize Rowan had been out there all along, within earshot.

Ever since Rowan had taken Slate down a notch, Slate's fear of him had only deepened. He flinched, spinning around at the sound of that voice. "R-Rowan, I didn't realize you were here..."

Rowan stepped out, eyes icy. "If I wasn't here, how could I make sure you had your fun?"

"B-big brother, I'm sorry, I was just joking with Elissa."

Slate's last encounter with Rowan had left him with more than a physical bruise; even now his legs trembled at the memory.

Rowan tilted his head thoughtfully. "So... do you still want to have fun?"

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"N-no. I'm good..."

Slate didn't dare push his luck-never mind that this was the Murphy estate, or that the old matriarch might stand up for him. He hated Rowan, but he feared him much more.

Rowan shot Elissa a sidelong glance. "Well? Are you just going to stand there and watch?"

She jumped, muttered something incoherent, and hurried downstairs.

By the time she and Frank finally left Murphy Manor, it was nearly ten o'clock at night.

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There were always plenty of outsiders in Vistapeak City, but at this hour, the streets were nearly deserted, with only a handful of cars passing by.

Yet the route Ridge took began to feel wrong.

They were heading toward Greenwood Manor.

Elissa glanced at the driver. "Ridge, I'd rather go back to Juniper Road."

"Mrs. Frank..."

Ridge hesitated, catching Frank's eye in the rearview mirror.

At first, Elissa had assumed Ridge was simply lost, but now she understood—this was Frank's doing.

Circling back to the same topic exhausted her. "I have no intention of returning to Greenwood Manor right now."

"Elissa," Frank said gently, turning to look at her. "Let's spend the holidays together. After the New Year, if you still haven't heard anything, I'll take you back to Juniper

Road..."

"When have we ever spent a holiday together?" Elissa stared at him, her tone cool as she reminded him, "Every year, you stayed at the old house. I was always alone at

Greenwood Manor."

"Oh, right—except for Lucy."

She'd accepted things as they were in the past. But now? How could he expect her to come running at a mere word, docile and obedient?

Who gets that kind of luck in this world?

Frank knew he was in the wrong. He was about to say something when his phone rang.

He glanced at the caller ID and answered immediately. "What is it?"

"Mr. Atwater..." Bernard's nervous voice came through the line. "Marcia's gone. Since it's New Year's, I only had one person on duty. Marcia faked a stomachache and knocked out our guy when he went to check on her."

Frank's eyes narrowed dangerously. "Then what are you waiting for? Get more people on it. Find her and bring her back, no matter what."

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Elissa couldn't make out what was being said, but she saw Frank's expression darken.

Something serious had happened.

Who was missing?

After hanging up, Frank checked the time and turned to her. "I'll drop you at Vistapeak Gardens. Something urgent just came up."

Vistapeak Gardens was closer than Greenwood Manor anyway.

"Alright." Elissa let out a breath, relieved. "If you're in a hurry, I can get a cab from here."

Frank shook his head. "No need. I'll take you."

She didn't argue further, but she could feel the car pick up speed.

When they reached the gates of Vistapeak Gardens, Elissa got out, and the sleek black Maybach disappeared into the night.

A cold wind cut through the silence. Hugging her coat tighter, Elissa turned and walked into the complex.

She was almost at her building when someone suddenly lunged out from the shrubbery. Elissa's legs went weak from shock.

Under the dim streetlight, a woman stood with disheveled hair and a wild look in her eyes, radiating a strange, unsettling energy.

It was Marcia.

Marcia, who seemed half-crazed now.

Just yesterday, she'd looked the picture of elegance.

Elissa stared in disbelief. "What happened to you?"

Even if Frank really had cut her off, she was still Spencer's wife—no one in Vistapeak City would dare lay a hand on her lightly.

Marcia let out a cold, hollow laugh, her gaze fixed on Elissa with a strange intensity.

The longer she looked, the more Marcia saw the Elissa from her memories—the little orphan she'd despised.

Suddenly, she lunged, grabbing at Elissa's collar with wild abandon.

Elissa had expected a confrontation, but she hadn't expected Marcia to grab her

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clothes. "Marcia, what are you doing?!"

In the struggle, under the streetlamp's glow, Marcia caught a fleeting glimpse of the butterfly-shaped birthmark on Elissa's shoulder.

It really was her.

She really was that wretched little orphan!

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When Elissa first arrived at the orphanage, it was summer. She wore a beautiful little sundress, the kind that made her look like a storybook princess.

Most kids had birthmarks that were nothing special—an ugly mole here, a strange shape there, nothing you'd ever call attractive.

But Elissa's was different.

On her shoulder, she had a faint pink birthmark shaped like a butterfly.

It was lovely—so much so that it seemed like fate itself had chosen to favor her, adding a delicate flourish to her already charmed existence.

Back then, Marcia destroyed everything that belonged to Elissa. She would have carved the butterfly right from Elissa's skin if she could have.

Elissa yanked her dress back over her shoulder, glaring coldly at Marcia. "What are you doing here in the middle of the night, trying to stir up trouble?"

"It's you!" Marcia's eyes were bloodshot, burning with jealousy and bitter resentment. "It really is you. I knew it!"

"Why does it always have to be you?"

Why?

Marcia simply couldn't understand.

Why did every good thing in the world seem to revolve around Elissa?

She'd been born into a good family—her parents were both police officers, and she was raised like a princess.

Even after being adopted by her parents' enemies, Rowan had protected her for nine years, treating her like she was made of glass.

Later, she'd married Frank, just as she wished, and landed a coveted spot on a major research project.

Now, she was married to Frank, yet still sneaking around with Rowan behind his back.

The illustrious Young Master Murphy, reduced to a secret lover—all for her.

The two most eligible men in Vistapeak City, and both only had eyes for Elissa!

Marcia couldn't even bear to imagine what would happen if Frank ever found out that

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Elissa was that little vixen from their past. Would he put her on a pedestal even higher than before?

Elissa never imagined anyone could envy her to this degree.

If she had known, she probably would have laughed.

Her parents were cops, but she'd spent most of her childhood eating at the neighbors' because her parents were always working. Their lives revolved around their jobs, not her.

After Matriarch Paige Murphy took her in, she was constantly punished—yelled at, slapped, even forced to kneel for hours.

Those eight years after Rowan abandoned her had been even worse.

And her marriage to Frank... well, that was a whole other story.

Still, Elissa knew exactly what Marcia was talking about. Her face remained utterly calm. “Yes, it’s me. I never came looking for you, and yet here you are at my door.”

When she first found out Marcia had been the one bullying her at the orphanage, Elissa had considered confronting her, demanding an explanation for the past.

But in the end, it all seemed pointless.

Besides, she was too busy with her lab project to waste time on old grudges.

Yet now, here was Marcia, showing up on her doorstep.

Hearing Elissa’s admission, Marcia’s rage only grew wilder. She lunged for her, but Elissa slipped out of reach. Marcia’s voice grew shrill with desperation. “Why are you always against me? Haven’t you taken enough? Can’t you just give Frank to me?”

Elissa stared at her, incredulous. “Am I the one standing in your way, or are you the one determined to be the other woman? Marcia, if you want to lose your mind, go check yourself into a hospital!”

With that, Elissa turned to head into her building.

Marcia chased after her, a twisted smile on her face. “The other woman? If I hadn’t married Spencer, Frank would have chosen me! You would never have even had a chance!”

“But you didn’t marry him, did you?”

Elissa looked at her, exasperated by how irrational she’d become. “Marcia, I have no idea what went wrong between you and Frank, but if you have a problem, take it up

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with him. I’m not part of your drama.”

Elissa had noticed just the day before that Frank’s attitude toward Marcia had shifted.

But she had no idea things had spiraled so far out of control that Marcia would show up at her door.

The whole situation was almost laughable.

She was the legitimate wife, and yet here she was, stuck in the middle of her

husband's affair—forced to play mediator between the mistress and her own husband.

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Not to mention all the other things Marcia had done—Elissa didn't have it in her to play savior.

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Her compassion was in short supply.

Marcia stared in disbelief at Elissa's retreating figure, then turned to Frank, her voice shaking. "She can just walk away and leave me like this? You really think she's some kind-hearted angel?"

She just didn't get it.

Why did everyone think Elissa was sweet and obedient, when she could be this cold?

Frank seized her chin in a bruising grip, his voice low and dangerous. "Why are you here? Did you come to hurt her?"

"

"I—I didn't..." Marcia stammered, terrified as she remembered just how frightening he could be. "I just wanted to know—what does she have that I don't? You've clearly got feelings for her, so why haven't you divorced her yet?"

Frank's eyes narrowed with contempt. "That's what you're curious about?"

"Yes..." Marcia nodded frantically, ignoring the pain in her jaw, desperate to convince

him.

Frank released her with a shove, as if discarding something worthless. “You think you’re even worthy of comparison?”

He didn’t give her a chance to respond. With a final cold look, he turned and walked away.

Bernard understood and gestured for his men to restrain Marcia. They forced her into the car and headed straight for the house on the edge of town.

The night was pitch black.

Most of the houses out here were just investment properties, empty and eerily quiet at this hour. The silence was unsettling.

A fleet of black sedans pulled up in perfect formation, each driver as disciplined as a soldier.

Marcia was yanked from the car. The sight of the house—the same place where she’d suffered so much—made her panic. She struggled desperately, running to Frank’s side, pleading for mercy.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry! I never should’ve pretended to be her—just let me go, please, I’m begging you!”

Frank’s voice was ice-cold, devoid of any warmth. “If I let you go, who will give her

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justice?”

If Marcia hadn’t stolen her identity all these years, maybe he would’ve found little Nine long ago.

Thinking of Elissa, Marcia’s face twisted with bitterness. She spat out, “But she’s doing just fine now!”

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than before?

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Her parents were cops, but she'd spent most of her childhood eating at the neighbors' because her parents were always working. Their lives revolved around their jobs, not her.

After Matriarch Paige Murphy took her in, she was constantly punished—yelled at, slapped, even forced to kneel for hours.

Those eight years after Rowan abandoned her had been even worse.

And her marriage to Frank... well, that was a whole other story.

Still, Elissa knew exactly what Marcia was talking about. Her face remained utterly calm. "Yes, it's me. I never came looking for you, and yet here you are at my door."

When she first found out Marcia had been the one bullying her at the orphanage, Elissa had considered confronting her, demanding an explanation for the past.

But in the end, it all seemed pointless.

Besides, she was too busy with her lab project to waste time on old grudges.

Yet now, here was Marcia, showing up on her doorstep.

Hearing Elissa's admission, Marcia's rage only grew wilder. She lunged for her, but Elissa slipped out of reach. Marcia's voice grew shrill with desperation. "Why are you always against me? Haven't you taken enough? Can't you just give Frank to me?"

Elissa stared at her, incredulous. "Am I the one standing in your way, or are you the one determined to be the other woman? Marcia, if you want to lose your mind, go check yourself into a hospital!"

With that, Elissa turned to head into her building.

Marcia chased after her, a twisted smile on her face. "The other woman? If I hadn't married Spencer, Frank would have chosen me! You would never have even had a chance!"

"But you didn't marry him, did you?"

Elissa looked at her, exasperated by how irrational she'd become. "Marcia, I have no idea what went wrong between you and Frank, but if you have a problem, take it up

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Chapter 197

with him. I'm not part of your drama."

Elissa had noticed just the day before that Frank's attitude toward Marcia had shifted.

But she had no idea things had spiraled so far out of control that Marcia would show up at her door.

The whole situation was almost laughable.

She was the legitimate wife, and yet here she was, stuck in the middle of her husband's affair—forced to play mediator between the mistress and her own husband.

Chapter 198

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator - Lullaby 199[699 words]

Frank froze, his expression darkening.

"What did you just say? You know where she is?"

"How could I possibly know?" Marcia shot back, denying it flatly. "That drug lord's still locked up—how bad off could she be?"

Frank narrowed his eyes, suspicion written all over his face. "For your own sake, you better hope she's doing just fine. Because if she isn't, I'll make sure your suffering is a hundred times worse."

He lifted a finger and turned to Bernard. "Lock her up. From now on, there must be at least three people watching her at all times. No exceptions."

"Yes, sir." Bernard grabbed Marcia's arm and started dragging her toward the basement.

Just then, the roar of an engine broke the tension as a luxury car screeched to a halt outside. Carmela got out, her movements swift and purposeful, and strode over to confront Frank.

“Are you out of your mind? She’s your sister-in-law! How far are you going to take this—what do you want, to break her completely?”

“Mother,” Frank’s reply was icy. “Don’t you think you’re meddling in things that don’t concern you?”

Carmela knew better than to challenge him head-on. She softened her tone, trying to appeal to reason. “Think about Hickey. Your brother’s barely gone, and you’d have his son lose his father and be kept from his mother too? Can you really stomach that?”

She caught the brief flicker of hesitation in Frank’s eyes and pressed her advantage. “Whatever Marcia’s done, she’s still your nephew’s mother. For Spencer’s sake, if not hers—can’t you let this go, just this once?”

Frank and Spencer had always been close. There were never any ugly power struggles or inheritance feuds between them—Spencer had no interest in the family business, never fought for anything. Years ago, when Marcia turned her back on everyone else to marry Spencer, Frank didn’t say a word; he simply kept his distance and watched over them quietly.

He’d had a good brother.

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Chapter 199

Now, after a moment’s hesitation, Frank’s expression softened just a fraction. “Fine. I’ll let her go this time. But you’d better keep an eye on her. Don’t let her cause any more trouble.”

Marcia let out a long, shaky breath of relief. The moment Bernard released his grip, she collapsed to the floor, her legs giving out.

Even after Frank swept out with his entourage, dread still clawed at her insides.

She’d bet everything—and won.

Carmela didn’t offer her a hand up. She simply stood at a distance, her gaze sharp. “Well? You said you had something about Frank I needed to know. What is it?”

An hour earlier, Carmela had received Marcia's message. She hadn't planned to come, hadn't even taken it seriously—her patience for Marcia had worn thin long ago. This woman had ensnared both her sons: one dead, the other's reputation in tatters. And with Hickey saddled with a mother like Marcia, what hope did he have? Frank might as well do whatever he wanted with her. Carmela wouldn't shed a tear if Marcia

vanished off the face of the earth.

But Marcia had claimed to know something important about Frank—something Carmela couldn't ignore.

So she'd come.

Marcia hadn't been sure Carmela would show at all. Compared to Elissa, she'd spent more years dealing with her mother-in-law. Carmela might seem warm and reasonable, but it was all a mask. What happened between Marcia and Frank alone was enough for Carmela to want her destroyed; coming to her rescue was

unthinkable.

Steadying her breath, Marcia braced herself against the wall and hauled herself upright, her eyes glinting coldly. "Do you have any idea why Frank always treated me so well before?"

That was a landmine—and Carmela's patience snapped.

"As if *you* don't know! Because you can't keep your claws to yourself, that's why!" Carmela spat. "Shameless women like you—what man could resist? I always thought Frank was a man of principle, self-disciplined, a true gentleman. Turns out, I was wrong. The only explanation is that you're utterly shameless."

But Marcia only smiled, unfazed. "Remember that accident, years ago—the one that killed your husband and put you in the hospital at Cresthaven?"

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Chapter 200

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator - Lullaby 200[647 words]

Carmela remembered it all too well.

The accident had taken from her the most important man in her life. Since then, she'd never even considered marrying someone else.

When Marcia brought it up, a shadow flickered through Carmela's eyes. "Why are you dredging this up?"

Marcia pressed, "You remember what happened, right?"

"Of course I remember."

"Then do you remember the police officer and the little girl who saved you and Frank?" Marcia asked again.

"I remember."

In Carmela's memory, that little girl had been such a bright, cheerful soul—like a sunflower, radiant and impossible not to like.

If things hadn't been so chaotic at the time, Carmela would have seriously considered arranging a childhood betrothal between Frank and that girl. The girl's family might not have had much money, but they were honest people—her father a police officer, her background spotless. And with such a sweet, well-mannered daughter, she and Frank would have made a golden couple.

Carmela frowned at Marcia, suspicion sharpening her tone. "What are you getting at? What does any of this have to do with Frank?"

"Frank's been searching for that girl ever since," Marcia said quietly. "He used to think I was the one who saved you both."

Her voice trembled, just a touch bitter. "That's why he's always treated me so well."

Carmela laughed, harsh and scornful. She shot Marcia a look full of contempt. "I knew it. I always wondered why Frank was so obsessed with you—it was never about you at all! You stole someone else's place, didn't you?"

Pretending to be someone you're not—how despicable.

"I didn't steal it!" Marcia snapped, her voice ringing with indignation. "If I'd been there that day, I would've saved you too! I—I just wasn't as lucky as Elissa, that's all!"

Having a police officer for a father, being in the right place at the right time when a

wealthy family was in trouble... That's the kind of luck reserved for a storybook heroine.

If it had been her, she wouldn't have hesitated to rush in front of those fancy cars, hoping for a generous reward from some rich benefactor. Elissa had just gotten lucky, that's all.

Carmela's face tightened as she processed what Marcia was saying. "Elissa? Are you telling me—Elissa was the girl who saved us?"

"That's right."

Marcia saw the flicker of doubt in Carmela's eyes and knew she'd played her cards right. "Elissa was that little girl."

"That's impossible!" Carmela's voice was wary, guarded. "Why are you telling me this? What are you hoping to get from me?"

you should

"If you don't believe me, find out for yourself," Marcia replied coolly. "But know—Frank's already looking into it. If you want to act, you'd better be quick."

Carmela studied Marcia closely. She didn't seem to be lying, and that uncertainty gnawed at her.

Back then, the doctors had said if she'd arrived at the hospital even a little later, she wouldn't have survived. That little girl had genuinely saved her life.

But if that girl was Elissa...

Marcia watched her carefully, then struck home. "You're not seriously thinking about being kind to Elissa because of what happened, are you? You two have always been at odds. If Frank finds out she was the one who saved him, he'll only listen to her

from now on."

Carmela's gaze narrowed. "What do

you want?"

Marcia didn't hesitate. "Help me make contact with the Murphys."

She'd figured it out earlier, when she'd gone to see Elissa. If Elissa really was that little wretch from the orphanage, then the Murphys—who'd raised her—must be the ones. who adopted her back then. And from what Marcia could tell, they couldn't stand Elissa either.

The enemy

of my enemy... could be a powerful ally.

Elissa, you're the reason I've ended up like this. Don't blame me for what happens next.

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