

## A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator - Lullaby 201[ 730 words ]

Chapter 201

### Chapter 201

This New Year was the most relaxing one Elissa Drummond had experienced in years.

It felt like a small miracle just to get through the holiday unscathed.

For two or three days straight, even the neighbors across the hall had been unusually quiet.

Elissa and Tanya Foster holed up at home, each busy with their own projects. Sheets of paper covered the coffee table, scrawled with research notes and ideas, while case files spilled across the desk.

That afternoon, just as Elissa took the coffee Tanya brought over, her phone—screen down on the table—started to vibrate.

She picked it up and checked the caller ID before answering. “Bradley, what’s up?”

On the other end, Bradley Wheeler teased her, “Little Elissa, it’s New Year’s—how come you didn’t call me?”

Elissa laughed. “I sent everyone a WhatsApp message.”

Right at midnight on New Year’s Day, she’d sent the same message to all her friends, including the handful of guys she was especially close with.

Bradley chuckled. “Alright, I’ll let you off the hook. So, what are you up to?”

“Just working from home,” she replied honestly.

Bradley laughed again. “Come on, it’s the holidays. Quit working. Bring Tanya and come hang out with us. I just sent you the location on WhatsApp.”

“I think I’ll pass. You guys go enjoy yourselves.”

Elissa just wanted a few quiet days, to sort things out with Frank Atwater and finally talk through the divorce.

The less socializing during this time, the better.

Someone said something in the background, and then Bradley reported, “Frank says he can come pick you up, if you want.”

Elissa set down her coffee cup. “I’ll just come on my own.”

If Frank came to pick her up, he’d insist on driving her home later. She’d rather avoid

1/3

12:08

Chapter 201

the awkwardness.

Bradley burst out laughing, teasing Frank beside him, “Man, that’s some way to win your wife back. Elissa’s still not over it, you know.”

Elissa pretended not to hear. After saying goodbye, she hung up and checked the location Bradley sent. Then she turned to Tanya to see what she thought.

“Tanya, Bradley invited us to the Cloud Peak Club. Want to come with me?”

Tanya had seemed a little down since she’d come back from her family’s place a couple days ago.

Elissa figured it’d do her good to get out of the house for a while.

Tanya didn’t seem keen at first, but when she saw the hopeful look in Elissa’s eyes, she relented. “Alright, I’ll go.”

Neither of them was the type to drag things out. They got ready and left soon after.

Elissa had been to Cloud Peak Club plenty of times, so the staff recognized her right away and led them straight to a private lounge.

At the VIP door, the attendant stopped and opened it for them. “Ms. Drummond, Mr. Wheeler and Mr. Atwater are already inside.”

“Thank you.”

As soon as Elissa finished speaking, she glanced into the room and saw the whole group in high spirits.

And in the corner, slouched with an unlit cigarette between his lips, sat Rowan Murphy. She hadn't expected him to be here, too.

Frank waved her over. "Elissa, come sit with us!"

Elissa took Tanya's hand and started to step inside, but before the door could fully close behind them, a bright, familiar female voice called out.

"Elissa?"

Lorraine Lynn caught the door with her hand and smiled at Elissa. Her gaze swept through the shifting lights, landing on Rowan in the corner.

Elissa hesitated for a moment. "Secretary Lynn."

Bradley piped up, grinning, "Little Elissa, don't call her Secretary Lynn."

2/3

12:08

Chapter 201

He shot Rowan a look, then joked, "Heard from my old man over the holidays--the Murphys and the Lynns have a marriage arrangement. Might not be long before you have to call Lorraine your sister-in-law..."

Before he could finish, Rowan pulled the unlit cigarette from his mouth, his expression cold and unimpressed. He shot Bradley a glare, as if he were an idiot. "Whoever made that arrangement can go marry themselves."

The message was clear; he wasn't interested.

Bradley gave an awkward laugh. "Wasn't it your grandmother who arranged it...?"

"Then she can marry Lorraine," Rowan said offhandedly, snapping the cigarette in half and tossing it into the ashtray before glancing coolly at Elissa.

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator - Lullaby 202[ 745 words ]

Chapter 202

It almost felt like Rowan was trying to clarify things for Elissa—trying to make sure she understood his relationship with Lorraine.

Tanya leaned in close, whispering in Elissa's ear, "I have to give it to your

boyfriend—he's quick to shut down any rumors. Doesn't even give you a chance to wonder."

Elissa wanted to set her straight, to tell her the truth, but she bit her tongue.

Even though Rowan hadn't spared Lorraine's feelings, Lorraine chose to stay in the lounge with everyone else.

The mood shifted, a subtle tension threading through the room.

Rowan acted oblivious, dropping onto the couch and glancing briefly at Tanya beside Elissa, then lowering his gaze to his phone, idly scrolling or maybe texting

someone—no one could tell.

Elissa didn't dare sit next to Frank; instead, she tugged Tanya over and they claimed a spot in the far corner.

In the end, it was Bradley who broke the ice. "Let's play truth or dare," he suggested, trying to liven things up.

They went with the classic rules: spin the bottle, and whoever it points to has to answer a question or take a dare from whoever spun it.

No one had to think too hard; whether they'd played before or not, everyone joined in easily.

They were all friends here, or at least familiar enough, and the game quickly brought the laughter back. Lorraine, ever the social chameleon, slipped right back into the group's rhythm.

After a few rounds, folks started to loosen up.

Elissa managed to dodge the bottle every time, narrowly escaping the spotlight.

But this round, the bottle stopped right in front of Tanya.

One of Bradley's buddies grinned and asked, "What's your type? Any requirements for your ideal partner?"

The group immediately erupted with teasing shouts and whistles.

1/3

12.08

## Chapter 202

They were adults—everyone knew exactly what was being implied.

Tanya wasn't the shy type. She laughed and started ticking things off on her fingers. "Let's see... at least six-foot-one, works out every day, totally loyal—"

"Alright, alright, we get it."

She didn't get to finish; the door swung open with a sudden thud.

Everyone turned. Rex Wilkinson strode in, his gold-rimmed glasses catching the light, giving him that polished, almost ascetic look—like he'd just come straight from a meeting.

Elissa followed everyone's gaze to the door, only to see Rowan beckoning her over. "Come here," he called.

She hesitated, and in that moment, Rex was already standing beside her, clearly waiting for her to move so he could sit.

Elissa had never asked Tanya directly about her and Rex, but she'd picked up enough hints. She got to her feet, making room for him.

Once Rex sat next to Tanya, the group's teasing only grew louder.

Bradley, always the joker, piped up, "Rex, when did you and Tanya's sister get so close? Keeping secrets, huh?"

Rex just smiled quietly. "I wouldn't say we're that close yet."

Bradley shot a glance at the guy who'd asked about Tanya's type. "You can give up now, man. If Rex can't win her over, you don't stand a chance."

Elissa had just sat back down when it was Rowan's turn to spin the bottle.

He leaned forward, long legs stretching out, and his knee brushed against Elissa's calf—maybe by accident, maybe not.

The bottle spun around, finally stopping in front of Frank.

Elissa was surprised. She watched as Rowan looked straight at Frank and, in an even voice, asked, "Back then, why did you have to marry her?"

He didn't name names, but everyone knew who he meant.

The room, once buzzing with laughter, fell silent. You could hear a pin drop.

Frank froze for a moment, his gaze drifting to Elissa. There was a flicker of regret in his eyes. After a pause, he reached for his glass, downed the whiskey in one long

2/3

**12.08**

Chapter 202

swallow, not leaving a drop.

Someone silently refilled his glass—that was the rule. If you refused to answer, you had to drink three times.

Elissa stared at the floor the whole time, as if she were just an observer, not really there.

Lost in thought, she didn't realize the bottle had spun again and landed right in front of her.

She was just about to look up to see who had spun it this time when Lorraine spoke up, her voice cutting through the quiet.

“So, Elissa—which matters more to you: Mr. Atwater or your brother?”

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator - Lullaby 203[ 671 words ]

To anyone else, the question seemed harmless—no different from asking a child if they loved their mom or dad more.

But Elissa and Rowan weren't anyone else. Their relationship had always been complicated, and so the question, so ordinary for others, was anything but for them.

Still, Rowan and Frank both turned to her, waiting for an answer. The others did the same, eyes quietly expectant.

Elissa smiled, her tone light but honest. “Honestly? Neither really matters to me.”

Her answer drew laughter from the group, though no one seemed surprised.

After all, Rowan had abandoned her for eight years. Frank hadn’t touched her for three, too busy pining for Marcia Carson.

Really, they were all just as bad as each other.

The evening rolled on, and after a few more rounds of games, someone suggested playing cards. The suite had two card tables, each separated by a decorative screen. The mood was relaxed, and the groups kept to themselves.

At one table, Rowan, Frank, Bradley, and Tanya Foster gathered, with Elissa seated quietly beside Tanya, watching the hands unfold.

Someone called Rex over to the other table, but he declined, pulled up a chair beside Tanya instead, and grinned. “I’m here to bring you luck.”

Tanya flicked a card onto the pile, not missing a beat. “I’ve got Elissa for that. She brings me all the luck I need.”

Rex arched an eyebrow. “So if you win, it’s your skill. If you lose, it’s my fault? Fair enough?”

“Deal,” Tanya replied, this time with a hint of amusement.

Elissa made a mental note: she’d definitely have to tease Tanya about her and Rex when they got home.

After a while, Elissa excused herself to use the restroom. On her way back, she called Aaron Blaine to check on Jacqueline’s health.

“Don’t worry,” Aaron’s voice was reassuring. “She’s almost fully recovered.”

“We’re actually planning to head home in a couple of days,” he added, sounding

1/3

12:08

Chapter 203

relieved.

“That soon?” Elissa was surprised. “I thought you’d stay at least until after the spring

festival.”

“Nah, we’ve had enough of being abroad. Nothing beats home, and your godmother is ready to be back.”

“Alright then,” Elissa agreed. “I’ll book your flights and pick you up at the airport when you arrive.”

They chatted briefly before Elissa hung up, walking out of the restroom and scrolling through her phone to check flight tickets.

She’d barely taken a few steps when a large hand suddenly grabbed her wrist, pulling her into a dark, empty suite. The room was pitch-black, the lights off, and *no* one else inside.

Elissa barely had time to adjust to the darkness before she felt a man’s hand gripping her waist, his voice low and unmistakably familiar. “So, I don’t matter to you at all?”

The warmth of his breath, the deep timbre of his voice—she knew it was Rowan.

Elissa pressed her lips together, her answer measured. “That wasn’t part of the contract.”

She’d learned to use his own words against him.

Rowan gave a quiet, humorless chuckle in the dark, leaning down until his face was close to hers. “This,” he murmured, “was in the contract.”

And he was right. The agreement was clear: she couldn’t refuse intimacy.

Elissa parted her lips to say something, but Rowan didn’t give her the chance. His lips claimed hers, stealing her words and her breath.

In the darkness, with her senses overwhelmed, Elissa found herself instinctively wrapping her arms around his waist. Her body remembered him—his touch, his heat. She surrendered control, letting him do as he pleased.

Feeling her soften in his arms, Rowan slid his hand up her back, pressing her closer. Her skin was soft and warm beneath his palm, and he pulled her in until their bodies were flush against each other.

The air between them grew thick and charged.

He wanted more. She was *too* sweet, too untried—yielding to him, trembling quietly as

Chapter 203

if every touch was new.

Chapter 204

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator - Lullaby 204[ 640 words ]

### **Chapter 204**

Rowan's hand slid lower along her waist, fingertips brushing against the telltalet warmth between her thighs. The girl in his arms bolted upright, shoving him away

with sudden force.

"No!" she said, breathless.

Though Elissa had tried to prepare herself for this moment—knowing, inevitably, that it would come—now that it was here, she realized she simply couldn't go through

with it.

At her core, she was still a traditional soul.

Even if they were lovers, she wanted her first time to be somewhere safe, somewhere private.

Not here, where anyone might burst through the door at any moment.

Her voice trembled. Rowan withdrew his hand, his tone rough and gravelly. "Not here?"

She nodded, reaching for the cool brass doorknob. "I'm going back to the lounge."

Before Rowan could respond, Elissa slipped out, nearly running down the hall. She ducked into the restroom, fixed her lipstick, and hurried back to the private room.

Her heart was still pounding hard when she opened the door.

If she'd known Rowan had such a taste for risky encounters, she might have thought twice about getting involved—might even have looked for another way to help Tanya

Foster.

She'd assumed it would be simple: Rowan wanted her, she'd spend the night, and that would be that.

After all, Rowan was handsome. It wasn't much of a loss.

But she hadn't expected this—being pulled aside at any moment, pressed up against a wall, kissed breathless in public places.

His hands never seemed to behave.

Every encounter left her jumpy, nerves frayed.

Back in the hallway, Rowan stood before the closed lounge door, his eyes dark, thumb absently brushing his fingertips. The corner of his mouth curled into a faint,

1/3

10:29

Chapter 204

unreadable smile.

He knew Elissa was worried Frank might suspect something, so he waited a moment before leaving.

He'd barely taken two steps when Lorraine called out.

“You-”

Her fists clenched so tightly her knuckles blanched, and for a long moment, she couldn't form the words.

She'd just watched Elissa rush out of the lounge, lipstick smudged and lips swollen from someone's kisses.

Lorraine had always thought Elissa seemed quiet, gentle—who would've guessed she was playing around behind everyone's backs, sneaking off with some mystery man?

Only, the “mystery man” turned out to be Rowan.

And Rowan, for his part, looked completely unbothered, as if he hadn't just been tangled up with another man's wife. He shot Lorraine a cool, disinterested glance. "What is it?"

"You-you and Elissa..." Lorraine took a shaky breath, eyes rimmed red. "What exactly is going on between you two?"

She could hardly believe what she'd seen.

This was Rowan. He could have any woman he wanted!

She'd been chasing after him for years, never once catching his eye.

As his assistant, Lorraine had seen countless women throw themselves at him, or business partners sending over one beauty after another, hoping to curry favor.

He'd turned every single one away.

That only made Lorraine want him more, made her long for the impossible-like reaching for the moon.

She'd always wondered: if Rowan ever fell for someone, how devoted could he be? She'd spent countless nights dreaming of being that woman.

But she'd never imagined this untouchable man would end up with Elissa.

He'd kissed Elissa until her lips were red and swollen.

It was obvious just how far things had gone in the lounge.

2/3

10:29

Chapter 204

Rowan didn't so much as blink. "Why should I have to explain myself to you?" he replied, his voice flat, almost bored.

He acted as if there was nothing inappropriate about his relationship with Elissa.

But it was exactly this careless, untouchable quality that Lorraine found irresistible.

She hesitated, then spoke with forced calm. "She's your adoptive sister, Rowan. If people find out, it could ruin your reputation."

## Lullaby 205

For a moment, the air was heavy with silence.

Rowan glanced at her, as if amused by some private joke. "When has my reputation ever been any good?"

In the Murphy family, he was the black sheep—never one to respect tradition or elders.

Out in the world, people froze up at the mere sight of him.

A good reputation? That was never in the cards for him.

Lorraine hesitated, then pressed, "But what about her? Aren't you concerned about her reputation?"

"I am."

That was exactly why he'd never considered going public with Elissa before her divorce was finalized.

Lorraine rushed to add, "But if this keeps up, sooner or later, people will start talking—"

Rowan cut her off, his eyes cold and voice like ice. "Which is exactly why you'd better keep it to yourself."

Half warning, half reminder.

He was always this distant, this cool. But when that glacial stare landed on her, Lorraine's heart stuttered. "I—I understand," she stammered.

Her perfectly manicured nails dug into her palm, snapping one by one.

As Rowan turned on his heel to head back to the lounge, Lorraine watched his tall, broad-shouldered frame and couldn't help but ask, "Is this just a game for you two,

or...?"

He didn't so much as slow down, let alone answer.

He didn't see the need to explain himself to her. Just as he'd always said he didn't acknowledge their engagement, not for a second.

Lorraine stood frozen, collecting herself before she finally managed to return to the lounge.

1/3

10:29

Chapter 205

When Elissa walked back in, Frank waved her over. "Come on, give it a try,"

"I'm really not much good at this," she protested.

"Doesn't matter—just play," Frank said breezily, scooting over to make room. "Your husband's loaded. If you lose, you lose."

Bradley clicked his tongue. "This isn't a card game, it's a front-row seat to domestic bliss."

Elissa sat down and picked up her cards, still sorting them when the door swung open again.

Rowan strolled in, looking completely unbothered—the polar opposite of the man who'd just left the room minutes ago.

Elissa's gaze flicked to his mouth; guilt prickled at her, and her hand shook, cards tumbling out of her grasp.

Tanya Foster grinned. "What's this—showing your hand right off the bat?"

Elissa shot her a look, hastily gathering her cards as Frank chuckled. "Be nice, she's a beginner."

He sounded every bit the protective husband.

Rowan wandered over and stood behind Elissa, his long legs and lazy posture unmistakable. "Play this one," he murmured.

Elissa looked up at him, exasperated. "Backseat players don't get to talk."

Rowan's lips curled in a half-smile, his meaning unmistakable. "I never claimed to play

fair."

She couldn't out-talk him, so she just ignored him and focused on her hand.

Bradley, an old hand at the table and an even older gossip, threw Rowan a sideways glance and suddenly quipped, "So you say you're not acknowledging that engagement with Lorraine, but your lips look a whole lot redder than before you left."

Elissa's grip on her cards tightened. Her whole body tensed.

She'd retouched her lipstick—no one had noticed.

But Rowan's...

Frank noticed her hesitation and grinned. "Can't decide what to play?"

"Yeah, just give me a second," Elissa replied, regaining her composure and playing a

2/3

10:29

Chapter 205

card under Rowan's direction.

Rowan laughed and reached over to smack Bradley on the head. "Why do you spend so much time looking at my lips? What, you want a kiss?"

Bradley recoiled with a theatrical shudder. "Man, don't even joke like that. I don't swing that way."

The joke broke the tension, and Elissa let out a quiet sigh of relief.

She picked things up quickly, memory sharp and luck on her side. With the beginner's edge, she wiped the floor with them.

Tanya threw down her cards in defeat. “Seriously, girl, what kind of luck do you have? You win every damn hand!”

3/3

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator - Lullaby 206[ 701 words ]

## Chapter 206

Elissa arched a brow, her eyes sparkling with mischief. “A bet’s a bet. I lost, fair and square.”

Frank’s gaze lingered on her animated face. The sharpness in his eyes softened, warmth blooming in their depths.

Murphy Manor

After stepping out of the car, Marcia followed a housekeeper through the grand entryway and toward the drawing room.

The Murphy estate radiated an old-world elegance that made the Atwater home seem almost ordinary by comparison. Every step Marcia took was a silent reminder of the gulf between people like them and people like her—why, she wondered, had she always been destined to wade through the mud while others walked marble halls?

“Ma’am, Ms. Carson is here—the lady Mrs. Atwater mentioned on the phone yesterday,” the butler announced as Marcia reached the doorway.

He held out an arm, halting her just long enough for someone inside to give a curt acknowledgment. Then, with a polite gesture, he ushered her in.

Inside, Matriarch Paige Murphy sat upright in an antique armchair, a porcelain teacup balanced in her hand. Her sharp, calculating eyes fixed on Marcia the moment she walked in.

Her presence was commanding—far more imposing than Old Mrs. Atwater back home, who, for all her sternness, could usually muster a kind word or two. Marcia’s chest tightened, her every step careful, as if treading on thin ice.

Before she could speak, Paige Murphy cut straight to the point. “You’re Mrs. Spencer from the Atwater family?”

“Yes,” Marcia replied, nodding.

Everyone in Vistapeak's upper circles knew about Mrs. Spencer's little scandal with her brother-in-law. There was no use pretending otherwise.

Paige Murphy's disdain was barely concealed. "Your mother-in-law said you wanted to discuss something with me?"

"I do." Marcia met her gaze, matching her bluntness. "Matriarch Murphy, I know the

1/3

10:29

Chapter 206

real reason your family adopted Elissa all those years ago."

A flicker of surprise crossed Paige Murphy's face, but she quickly masked it with a cool, practiced smile. "And what reason might that be?"

No one outside the family could possibly know the truth. The adoption had been handled quietly, behind closed doors.

Marcia lifted her chin, her voice steady. "Because of that drug bust nineteen years ago—the one that made headlines across the country."

She hadn't even finished before Paige Murphy's expression darkened, her eyes flashing dangerously as she scanned the room. Every servant understood the look and hurried out.

The butler took his place just outside the door, sealing off any chance the conversation might be overheard.

Marcia caught the murderous glint in Paige Murphy's eye and felt a cold shiver run down her spine. Still, she pressed on. "That case was the real reason, wasn't it? Elissa's parents—one was an undercover agent, the other the chief investigator."

She left it at that. There was no point asking about Paige Murphy's connection to the drug lord—or why she seemed so intent on making Elissa suffer.

Some things, Marcia knew, were better left undiscovered.

Paige Murphy let out a soft laugh. "And where's your proof? You think you can throw accusations around with nothing but your word? The Murphy family has never been involved in anything criminal. We're not afraid of police inquiries."

She wasn't wrong. The Murphy family was practically an institution, their legacy as clean as anyone's could be in this city.

But Marcia wasn't deterred. "If you say so. Maybe I'll ask Mr. Murphy—he has a knack for digging up secrets. I'm sure he could turn up something interesting."

She moved as if to leave.

"Butler!" Paige Murphy's voice cracked like a whip.

The butler reappeared instantly.

"Bring Ms. Carson some tea," Paige commanded, her voice icy but controlled.

Relief washed over Marcia. She sat down on a carved wooden chair, composing herself. "Matriarch Murphy, I didn't come here to cause trouble."

2/3

10:29

## Chapter 206

The butler closed the door, poured her a steaming cup of tea, and set it carefully at her side. "Ms. Carson, please."

Paige Murphy's voice was cool. "So what is it you want?"

Marcia traced her finger around the rim of the delicate cup, a glimmer of cold calculation in her eyes. "I'm here to help you."

10:2

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator - Lullaby 207[ 658 words ]

## Chapter 207

At those words, Matriarch Paige Murphy fixed her with a long, steady gaze before speaking with her usual calm.

"Well then, I'm curious—how exactly do you plan to help me?"

"Elissa's involved in that cancer drug research project at the Murphy Group, you're aware of that, aren't you?"

Seeing that Matriarch Paige Murphy's expression didn't change, Marcia continued, "Once that project succeeds, the Murphy family won't be able to control her so easily."

If Elissa became a lead researcher on a major national project, her influence would skyrocket—far beyond what it was now.

Even with all their power, the Murphy family would make waves if they tried to touch her then.

Matriarch Paige Murphy scoffed, “She doesn’t have the ability to pull that off.”

She’d watched Elissa grow up right under her nose.

The only thing remotely remarkable about her was her grades, but every year, thousands of students graduated from Vistapeak University—barely one in a thousand ever made a real name for themselves.

Elissa, of all people, certainly wasn’t going to be the exception. She’d made sure to keep her tightly under control from the very start, cutting off every opportunity.

She was never meant to shine.

The only reason she’d gotten into that project was probably Rowan’s lingering sentimentality—letting her pad her resume, not because anyone truly expected her to achieve anything.

Marcia knew the odds of Elissa making any real breakthrough were slim.

But she pressed on, “But what if she does? With me there, I can make sure she never finishes that research. And even if she does, it won’t be her name on the results.”

“Oh?”

Matriarch Paige Murphy didn’t seem surprised. She took an unhurried sip of tea. “And how do you plan to manage that?”

1/3

**08:55**

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Marcia gave a small smile. “I’ll need a bit of help from you.”

Their conversation finished, Butler Murphy escorted Marcia out of the sitting room. When he returned, he hesitated before voicing his worry. “Ma’am, why not just finish this for good? Why agree to her plan at all?”

No one in the Murphy family, save for the Matriarch herself, knew the real reason Elissa had been adopted all those years ago.

Now, an outsider had gotten wind of it—and not a trustworthy one, either.

Matriarch Paige Murphy narrowed her eyes and smiled with leisurely confidence. “Relax. Even if she had a hundred lives, she wouldn’t dare breathe a word of it. If she can cause Elissa a little trouble for us, why not let her?”

“I’m just worried...” Butler Murphy started to say, but fell silent as he caught the Matriarch’s warning glance.

She was growing less and less willing to hear anyone else’s opinion.

That evening, after dinner at a private bistro, Elissa and Tanya Foster headed home together.

This time, Elissa couldn’t hold it in any longer.

Fresh out of the shower, she marched straight into Tanya’s room. “All right, confession time. Are you and Rex...what exactly is going on there?”

Of all Rowan’s circle, she’d always seen the least interaction between Tanya and Rex. The idea that something had happened between them genuinely caught her off guard.

She’d been waiting for Tanya to bring it up herself, but clearly, Tanya knew how to keep her secrets.

Tanya was drying her hair when Elissa barged in, and she couldn’t help but laugh. “What could it be? We’re exes.”

“...What?”

Elissa froze, thunderstruck. “Exes? You two actually dated?”

“Mm-hmm.”

Tanya set the hairdryer aside, her face unreadable. “Back in college. We were together for three months.”

2/3

**08:56**

Chapter 207

A brief three months—so short that most people wouldn’t have bothered to mention

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But those three months had been enough for Tanya to learn, painfully, that there was a mountain dividing people from different worlds.

No matter how hard she tried, someone like Rex was always out of reach.

“No wonder I never picked up on it.”

## A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator - Lullaby 208[ 704 words ]

Elissa remembered how busy she and Tanya Foster had been back in college.

They were ordinary girls, and they knew that studying was their only way forward. So they raced against time, squeezing every spare moment into their books.

Since they didn't even live in the same dorm, they might only see each other once or twice a week.

Elissa glanced at Tanya. “So what happened? Why did you two break up? Honestly, when I saw Rex today, it was obvious he still has feelings for you.”

“Because of the gap between us,” Tanya said, her tone light, as if it didn't matter at all. “His older sister gave me a check for a million dollars and asked me to break up with him.”

Rex's sister was over ten years his senior, and in the Wilkinson family, her word carried as much weight as their parents.

She'd joined the army early and risen quickly through the ranks, and over the years, she'd become someone who never took 'no' for an answer.

“What?” Elissa gasped.

Tanya laughed. “Honestly, it's not that strange. Aren't there a million soap operas like that?”

“No,” Elissa shook her head. “That's not what I meant. I wanted to ask—you didn't actually take the money, did you?”

“...No.” Tanya sighed. “I was just too young back then.”

She'd been barely twenty. Her own family's relentless favoritism toward sons had already taught her how important money could be. But at that age, even if you're dirt poor, pride always feels more precious, and you just can't stomach a single ounce of

humiliation.

Tanya flopped onto the bed and stared at the ceiling, lost in the memory. “I almost started crying. I jumped up, told her I’d break up with him, and then—right in front of her—ripped the check to shreds and slapped it back down on the table.”

She later heard that Rex’s sister got another promotion, and for days Tanya couldn’t sleep, terrified she’d come after her in some way.

After all, it would take just the flick of her finger to ruin Tanya’s whole future.

1/3

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Chapter 200

Luckily, it ended up being nothing. Rex’s sister probably forgot her name the very next day.

Elissa listened, torn between wanting to laugh and feeling a pang of sympathy. “So... how do you feel about it now?”

Tanya blinked her dry eyes. “Do you really think his family would ever let him me?”

Elissa’s heart ached even more at that. She didn’t know what to say.

marry

The only reason she’d married Frank was because it suited them both. Even then, the Atwaters hadn’t approved at first—Frank had to fight for her.

But the Wilkinsons were famous for being strict. And Rex wasn’t even the eldest; he was the fourth child, with not just parents and grandparents above him, but three older siblings, too.

In the end, his sister’s opinion pretty much summed up the family’s stance.

Seeing Elissa fall silent, Tanya just smiled, as if she’d expected it. “So what I think doesn’t really matter, does it?”

It didn’t matter.

She wasn’t about to become someone’s mistress, and there was no way Rex’s family would ever budge.

Elissa reached out and gently mussed Tanya's hair, at a loss for words..il she could do was sit quietly by her side.

A long while passed before Elissa's phone rang. She stood up and walked out to answer.

"Hello, Mrs. Garrett?"

Janice Garrett's voice was cheerful and warm. "Hi, Dr. Elissa! Are you free tomorrow?"

"I am," Elissa replied, smiling. "If you have time, I'd love to come over and wish you a happy New Year."

She'd been thinking about it for days. But given how close-or not-they were, it didn't feel right to visit too early and risk intruding on Janice's time with her other friends and family.

If Janice hadn't called today, Elissa had planned to ring her in the morning to ask if it was convenient.

2/3

08:56

Chapter 208

"That would be wonderful!" Janice exclaimed, practically beaming through the phone.

When she hung up, she was so delighted she could hardly contain herself.

Rowan, watching her glow with happiness, raised an eyebrow. "Who was that on the phone?"

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator - Lullaby 209[ 712 words ]

Janice shot him a sideways glance. "Why do you care? Are you staying home tomorrow, or going to see that new girlfriend of yours?"

Rowan looked pleased. "I just spent time with her today."

"So you're not going out tomorrow?"

Janice didn't bother hiding her intentions. "I invited that young doctor over for dinner tomorrow. Thought it'd be good for you two to get acquainted..."

"Nope."

Rowan cut her off without missing a beat, putting on a dead-serious face. "Just remembered—I've got something to do tomorrow."

Janice rolled her eyes, seeing straight through him. "What, is your girlfriend the jealous type? She'd get upset just because you met someone new?"

"Well—"

A shadow flickered across Rowan's deep eyes as he fished a cigarette from his pocket and rolled it between his fingers. "If she had dinner with a man who almost became her blind date, I'd be jealous too."

Every time he saw Frank sitting beside her, he couldn't help thinking—why did her husband have to be someone else?

Why not him?

The next morning, Elissa woke up early, got ready, and set out to pay Janice a New Year's visit.

This time, she entered the neighborhood on her own, not wanting to trouble Janice to come out and meet her.

"Elissa, Happy New Year!"

Janice spotted the bags of health supplements in Elissa's hands and quickly waved her off. "Oh, you really didn't have to bring all this! I just wanted you over for a meal."

"It's nothing, really."

Elissa smiled and slipped off her shoes in the entryway. As she opened the shoe

1/3

**08:56**

Chapter 209

cabinet, she glanced at a pair of men's dress shoes that looked oddly familiar.

A high-end, handmade brand.

Very expensive.

Rowan owned a pair just like these—and if she remembered right, he'd been wearing this exact style yesterday.

But there was no way Rowan would be here. His grandmother was Paige Jensen, the matriarch of the Murphy family.

Elissa pulled on a pair of wool slippers and followed Janice into the living room, still smiling. “These supplements are just what you need for your health. They're perfectly safe for you.”

“Wonderful, wonderful.”

Janice was all smiles. “You really shouldn't have spent so much.”

The more she looked at Elissa, the more she liked her.

So gentle, so thoughtful.

Pity that rascal Rowan—he just doesn't have the luck!

A sleek black Bentley was gliding out of the estate.

Evan Murphy was at the wheel. He glanced in the rearview mirror. “Sir, you're acting like you're dodging ghosts. What's got you so spooked?”

Ten minutes earlier, the old lady had taken a phone call, and suddenly Rowan was throwing on a coat and hurrying out the door—like he couldn't get away fast enough.

Ian Murphy, the sharper of the two brothers, rolled his eyes. “No wonder you're the middle child. You're such an idiot.”

Evan shot back, “Takes one to know one.”

Ian didn't bother keeping it a secret. “He's worried about what he'll say to Miss Elissa. That's why he bolted.”

Everyone in the staff knew what was going on between their boss and Miss Elissa.

Well—everyone except Evan, who only caught on recently.

At this, Evan looked genuinely puzzled. “What's the big deal? She's still married to

08:56

Chapter 209

Frank, isn't she? It's just dinner with another woman."

The air in the car turned icy.

Even with the heater on, Ian felt a chill run down his back.

Rowan's voice came from the backseat, cold as steel. "You afraid I'll mistake you for a mute?"

#

"

Evan grumbled inwardly.

Guess the truth really does sting.

-

After lunch at Janice's, Elissa sat and chatted a while before taking her leave.

Aaron and Jacqueline's flight was scheduled to land at Vistapeak International Airport at four, and Cliff Riley had arranged to meet her so they could pick up their mentors together.

As she pulled up outside Cliff's building, she glanced at the clock.

Perfect timing.

With the post-holiday traffic, the roads to the airport were bound to be packed. Factoring in the delays, she'd arrive just in time.

Cliff climbed in and buckled up, giving her a once-over and a teasing smile. "You look even skinnier after the holidays-how's that possible?"

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator - Lullaby 210[ 666 words ]

"Really?"

Elissa instinctively touched her own face. "I don't think so. I've been eating just fine."

There was still enough food in the fridge to last her and Tanya Foster another couple of days.

They hadn't bought much over the holidays—just some snacks and fresh produce. Everything else came courtesy of Father Benedict's wife and Mrs. Garrett, who made sure they were well supplied with homemade goodies.

Even so, Elissa felt like she'd put on a few pounds.

Cliff chuckled. "Enjoy the rest while you can. Once work starts up again, it'll be non-stop for the rest of the year."

A clinic wasn't like other businesses. Apart from a brief break at the end of the year, *you* had to be ready to work at any moment.

Elissa wasn't just seeing patients in person—she also hosted live online Q&A sessions and was now involved in a new pharmaceutical research project that kept her busier than ever.

She started the car, unbothered. "Honestly, I like keeping busy."

She thrived on that kind of fast-paced routine.

And sure enough, traffic near the airport was a nightmare.

By the time she'd picked up Aaron and Jacqueline and made it back downtown, the city was already glittering with lights.

Dinner was Cliff's responsibility tonight. He chose a quiet, unpretentious restaurant known for its light, healthy cuisine—run by a southern chef who knew exactly what he was doing.

As soon as the four of them arrived, a server led them to a private dining room. The space was roomy and tastefully decorated.

Cliff handed the menu to Aaron and Jacqueline, smiling warmly. "Father, Mrs. Foster, you haven't had good home cooking in a while. Tonight, you two pick the dishes."

"Alright," Aaron replied easily. He knew everyone's favorites and wasted no time placing the order.

Elissa sat beside Jacqueline, looking sweet and earnest. "Mrs. Foster, are you really feeling much

better?"

She half-suspected Aaron was just telling her that to put her at ease.

Jacqueline stifled a laugh and held out her wrist. “Go on, Dr. Drummond. If you’re worried, check my pulse yourself.”

“Don’t mind if I do,” Elissa grinned, setting her middle and ring fingers gently on Jacqueline’s wrist before she could protest.

Aaron and Cliff exchanged amused glances. “Would you look at that? She doesn’t even trust my medical skills anymore.”

1/2

18:01

Chapter 210

“It’s not that I don’t trust you, Father,” Elissa protested, genuinely horrified by the idea.

Jacqueline came to her defense. “Elissa’s just worried about me. You men wouldn’t understand.”

Elissa withdrew her hand, smiling. “You really are recovering well, but *you* should still take it easy for

a while.”

“Don’t worry. Your father’s keeping a close eye on me,” Jacqueline said, patting Elissa’s hand

affectionately before turning the conversation to her. “Now that you and Frank are divorced, have you thought about what’s next?”

It was a question Jacqueline and Aaron had wanted to ask for a while, but they’d held off until after the holidays.

After all, if Frank could cheat while still married, it was only natural for Elissa—still young—to consider moving on and finding someone new. Every woman deserved a place to call home.

Cliff paused mid-bite, glancing at Elissa with a flicker of hope in his eyes.

Elissa pressed her lips together. “I haven’t really thought about it yet. I just want to focus on the new research project for now.”

“Here, have some fish,” Cliff said with an easy smile, placing a piece of steamed fish in her bowl with the serving fork.

“Thank you,” Elissa replied.

Jacqueline noticed the look in Cliff’s eyes and nodded in approval. “That’s a good plan. You’re still young–no need to rush. Keep working, and take your time figuring out what kind of partner you want.”

“When it comes to choosing a husband, character is everything. If you’re not sure, sometimes it’s best to choose someone you already know and trust.”

And in her opinion, Cliff was the obvious choice.

Chapter 211

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator - Lullaby 211[ 655 words ]

Jacqueline had always thought Elissa and Cliff made the perfect pair.

Who would have guessed that, in the end, Elissa chose Frank.

Not that anyone could blame her. The first time Jacqueline and Aaron met Frank, they too had been taken in by his gentle demeanor–a refined, trustworthy man, or *so* he seemed.

It just goes to show: you never really know someone.

After dinner, the group headed out of the restaurant, and from a distance, Elissa spotted Frank.

He must have just come from a business meeting. Dressed in a sharp, tailored suit, with striking features and an easy confidence, he stood out effortlessly among the *crowd*.

Frank saw Elissa immediately.

She wore a sky–blue dress, her delicate face relaxed and glowing with quiet joy. Her silky black hair fell loosely over her shoulders, and she looked as sweet and serene as ever.

One hand held her wool coat, the other rested on Jacqueline’s arm.

Beside her stood Cliff, her senior from university.

The hallway buzzed with people; waiters passed by carrying trays of sizzling dishes. Cliff stood protectively at Elissa's side, almost unconsciously shielding her from the bustling crowd.

Every time Elissa glanced up at him, she'd flash a bright, easy smile. From where he stood, Frank couldn't make out what they were saying, but it was clear they were close.

To any onlooker, they might have seemed like a family of four.

An older couple, and a newlywed pair.

What Frank couldn't figure out was how Elissa—one of Aaron's many students—had become so close to them.

One thing was certain: around Cliff, Elissa was completely at ease, a side of her Frank rarely saw.

"Mr. Atwater?"

The man chatting with Frank noticed his distraction and, following Frank's gaze, looked over. His surprise was obvious. "Mr. Atwater, isn't that Mr. Blaine over there?"

But Frank barely seemed to hear. Without a word, he strode purposefully toward Aaron, a subtle edge

to his movements.

The other man quickly caught up.

"Mr. Blaine, happy New Year."

Just as Elissa and her friends were about to step outside, a familiar voice called out from behind.

Elissa stiffened, but she had no choice but to turn with the others.

Aaron glanced at Frank, remembering all too well the fuss he'd caused last time over his sister-in-law.

1/2

18:01

Chapter 211

He didn't bother to hide his irritation. "Is there something you need, Mr. Atwater?"

Frank hesitated, caught off guard. Aaron was known for being blunt, but Frank had expected at least some courtesy, given he was Elissa's husband.

Still, Frank recovered quickly, unbothered. He smiled coolly. "Nothing important. Just wanted to wish you a happy New Year."

"And to thank you for always looking out for Elissa."

As he spoke, he started to move naturally between Elissa and Cliff, intent on separating them. But before he could, the man who'd been speaking with him caught up.

Beaming, the man greeted Aaron. "Mr. Blaine, do you remember me? I was there when you treated Mayor Campbell's father-in-law a while back."

Aaron thought for a moment. "Sorry, I'm getting old. My memory isn't what it used *to* be."

"No problem, no problem at all."

The man didn't seem offended. His gaze flicked to Cliff and Elissa. "Mr. Cliff, is this your girlfriend?"

At the faint smile that crossed Cliff's face, the man jumped at the chance to flatter them. "*You* two make such a stunning couple. A perfect match, honestly!"

The words had barely left his mouth before the mood shifted—a cold tension seemed to settle over

them.

Aaron caught sight of Frank's face darkening, and had to fight the urge to applaud.

Elissa looked up just in time to see the chill in Frank's eyes, his expression hardening. She opened her mouth to explain, not wanting him to misunderstand, but before she could speak, he drew her firmly to his side, his arm possessive around her shoulders.

2/2

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator - Lullaby 212[ 608 words ]

## **Chapter 212**

Frank shot the man a sidelong glance, his tone unfailingly gentle as always. "Mr. Bryant, if you can't even recognize my wife, I don't see any reason for your company to continue working with the Atwater Group."

There was not a shred of courtesy in his words.

His displeasure was written all over his face.

Mr. Bryant froze, all thoughts of currying favor forgotten. He stammered, “Oh, it’s just a huge misunderstanding, Mr. Atwater! You’re a big-hearted man—surely you won’t hold this against me.”

He wished he could sew his own lips shut.

If only he’d kept his mouth shut in the first place!

But this Mr. Atwater didn’t seem anything like the rumors in their circles—that he was indifferent to his wife, head-over-heels for someone else. He seemed to care, didn’t he?

If looks could kill, Frank would have finished him off on the spot.

Aaron caught Frank’s pointed glare and said lazily, “It was just a careless remark, not worth fussing over. After all, you’ve made quite a scene with your own escapades, and Elissa has never made a fuss about those.”

The room fell quiet.

Only Elissa, watching her mentor stand up for her, felt a warmth blossom in her chest.

She glanced at the time and spoke up, “Professor, it’s getting late. Let me drive you and Mrs. Carter

home.”

“Of course, dear. Thank you.”

Jacqueline, well aware that the divorce wasn’t public yet, tugged Aaron away before he could say something inappropriate. “Let Elissa take us home. I’m exhausted.”

As the three of them headed out, Frank shot Cliff a cold, warning look.

Elissa turned *and* called back, “Cliff, come on!”

“Coming.”

Cliff replied, then gave Frank a faint, almost taunting smile. “Mr. Atwater, I’ll be heading out as well—Elissa’s offered to drop me off.”

Mr. Bryant, standing off to the side, broke out in a cold sweat.

What was Cliff thinking? Even though it was obvious Frank minded, he still had to push his buttons.

Elissa knew Aaron and Jacqueline had just gotten off a long-haul flight and would be exhausted, so she dropped them home first.

Only then did she take Cliff.

By the time she'd finished and returned to Vistapeak Gardens, it was nearly ten.

1/2

18:01

Chapter 212

She expertly reversed into her parking spot and had just stepped out when she noticed a particularly familiar Maybach parked beside her.

A limited edition—there were only two in all of Vistapeak City.

One was Frank's go-to car. The other gathered dust at Rowan's Rivercross residence.

Rowan's taste in cars was as flamboyant as his personality; he'd never bother with something this understated.

Which meant the car parked here could only be Frank's.

Elissa was about to ignore it and head upstairs when the Maybach's rear *door* swung *open* from

inside.

The first thing she saw was a pair of polished leather shoes, then long legs clad in a perfectly pressed suit—no sign of a wrinkle.

Frank stepped out, his eyes sharp as he regarded her. "Why were you having dinner with Cliff tonight?"

On New Year's, outside of business obligations, people only spent time with close family and friends. If she and Cliff were just colleagues, there was no way they'd be this familiar.

Elissa's face was cool and distant as she countered, "So now I'm not even allowed to have dinner

with whomever I choose?"

“Elissa-”

Frank closed the car door *and took* two steps toward her, a slight furrow in his brow. “It’s not that I object to you seeing people. But your relationship with Cliff-”

“I don’t owe you any explanations about my private life.”

## A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator - Lullaby 213[ 634 words ]

Even before the divorce, what they had could hardly be called a normal marriage.

Frank had never once reported to her about his relationship with Marcia, not even when they were together.

He knew, of course, that what had happened with Marcia had hurt her, and tried to explain, “It’s really over between me and Marcia. There’s nothing left. I won’t be seeing her again.”

“I promise you,” he said.

But Elissa didn’t really care anymore.

Whether they ended up together happily ever after or parted ways for good, it no longer mattered to

her.

The divorce was settled—there was no turning back.

She lowered her eyes, silent for a moment before glancing at him. “So it’s over with Marcia. But does that mean there won’t be anyone else?”

She had always believed: once someone betrays you, they’ll do it again. A person’s true nature never

changes.

She wasn’t willing to pay the price to gamble on someone changing—not anymore. Her life didn’t offer her many chances to make mistakes.

Her question made Frank hesitate.

He was still searching for little Nine...

If little Nine wasn't married, she'd need him to look after her, maybe spend more time and energy on

her...

He had no intentions in that direction, but Elissa probably wouldn't believe it.

Elissa watched his silence, and without waiting for an answer, turned and headed upstairs.

The holiday ended before she knew it, and on the first day the clinic reopened, Elissa was scheduled for appointments.

She quickly settled back into her work routine, waking before dawn to get ready. The weather was warming, but the early mornings still called for a winter coat.

At least this time, she didn't run into Marcia at the clinic.

As soon as Elissa arrived, one of the nurses rushed over, eyes bright with excitement. She leaned in and whispered, "Elissa, I have some great news!"

Elissa looked at her, intrigued. "What is it?"

"Word is, that homewrecker won't be coming to the clinic anymore!" the nurse said, voice raised in triumph.

Ever since they'd learned the real reason for Elissa's marriage troubles was Marcia, everyone at the

1/2

18:02

Chapter 213

clinic had been quietly furious with her.

It was one thing to interfere in someone's marriage, but to deliberately make them misunderstand Elissa—that was unforgivable.

Elissa was a little surprised, but said nothing. She went straight to her office, changed into her coat, and began calling in patients.

The earlier she started, the more walk-ins she could squeeze in.

After the indulgence of the holidays, many patients' conditions had worsened, but Elissa had expected as much.

Around here, the holidays were a big deal—people celebrated with all sorts of rich food, and expecting them to abstain was almost cruel.

By noon, Elissa had barely had time to breathe, let alone run to the restroom.

Just as she finished seeing her last patient, Cliff knocked and came in, white coat crisp and smiling warmly. “Elissa, did you hear about Marcia?”

She nodded. “I heard.”

Cliff hesitated, then said, “Frank called my parents about it a couple days ago.”

He hadn't really wanted to tell Elissa about this.

But after some thought, he realized she deserved to know. If this bit of news could bring her even a little peace, then it was worth it.

Whether she and Frank got back together wasn't his business to meddle in.

Sure, he liked her—but it was the kind of liking that wished her well.

If she looked at him a little more, of course he'd be happy. But if Frank's change of heart could make her genuinely happy, then maybe that was for the best.

Elissa raised an eyebrow. “That's not really like him.”

If it had been Rowan, she wouldn't have been surprised at all.

2/2

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator - Lullaby 214[ 642 words ]

## **Chapter 214**

Still, Elissa couldn't quite believe Frank was the type to hound someone to the bitter end—unless Marcia had done something truly unforgivable.

Cliff smiled, about to respond, but Elissa spoke again. “Anyway, none of this really concerns me anymore.”

How Frank chose to deal with Marcia was his business. The feud was between them, and Elissa wanted no part of it.

“Right.”

Cliff suddenly felt a wave of relief, as if a taut string inside him had just loosened. He chuckled lightly. “You finished up here? Let’s grab something to eat. My car’s in the shop, so I’ll have to hitch a ride with you to the lab.”

“Sure.”

Elissa stood, shrugged out of her lab coat, grabbed her bag, and left with him.

Now that the holidays were over, the research project’s schedule had to pick up pace. The two of them, without needing to discuss it, chose a restaurant nearby for lunch.

Once they were done, they headed straight to the Murphy Group’s research center.

The Murphy Group’s research institute was nothing if *not* lavish; everything a team could need was right at their fingertips—state-of-the-art equipment, a full inventory of medical supplies—no time wasted scrambling for resources.

At work, Elissa and Cliff were in perfect sync.

Of the other three people in the Traditional Medicine Unit, only Xavier would occasionally lend a hand. The other two, who had openly mocked Elissa before, spent their days pretending to be busy, but in reality, made no progress at all.

They looked down on Elissa, convinced that a young woman like her didn’t deserve to be team leader and wouldn’t accomplish anything.

So why would they put genuine effort into the research? Why work hard just to let Elissa walk away with the credit? Not a chance.

After all, in the world of scientific research, stories of people getting their work stolen were a dime a dozen. They weren’t about to be the next cautionary tale.

Elissa was in the middle of her work when Zachary Jones knocked on the lab door and called to the Traditional Medicine Unit, “Wrap up what you’re doing. There’s a meeting in the third-floor conference room in thirty minutes.”

“What’s the meeting about?” Elissa asked.

Their team had always had an unspoken rule: meetings were announced at least a day in advance so no one’s workflow was disrupted. A last-minute meeting like this was unheard of.

Zachary Jones didn't bother to hide anything. "It's something arranged by the government.

1/2

18:02

## Chapter 214

Apparently, there's a company with a new project that aligns with ours, so they want us to collaborate—see if we can speed up development."

"Alright, got it."

Elissa didn't mind. In fact, if they could finish the project a day sooner, that meant saving more lives.

She and Cliff wrapped up their work and headed downstairs with the rest of the team.

When they arrived, the other company's research team hadn't shown up yet.

After about ten minutes, the sharp sound of high heels echoed down the hallway.

As the head of the Traditional Medicine Unit, Elissa stood with Zachary *Jones*, ready to make a good first impression. After all, they'd be working together soon.

Marcia strode in, dressed head-to-toe in a crisp white suit, leading a small entourage—her entrance anything but subtle.

Elissa frowned slightly as Marcia walked straight up to Zachary Jones. "Dr. Jones, it's an honor. When my team heard you'd be heading up Murphy Group's side, everyone was eager to learn from you."

"You're too kind," Zachary replied, racking his brain for any recollection of her from the research community, and coming up blank. "And you are...?"

"I'm Marcia, head of our team." Marcia finished her introduction, then turned to Elissa with a small, knowing smile. "Ms. Drummond and I—well, we go way back."

## Chapter 215

## Chapter 215

## A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator - Lullaby 215[ 634 words ]

hary Jones raised his brows in mild surprise. “Oh? Is that so?”

If she was close to Elissa, then her medical expertise must be impressive, too. That would certainly explain how she managed to become the project lead.

Elissa, however, had lost all interest in pleasantries. She settled back in her chair, making her detachment obvious. “We’re hardly close,” she said coolly.

Even the most oblivious person could sense there was no love lost between her and Marcia.

The two habitual slackers in Elissa’s team wasted no time seizing the chance to mock her.

Raymond clicked his tongue. “See? The people with real talent always go it alone. Unlike *some* who worm their way into the Murphy Group, padding their résumés without actually doing anything.”

Until Elissa joined the project, none of them had ever heard her name. Yet as soon as she arrived, she

became their boss.

James chimed in, “Exactly. If you’re so capable, let’s see some results. If you’re not up for the job, stop pretending you’re cut out for it.”

“That’s enough.”

Zachary Jones couldn’t stand their petty behavior any longer. “If you can’t keep up, that’s on you. No need to make a spectacle in front of outsiders.”

They failed to recognize Elissa’s abilities simply because she didn’t report every move to them. But as the project director, Zachary knew exactly what she’d accomplished.

Raymond, emboldened by his years at the Murphy Group, shot Elissa a resentful look, barely able to contain his frustration. “Who says we’re not as good? When they picked the team lead, it wasn’t exactly a fair competition, was it?”

Elissa’s gaze swept over them, her tone icy. “Then tell me, what progress have you actually made on the project lately?”

James scoffed, shaking his leg impatiently. “What, so you can claim our work as your own?”

Cliff finally spoke up, unable *to* listen any longer. He gave a short laugh. “I forgot to mention—Ms. Drummond has no need *to* steal your research. She’s already moved on to minimizing side effects, and she’s managed to reduce them by fifty percent.”

The room fell silent—not just Raymond and James, but everyone present looked stunned.

Impossible. The Murphy Group’s project had only been underway for a short time. How could anyone have made such staggering progress?

Reducing side effects by half? Forget whether it was possible—no one could’ve done it so quickly. It sounded like pure fantasy.

Raymond and James exchanged a glance before protesting, “No way! If that were true, why haven’t

we heard about it?”

1/2

18:02

Chapter 215

They were convinced Elissa was making things up just to save face.

Every time she came into the lab, they were there too. She never made a show of anything. If she’d really achieved a breakthrough like that, people would be celebrating her in the halls.

Elissa just smiled, unbothered. “This is our research. Why would we need to inform you?”

These two had been slacking off and undermining her from the start, simply because she was *young* and a woman. Elissa had never bothered to rein them in; their laziness didn’t affect her progress, after all.

James rolled his eyes. “If you didn’t get results, just admit it. No need to put on a brave face. *You’re* young and inexperienced—nobody’s expecting miracles. But you’d do well to step down as team lead before you embarrass yourself.”

**At** that, Marcia let out a barely perceptible sigh of relief. She knew it—there was no way Elissa had that kind of talent. Impossible.

Zachary watched the two men’s stubborn posturing with growing impatience. He cut in, “It’s not Elissa who’s putting on a show—it’s you two who don’t know when to quit.”

James’s arrogant smirk faded a little. “What’s that supposed to mean, Zach?”

## A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator - Lullaby 216[ 632 words ]

“She didn’t lie to you.”

Zachary Jones’s tone was calm, almost indifferent. “The new drug that reduces side effects by fifty percent is already in clinical trials. But based on Elissa’s previous track record in research and development, there’s no room for failure—she always succeeds.”

Reducing side effects wasn’t the kind of breakthrough you achieved overnight. Every single time, Elissa had to rack her brain to make adjustments—incremental, painstaking improvements, one after

another.

But she was talented, and more than that, she had the rare ability *to* pull it off. Each tweak she made worked out. Zachary saw it all firsthand and couldn’t help but be impressed.

Noticing James and Raymond exchanging incredulous glances, Zachary *decided* to twist the knife: “Originally, Ms. Drummond credited the entire team with this success. But clearly, *you* two weren’t involved at all. So, I’ll just list Ms. Drummond and Cliff as the researchers of record.”

James and Raymond stared in shock, too stunned to even protest. Their earlier denials had *been* far too absolute—now they’d backed themselves into a corner with no way out.

Marcia’s face darkened as well, but after a moment’s thought, she turned to Elissa. “Since our teams will be collaborating from now on, why don’t you tell us more about this drug you’re already testing,

Ms. Drummond?”

Everyone in the room was floored. Marcia’s intent couldn’t have been more transparent—she wanted to claim a share of the credit with zero effort.

Elissa arched a brow and fixed her with a cold stare. “You’re right, it’s a joint research project. But I never said you’d get all the rewards without putting in the work. When you can contribute something truly valuable, I’ll be happy to share.”

It was crystal clear what Marcia was up to. She wanted the prestige and the benefits, but without putting in the sweat, all she could do was resort to scheming.

This meeting had achieved nothing, Elissa thought. All their project had gained was another dead weight—someone who'd slap their name on it as a 'collaborator' but spend every moment looking to

cash in.

As soon as the meeting was over, Elissa didn't waste a second. She stood and left with Cliff at her side.

But Marcia, heels clacking sharply on the floor, hurried after her and called out, "You're just bluffing. The others may be fooled, but I don't believe for a second that some ordinary Vistapeak University student could develop anything groundbreaking."

Marcia couldn't deny that Elissa had some talent. But to develop a new drug, and cut side effects by half, in such a short time? No way. Unless Mr. Blaine himself showed up. And even then, Mr. Blaine was getting on in years—his energy was limited.

"But my mentor is Dr. Aaron," Elissa replied, her eyes glinting with a mocking smile. "The same Dr. Aaron—Mr. Blaine—that you tried so hard to apprentice with, but failed."

1/2

18:02

Chapter 216

She was talking about the time Frank had brought Marcia to Dr. Aaron's home, hoping to make her his student. Marcia remembered it all too well—and the humiliation the old man had handed her

Her glare was furious, but she sneered, "So you think four years in college is enough to master everything Dr. Aaron knows?"

Everyone in medicine knew that, especially in the more traditional branches, mastery took both talent and, above all, time. Four years was barely enough to bluff your way through a clinic, let alone lead real research

Besides, rumor had it Dr. Aaron had only ever passed down his full knowledge to a single, secret apprentice. Everyone else, at best, had only scratched the surface.

Elissa looked at her and suddenly smiled. "But did it ever cross your mind that maybe I've been learning for more than just four years?"

## A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator - Lullaby 217[ 672 words ]

Marcia froze for a moment when she heard that, then burst out laughing, giving Elissa a look that

said she thought she was crazy.

“Don’t tell me you expect me to believe you’re Mr. Blaine’s personal apprentice? Dream on!”

If Elissa really was Aaron’s apprentice, she’d be rubbing elbows with the city’s elite by now, already famous and successful—certainly not stuck here slaving away in research.

Elissa gave a slight, dismissive smile. “Whether I am or not, I don’t owe you an explanation.”

Without waiting for Marcia’s retort, she turned on her heel and strode away.

Marcia called after her, unwilling to let it go. “Aren’t you even curious why I’m here today?”

“Not interested.”

Elissa didn’t even look back.

She could guess well enough—Marcia was probably going to dangle Frank’s name in front of her, claim he was pulling strings for her. After all, there weren’t many people in Vistapeak City with that kind of influence.

As Elissa stepped into the elevator, the doors nearly closed before another colleague from the Traditional Medicine Unit hurried in, eyes shining with admiration. “Ms. Drummond, you’re

incredible!”

Elissa replied calmly, “Anyone who’s dedicated to their research can achieve great things. It all depends on where you set your mind.”

This colleague was different from James and the others—he’d never looked down on her, and would even offer a hand when she needed help.

Xavier nodded enthusiastically, grinning. “If you ever need anything, just let me know.”

“Thank you.” Elissa smiled.

When the elevator arrived, they exited together.

Once they'd put some space between themselves and the others, Cliff leaned in and asked quietly, "Are you really planning to work with Marcia?"

"As if." Elissa didn't even hesitate. "She's not capable of developing anything."

If someone can't even manage her own son's dietary regimen and has to come to me for help, what business does she have doing pharmaceutical research? Only Frank would be reckless enough to suggest something like that.

But the moment she thought of **Frank**, he appeared—as if summoned. Elissa was just about to head toward the lab when she spotted him.

Frank saw her, too, and his gaze flickered to Cliff at her side. He frowned slightly but kept his composure as he approached. "Where have you been? I came to pick you up, but they said you weren't in the lab."

1/2

18:02

Chapter 217

"I was in a meeting with Marcia," Elissa replied, meeting his eyes. Then, with a hint of mischief, she added, "Someone made quite an investment in her, wanting her to co-lead our project."

Frank's brow furrowed at once. "I had nothing to do with that," he said, irritated. "No one consulted

me."

He was clearly annoyed. He'd told Marcia to keep a low profile, and she couldn't even manage that for two days. Then again, it was just like her—she'd never been one to follow the rules.

Elissa studied his expression. He didn't seem to be lying, which left her puzzled, but before she could think it through, Frank said, "It's about time for dinner. Let's go eat—I'll drive you home."

Frank had finally figured out that Elissa was stubborn; forcing her to move back to Greenwood Manor was pointless. But he could show her, through patience and small changes, that things could be different. After all, for the woman he hoped to spend his life with, he was willing to be patient.

As Elissa was mulling over how to turn him down, Frank's phone rang.

He glanced at the screen—Bernard was calling. Without stepping away from Elissa, he answered, “What is it?”

“Mr. Atwater,” Bernard said efficiently, “our people at Cresthaven found a childhood photo of that little girl in the Pine Hill Orphanage records. Would you like to see it?”

Frank's eyes narrowed. “Send it to me.”

“Right away.”

Within seconds, Bernard said, “It's on your WhatsApp now.”

A notification popped up. Frank tapped the message open. As soon as he saw the photo, a sense of urgency flickered across his face.

2/2

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator - Lullaby 218[ 717 words ]

## **Chapter 218**

The little girl in the photo had bright, sparkling eyes and a beaming smile, so adorable that bit by bit, she merged with the girl in his memories.

So many years had passed—Frank's recollection of that child's face had long since grown hazy.

Yet right now, in this moment, the girl in the picture overlapped perfectly with the one from his past.

What's more, the photo itself struck him as oddly familiar.

He was certain he'd seen it somewhere before.

When he noticed Elissa's gaze drifting in his direction, Frank, afraid she'd realize he was searching for someone else, instinctively tucked his phone away and cleared his throat. “I-”

“You probably have something urgent to take care of, don't you?” Elissa caught the impatience in his

demeanor and offered him an out.

Frank was, in fact, itching to confirm where he'd seen that photo before. "Yeah, I do need to handle something," he admitted.

"Then go ahead," Elissa said.

Frank glanced warily at Cliff, who stood beside her, but after weighing his options, he nodded. "Alright, I really do have to run."

Once Elissa gave her consent, Frank strode toward the elevators, every step betraying his anxious

urgency.

He barely waited for the car door to close before dialing Bernard. "I know I've seen this photo somewhere before," he blurted out as soon as the call connected.

He stared at the image, feeling more and more certain—the girl looked so familiar. Not just from the scattered encounters in Cresthaven years ago. No, this was a deeper familiarity, as if the answer were right on the tip of his tongue.

Frank's voice was tense, tinged with frustration. "Dig into that photo. Track down every possible lead—don't miss a single detail."

"Yes, Mr. Atwater," Bernard replied crisply.

Frank took a steadying breath, then asked in a low, measured voice, "Last time, Marcia said the person who adopted little Nine was from Vistapeak City. How's your search going on that front?"

"Still working on it," Bernard reported. "I'm starting with the old-money families who might have had ties to the drug trade. That narrows things down, but it'll still take some time."

Vistapeak was home to its fair share of wealthy families, but only a handful had ever brushed up against the narcotics business. Investigating from this angle might save them some legwork.

Still, adoptions weren't something most families advertised, and confirming them meant a lot of quiet digging. Plus, these families were experts at covering their tracks; evidence didn't just vanish by accident.

1/2

18:02

Chapter 218

Frank nodded. "Make it fast."

After hanging up, he instructed the driver to head out, then immediately placed another call.

"Did you arrange for Marcia to join the pharmaceutical project?" he demanded as soon as the line

connected.

Of all people, his mother was the most likely to have meddled.

Carmela, unfazed by his pointed tone, denied it without missing a beat. "What project? I haven't heard. a thing. Why would I get involved?"

Frank didn't believe a word. His brow furrowed. "You'd better tell her to stay out of this. My patience is running thin."

He'd let Marcia off the hook once, for the sake of his brother and Hickey Atwater, but there wouldn't

be a second time.

After Frank left, Elissa packed up her things in the lab and headed home to Vistapeak Gardens.

Rowan hadn't been back since New Year's, and Elissa had secretly hoped he'd finally grown tired of the ordinary apartments here and decided to return to his grand mansion. The thought alone brought her a quiet sense of relief.

Living across the hall from him, that whole contract ordeal had hung over her like a curse.

Now that Rowan had supposedly moved back to Rivercross Residence, she could finally breathe

easy.

She was even humming to herself as she stepped out of the elevator.

"Well, someone's in a *good mood* tonight. Did you know I'd be coming back?"

She hadn't even reached her front door when a smooth, rich voice sounded behind her, stopping her

in her tracks. The cheerful *tune* caught in her throat.

She hadn't expected Rowan to return so suddenly, without the slightest warning.

No wonder she hadn't glanced to the left when the elevator doors opened.

Chapter 219

## Chapter 219

### A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator - Lullaby 219[ 735 words ]

Elissa stiffened as she turned around, only to find Rowan leaning casually against the doorway, his dark eyes fixed on her.

He looked freshly showered—his short, inky hair still damp and falling haphazardly across his forehead. The usual sharpness in his features had softened, replaced by a relaxed, at-home air that made him look refreshingly approachable.

Elissa's expression was all resignation. "You're reading *too much into* it."

Wait, no. She was the one overthinking things.

How could she have been naïve enough to believe that, after finally getting something to hold over her, Rowan would just let it go?

He glanced at her with a faint, teasing smile. "Not exactly thrilled to see me back, are *you*?"

"...That's not true." The words came out flat and unconvincing.

If Rowan noticed, he didn't let on. Instead, he beckoned her over. "Then come eat."

Elissa knew she didn't really have a choice. With that agreement between them, she had even less say in front of Rowan than she ever did with Frank.

She changed her shoes and headed into the dining room, where four dishes and a steaming bowl of soup sat on the table. Her eyes sparkled with surprise as she glanced at Frank. "You made all this?"

Each dish was neatly plated—nothing like takeout or leftovers from a restaurant.

And after all, the breakfast he'd made the other morning—the nourishing soup and the perfect omelet—had been delicious. It wasn't a stretch to believe he could cook.

But Rowan arched an eyebrow, dodging her question. “So, do you prefer men who can cook, or men

who can’t?”

Elissa thought for a moment, then looked at him earnestly. “Do you want the truth?”

He fired right back, “Why wouldn’t I?”

She shrugged, relaxing a little. “Doesn’t really matter, honestly. If you like someone, even if they burn down the kitchen, you’d still think it’s charming.”

In other words, if you don’t care for the person, even if he’s a Michelin-starred chef, he’s still just a chef. All you’d offer is a polite, ‘Nice cooking.’”

Rowan decided to be honest too. “Wasn’t me.”

“From a restaurant, then?”

“Sort of.”

Janice was particular about the holidays—she insisted the new year wasn’t really over until Lantern Festival had passed. So even though Rowan hadn’t gone back to the family estate, Janice had meals prepared and delivered to his Rivercross apartment.

1/2

18:02

Chapter 219

Ian had just dropped this one off.

Elissa nodded and offered a genuine compliment. “Still, the breakfast you made last time was really good.”

Rowan shot her a sidelong glance, his eyes lowering just a little. “I only learned to make the omelet. The soup? That was a one-time deal.”

After he’d dropped Elissa off at Matriarch Paige Murphy’s place, he’d moved out soon after.

It wasn’t just Ian and Evan who struggled to get used to the quiet. Rowan missed her too.

Without Elissa around, even the chef stopped making omelets for breakfast.

But Rowan was too proud to ever admit it out loud. He could never lower his head and simply say he

wanted an omelet again.

Truth was... he missed Elissa.

So, late at night, he'd slip into the kitchen and make omelets over and over again.

He was a quick study; even the first time, he'd done a decent job. Before long, he'd perfected it.

Rowan told himself that once everything was settled, he'd bring her back—and make her omelets every morning.

But by the time he had finally put everything in order, Elissa had fallen for Frank. She was set on marrying Frank, and no one else.

Elissa paused, uncertain, as a strange sense of recognition flickered in her heart. But she'd never been one to dodge the truth. Tilting her head up, she met Rowan's eyes. "So, that's the only thing you

learned to make?"

"That's right," he replied without a second's hesitation, his tone light and teasing, half-joking, half-casual. "Just for *you*, princess. Are you flattered?"

Elissa could tell he was messing with her—if she took him seriously, he'd only mock her for it.

So she didn't take the bait, just washed her hands and headed to the kitchen to grab plates and

utensils for dinner.

Rowan pulled out a chair at the table, folding his arms across his chest. "There are clean plates in the dishwasher," he reminded her.

Bent over, Elissa called back, "Got it."

2/2

18:02

## A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator - Lullaby 220[ 716 words ]

### Chapter 220

Rowan watched her rummaging around in the kitchen, and suddenly, the thought struck him: he didn't want her to leave.

Wherever she was, that's where home felt like.

Elissa carried out two sets of plates and forks. She was just about to sit down across from Rowan when he pulled out the chair right next to him. "Sit here," he said.

It was almost comically couple-like.

But with the unspoken agreement hanging between them, Elissa didn't hesitate. She slid into the seat

beside him and began to eat.

As she tasted the food, a flicker of recognition crossed her face. "This flavor... I feel *like* I've had this

before."

Rowan gave her a sidelong glance. "Isn't this just how homemade cooking always tastes?"

Janice had always been a brilliant cook; her home-style meals could rival any private chef's.

But aside from Rowan and Ian, hardly anyone else had ever tasted her *food*.

Elissa considered for a moment. "True enough."

"Eat up." Rowan placed a piece of sweet and sour ribs on her plate, watching as she bowed her head, cheeks puffed out adorably as she chewed. For a second, a rare softness flickered in his deep-set

eyes.

Anyone who saw him like this would think they were imagining things.

Rowan, showing that kind of expression? Impossible—must be seeing ghosts.

Outside, the sunset faded *and* the city lights began to glow.

Elissa ate the sweet and sour rib Rowan had served her, and for a moment, she felt transported back

to childhood.

Once, she and Rowan had shared countless dinners together.

In fact, exactly 3,336 of them.

Every night, they'd have dinner together. Not once did either of them miss it.

They'd spent 3,336 days side by side.

Elissa didn't know why, but suddenly her eyes felt hot.

She couldn't quite explain it. Even though she was supposed to be angry with Rowan, right now she just felt this ache in her chest, like the **sadness** was welling up from her heart and spilling over, unstoppable.

Rowan noticed something was off and raised an eyebrow. "Is it so good it made you cry?"

"

1/2

33

**18:03**

Chapter 220

The teasing lilt in his voice snapped her back, and any trace of tears vanished **as** she ducked her head and focused on her food.

As dinner wound down, she couldn't shake the feeling that someone was watching her.

She glanced up and found Rowan half-turned toward her, elbow propped nonchalantly on the table, his dark eyes never leaving her.

Sensing the shift in atmosphere, Elissa dabbed her mouth with a napkin and ventured, "I'm going to take a shower, okay?"

After all, sooner or later, she'd have to face the music.

She certainly didn't believe Rowan had invited her over just for dinner.

A faint smirk played at his lips; clearly, he was pleased with her understanding. With a tilt of his chin toward the bathroom, he said, “Go ahead.”

When Elissa stepped into the bathroom, she realized Rowan had even set out a nightgown for her on the shelf.

But there was only one towel—he hadn’t gone out of his way to prepare anything extra.

She headed to the master bath, leaving the bedroom door ajar. From his seat in the dining room, Rowan could see the sliver of light spilling from the doorway.

And he could hear the rush of water.

The shower ran for a while, then stopped; she must have been brushing her teeth.

A couple minutes later, the water started up again, softer this time—the sound of her showering.

They used the same brand of body wash. She’d use his towel to dry herself, slip into the nightgown he’d chosen for her.

Rowan’s gaze darkened, a flush creeping up to the tips of his ears as his Adam’s apple bobbed.

When Elissa finished drying her hair and reached for the door, she felt a tremor of nerves.

After all, it was her first time.

She exhaled quietly, gathered her courage, and stepped out.

Rowan lounged lazily on the sofa, beckoning her over with a crook of his finger. “Come here.”

His voice **was** low and rough, so different from before.

Elissa hadn’t expected him to prefer the living room. She hesitated, then asked, “Can we... go to the bed instead?”

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator - Lullaby 221[ 724 words ]

Maybe it was because she’d never experienced it before, but Elissa Drummond found herself feeling oddly safe in his bed.

She was wearing the nightgown he'd picked out for her, a delicate slip edged with lace at the collar and hem, making her look even sweeter and more docile than usual.

While she was drying her hair, her mind must have wandered—her bangs ended up swept playfully to one side, giving her a charmingly impish look. Her skin, always soft and glowing, was now warmed with a rosy flush from the hot shower, making her seem almost like a ripe, juicy peach.

Though she managed to look calm on the surface, her hands twisted nervously in her lap, betraying her real emotions. Those wide, doe-like eyes held a trace of anxiety.

But mostly, she just seemed resigned—ready to accept whatever came next.

Rowan Murphy watched her, something stirring in his chest. He deliberately teased, “We’ll watch a movie before going to bed.”

A movie? Now?

Elissa’s mind jumped straight to \*that kind of movie. “Um, maybe we can just...skip the movie?”

She’d once let curiosity get the better of her and tried watching one—high definition and all. She hadn’t lasted long; it was just too much.

Still, she wasn’t a teenager anymore. In the past few years, she’d inevitably developed her own needs.

But honestly, books suited her better than movies.

Not that she could suggest something like, “Let’s read a steamy novel together,” to Rowan.

He’d probably tease her about it for the rest of her life.

And besides, he was a healthy, grown man. Why would he need a movie to get in the mood?

Unless...he couldn’t...?

Rowan caught the confusion in her eyes and realized exactly where her thoughts had gone. “What’s going on in that head of yours?”

He shook his head, already casting the movie to the projector.

Elissa, mortified, turned to see the film’s title appear on the screen—\*Flipped\*.

About as wholesome and innocent a movie as you could find.

She'd seen it before, but good films were always worth a rewatch.

Now even more embarrassed, she glanced at Rowan. When she caught his teasing grin, she wanted nothing more than to sink into the floor and disappear entirely.

Doing her best to save face, she moved to the sofa and settled in, determined to watch the movie as if nothing had happened. But before she could get comfortable, she felt a hand close firmly around

her wrist.

1/2

18:03

Chapter 221

With a gentle tug, Rowan pulled her over, and she tumbled into his arms.

"Sit closer," he said, his voice low and quiet.

"...Okay."

She clambered upright and sat beside him.

The lights dimmed, leaving only the soft glow of the projector. The atmosphere felt unexpectedly warm and intimate.

The movie itself was lovely—childhood sweethearts, that gentle ache of first love. No matter how messy real life could get, stories like this still made her long for something simple and pure.

The only thing not so lovely was the way, in every normal movie scene, the girl would rest her head on the guy's shoulder. But right now, it was Rowan's head that had come to rest on top of hers, leaving her so stiff she hardly dared to breathe. After a while, her neck started to ache.

Elissa gritted her teeth and held out as long as she could, hoping Rowan would move on his own.

But as the minutes passed, she realized his head was getting heavier, his breathing slower and

steadier.

She whispered, "Rowan?"

No response.

He'd invited her to watch a movie—and then fallen asleep.

Elissa glanced at her phone. Not even nine o'clock yet. This man's sleep schedule was almost too healthy.

She waited until he was completely out, then carefully supported his head with her arm and tried to ease him down onto the sofa.

But just as she was about to succeed, his head slipped and landed squarely in her lap, trapping her in place.

If she tried to move *now*, she'd only wake him up.

Faced with the choice of disturbing him or enduring a numb leg, Elissa chose the latter. She even switched her phone to silent, afraid of waking the sleeping king in her lap.

But she'd forgotten something very important about this particular king.

212

## A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator - Lullaby 222[ 622 words ]

Rowan's phone blared so suddenly that Elissa nearly jumped out of her skin. She scrambled to silence it, glanced at the caller ID, and, seeing it was Ian Murphy, decided to answer.

Ian dove right in. "Boss, the Meridia Country deal just closed."

"Ian," Elissa said quietly, "it's Elissa. Rowan's asleep. I'll have him call you back when he wakes up."

"Asleep?" Ian sounded genuinely shocked. "No way. Boss never sleeps this early—it's always the middle of the night for him. This has to be a first."

Elissa hesitated. "Really?"

"Yeah," Ian chuckled. "Maybe it's because you're there. Guess you help him relax."

He hung up in a flash, no further explanation, as if his job was done.

Elissa stared at the phone, momentarily lost in thought. She looked down at Rowan's peaceful face. The lines of his features were almost too perfect, softened now in sleep. Her feelings churned.

Once, she and Rowan had been each other's safe haven, the only place to let down their guard.

Now... she wasn't so sure.

She let herself sink into the plush leather sofa, watching the childhood friends on the TV screen tease and laugh. Her eyelids grew heavy, and before she knew it, she drifted off as well.

The vast house quieted, leaving only the movie's soundtrack echoing through the rooms.

When Rowan woke, the first thing he saw was her—sound asleep, her head tilted gently, a waterfall of dark hair spilling over half her face.

His eyes softened. Moving carefully, he slipped his arms beneath her and picked her up, just as he'd done countless times before.

She hadn't changed at all—her weight familiar in his arms.

“Mmm...” Elissa stirred, uneasy *for* a moment, catching the subtle scent of his cologne, then relaxed again, her breathing deepening.

As she shifted, her softness pressed against his chest. Rowan's jaw tensed; he nearly lost control.

Her weight hadn't changed, but she'd certainly filled out in all the right places.

—

The next day, Elissa hurried into the clinic, bag in hand, and made a beeline for her third-floor office.

She'd overslept, nearly running late for her shift.

Even after she arrived, she found herself distracted—a rarity at work. She'd woken that morning cradled in Rowan's arms, the two of them tangled together like lovers.

It wasn't the first time they'd shared a bed. But it was the first time since everything had changed

between them.

1/2

18:03

## Chapter 222

Elissa set her things down, checked the clock, and breathed a sigh of relief—she still had five minutes. She used them to collect herself. A doctor couldn't afford to be distracted.

Once she'd composed herself, she began calling for patients.

It was Valentine's Day, so the waiting room was mercifully quiet, and she finished on time for once. She'd just finished packing up when a nurse tapped on the door.

"Elissa, there's a walk-in asking if you can squeeze her in."

"Is it a returning patient or someone new?" Elissa asked.

"New," the nurse said, then hesitated. "But she says she knows *you*."

Elissa frowned. "Knows me?"

She didn't have to wait long. A tall woman appeared in the doorway, dressed in a crisp white coat and ankle boots, a rare Hermès bag on her arm. Lorraine Lynn—poised and elegant as ever.

"Elissa, it's me. Can you see me?"

Elissa blinked in surprise. "Have a seat."

Once Lorraine sat down, Elissa reached for her wrist, checking her pulse.

She let go after a moment. "Nothing serious. Sleeping badly lately? Bit of tension."

Lorraine nodded. "Yes."

Then, looking directly at Elissa, she said with a pointed edge, "Ever since I saw you and Rowan leaving that private room together, I haven't slept a wink."

## Chapter 223

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator - Lullaby 223[ 601 words ]

Elissa hadn't expected this was the real reason Lorraine had come.

Her face remained unreadable. “Whatever you think you saw, there’s no need to come to me about it.”

If there was anyone Lorraine should be talking to, it was Rowan.

Deep down, Lorraine knew this too. A man like Rowan wasn’t someone you could cling *to* so easily.

She’d witnessed firsthand how coldly Rowan had turned away woman after woman—elegant heiresses with perfect manners, sultry beauties who could charm anyone. Even she herself had been rejected by Rowan, and she’d never forgotten it.

That’s why Lorraine knew: if Rowan ever let a woman get close, it could only be because he wanted her there. No one could force him into anything.

Lorraine exhaled quietly, watching Elissa as she finally spoke. “I only came to *you* because I didn’t have any other options.”

Of course she wished Rowan would end things with Elissa himself. But that clearly wasn’t happening.

Elissa leaned back in her seat, cutting straight to the point. “So what is it you want me to do?”

“Stay away from him. End it, if you can.” Lorraine didn’t even need to think about her answer.

She’d thought about this all the way here—this was the whole reason she’d come today. Only if Elissa walked away from Rowan did Lorraine stand a chance of marrying him. Their engagement had lasted for years, and after working as his assistant for just as long, Lorraine’s feelings for him had only grown deeper. She couldn’t just let go.

Elissa gave a faint, almost amused smile. Her eyes were steady. “And just what authority do you think you have to ask me that?”

Surprise flickered across Lorraine’s face.

She’d always thought Elissa would simply agree without protest. In her mind, Elissa was just a quiet, soft-spoken girl, never *one* to cause trouble.

She hadn’t expected this sharpness.

Lorraine pressed her palms together, steadying herself. “Rowan and I are engaged. Whatever you and he have—it can’t end well.”

“Does he admit to that engagement?” Elissa’s voice was calm, unwavering.

Lorraine fell silent.

Seeing her hesitate, Elissa decided to be honest. “I can’t do what you’re asking. But it’s not about being difficult.”

“Then why not?” Lorraine blurted out. She stared at Elissa, searching her face. “Is it because... you’ve fallen for Rowan?”

She couldn’t really be blamed for thinking that—after all, plenty of women had fallen for Rowan. As his assistant, Lorraine had to shield him from a parade of admirers every week.

1/2

18:03

Chapter 223

“No way,” Elissa replied instantly, almost reflexively.

The idea of liking Rowan felt almost like a betrayal, something she simply couldn’t accept.

She took a breath, steadying herself. “He and I have a contract. If I break it, I owe him a penalty.”

“How much?”

Relief washed over Lorraine; she jumped at the opportunity. “Whatever it is, I’ll pay it for you.”

If money was all it took, she’d find a way. Even if the Lynn family was the one reaching up in this arrangement, they were still wealthy enough. If she couldn’t pay it, her parents would—especially if it meant she could marry Rowan without any

obstacles.

Elissa didn’t hesitate. “Three billion.”

Lorraine stared at her, certain she must have misheard. “Did you say three billion?”

“Three billion, in cash.”

That number had stunned Elissa too, the first time she’d seen it in the contract. But she’d had no choice—she needed the money to save Tanya Foster.

And at the time, she'd assumed Rowan's interest in her would fade as quickly as it had with everyone

else.

## A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator - Lullaby 224[ 685 words ]

hen Lorraine heard the sum repeated aloud, she felt as if both she and Rowan had lost their minds. "Where am I supposed to come up with three billion dollars in cash?"

Forget ordinary people—even the wealthiest families in Vistapeak City would struggle to gather that kind of money.

And to just hand it over for nothing? Impossible.

Elissa's calm expression didn't waver, making Lorraine grow suspicious. "You're not lying *to me*, are you?"

Elissa replied, "Why would I lie about this?"

Lorraine took a deep breath, suddenly at a loss for words.

It was the first time in her life that money had ever left her so helpless.

Elissa broke the silence, "Still want that prescription?"

After all, it was obvious Lorraine hadn't come here just for medical advice.

"I do," Lorraine answered with a nod.

Her sleep had been awful lately, and she'd just overheard some patients outside raving about Elissa's

medical skills.

Since she was already here, she figured she might as well do something about her health.

Elissa tapped away at the keyboard, then handed Lorraine a freshly printed prescription. "You can pay and pick this up at the front desk downstairs."

Lorraine took the paper but didn't leave right away, hesitating as if unsure whether to voice what was

on her mind.

Elissa glanced at the clock, clearly eager to go. “So, have you decided to pay that three billion for

me?”

Lorraine let out a long breath. “I don’t have that kind of money. If it were three million, maybe I could scrape it together.”

“Then don’t bother. I’m off for the day,” Elissa replied, not the least bit surprised.

She’d never expected Lorraine to come up with that money. She’d only wanted to lay things out clearly, to avoid endless trouble in the future.

Since Lorraine still didn’t budge, Elissa didn’t wait around. She grabbed her bag and prepared to leave.

Lorraine frowned and called after her, “Rowan loves to make a scene—are you really going to play along with his nonsense? Aren’t you worried you’ll ruin your reputation?”

Marrying into the Atwater family only to have an affair while still married—if word got out, the Atwaters would never let her off the hook, let alone the rest of society.

1/2

18:03

Chapter 224

Without turning around, Elissa laughed and said, “Since when does a reputation put food on the

table?”

She never cared about something so intangible. All she wanted was for the people she loved to be

safe and sound.

Lorraine was struck dumb by Elissa’s casual indifference—the same attitude she’d seen in Rowan so many times before.

She’d been by Rowan’s side for three years now, but at this moment, she had *to* admit it—Elissa and Rowan were two of a kind. It was in their bones; they were made of the same stuff.

Elissa didn't wait for a response. She slipped on her flats and walked out, quickly instructing the nurse at the desk before heading off. Not even this strange confrontation could shake her mood.

Today felt different—momentous, somehow.

As she was almost out the clinic's door, she ran into Cliff Riley. "Heading to the research center?" he

asked.

Elissa smiled, her eyes bright. "Not today. I have to drop by Atwater Manor."

She was going to pick up her divorce papers.

Today was the day Carmela had promised to hand them over.

After exchanging a few words with Cliff, Elissa made her way straight to Atwater Manor.

Because it was Valentine's Day, the manor was far livelier than usual. Lanterns hung everywhere in the yard, adding a festive glow to the place.

As soon as Elissa stepped inside, she heard the racket upstairs—Hickey Atwater was making his presence known as always.

Carmela saw her enter and bristled with irritation. "Couldn't you wait even one more day? You have to collect the divorce papers on Valentine's Day?"

In her mind, her own son was as outstanding as they came—background, looks, talent, character, all first-rate.

More than enough to match a hundred Elissas.

Elissa's voice was calm but resolute. "No, I can't wait."

212

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator - Lullaby 225[ 669 words ]

18:03

Chapter 225

**Chapter 225**

Elissa couldn't stand to drag things out for even one more minute.

Only by ending it quickly could she truly feel separate from this marriage.

Otherwise, every time Frank Atwater cornered her, it was like something was stuck in her throat—she couldn't spit it out, but she couldn't swallow it down either.

Carmela, hearing how crisp and decisive Elissa's answer was, nearly choked from anger. Gritting her teeth, she snapped, "What possible good could come from a divorce? Without the protection of the Atwater family, you'll have nothing to gain and everything to lose!"

Elissa almost laughed. Protection? She'd be lucky if they didn't go out of their way *to* humiliate her.

Her face remained calm as she replied, "If you won't give it to me, that's fine. I'll go *to* Rowan—he'll know how to get me a new divorce certificate."

Carmela had connections, sure. With a single call, she could make it almost impossible for Elissa to get a replacement certificate. But Rowan? One phone call from him, and Elissa could probably get ten of them without breaking a sweat.

Of course, she had no real intention of asking Rowan for help. She was only bluffing. If she didn't bring up Rowan now, who knew how long Carmela would drag this out before handing over the paperwork?

She refused to let them stall her any longer.

Carmela hadn't forgotten that Elissa and Rowan had reconciled—and that Rowan was her brother, ready to back her up. But she never expected Elissa to use that against her!

This little brat had really grown a backbone.

Had she forgotten that, once upon a time, she needed the Atwater family's help just to get a job out in the world?

Carmela was furious, but also terrified that Elissa might actually go complain to Rowan. Forcing herself to soften her *tone*, she said, "I'll give you the divorce certificate. Just promise me you won't tell Frank unless you absolutely have to."

She still had no idea how to break the news to her son.

Her original plan had been to pull some strings and void the certificate altogether. But since it was already in the system, there was nothing she could do.

Elissa, unmoved, replied flippantly, "Depends on my mood."

This wasn't the first time she realized how useful Rowan's name could be, but she hadn't expected it to work so well on Carmela. If she'd known, she would have gotten her hands on the divorce certificate ages ago. After all, no one was going to run to Rowan to check on their relationship.

Carmela stared at her, drawing a deep breath, then turned to the housekeeper. "Go get the divorce

certificate."

The housekeeper hurried off.

1/2

18:03

Chapter 225

Rowan's presence loomed large in Carmela's mind, she had no desire to let things get truly ugly between her and Elissa. "We've been family for three years. If you ever need anything, just call."

Elissa thought of the mess with Tanya Foster last time and smiled faintly. "Sure."

She wasn't interested in arguing. All she wanted was to get the divorce certificate and move on.

Soon, the housekeeper returned from upstairs, handing Elissa a dark red document.

Elissa opened it, glanced inside to confirm it was correct, and tucked it into her bag. "I'll be going, then. Didn't mean to interrupt your holiday."

Stepping out of Atwater Manor, she felt a weight lift from her shoulders.

With the divorce certificate in hand, her muddled marriage was finally, officially over.

It was all finished.

She was heading to her car when Hickey came barreling past her—like a runaway bowling ball—racing toward a car that must've arrived while she was inside.

"Mommy!"

Marcia Carson stepped out of the car, bent down, and scooped him up in a warm embrace. "Did you

miss me?”

Hickey nodded so hard his hair flopped. “Uh-huh!”

From a distance, the two of them looked like the perfect picture of mother and child—so tender, so loving

## A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator - Lullaby 226[ 654 words ]

### Chapter 226

Elissa calmly averted her gaze and headed toward her car. Just as she reached for the door, Marcia approached, clutching Hickey in her arms. Her eyes flicked over Elissa suspiciously, finally settling on the corner of a red document peeking from Elissa’s bag.

Marcia didn’t bother with pleasantries. “What’s that?”

She stood there with the entitlement of someone who already saw herself

as the future mistress of this old estate.

Unfazed, Elissa smoothly tucked the divorce certificate deeper into her bag and replied airily, “Just a permit for waste disposal.”

Marcia had no idea what game Elissa was playing, so she changed tack. “The new medication you mentioned at the meeting yesterday—when will the trial results be out?”

“Why do you ask?” Elissa’s lips curled into a wry smile. “Planning a heist? Marcia, you really do prove the old saying true—by the time we’re three, our character is set.”

She’d been snatching things from others since they were kids. And now, Marcia had her sights set on Elissa’s research.

Marcia’s face hardened, her voice tight with annoyance. “Who said I want to steal anything from you?”

“Then do it yourself,” Elissa said, her tone light but cutting. “Don’t expect to reap the rewards of someone else’s work.”

With that, Elissa got into her car, started the engine, and drove off without a backward glance.

Marcia stamped her foot in frustration.

If she actually knew how to handle R&D, what would she need Elissa for in the first place? Rationally, she doubted Elissa would achieve anything remarkable. But deep down, she couldn't shake a sense of dread.

1/3

16.17

Chapter 226

What if... What if Elissa really did pull it off?

Hugging Hickey tightly, Marcia headed back inside. "Hickey, did that woman just now say something to your grandma? She didn't give her anything, did she?"

The color of that document... it looked suspiciously like a deed.

Surely Carmela hadn't lost her mind and transferred the house to that woman?

No way—Marcia would never allow such a thing. Everything that belonged to the Atwater family had to stay with Hickey.

"No idea," Hickey said with a blink. "Grandma told me to stay upstairs. She wouldn't let me come down."

Was there some secret being kept from him?

Marcia narrowed her eyes. As she entered the living room, she overheard Carmela, her tone sharp as she spoke to the housekeeper, "If she won't take a gentle warning, she'll get a harsher one. When she and Rowan finally fall out, there'll be plenty of chances to put her in her place!"

It was obvious from her words that she meant Elissa.

Marcia set Hickey down and walked over. "I wouldn't count on that. It doesn't look like she and Rowan will be falling out anytime soon."

She was certain of what she'd seen that day—the color on Rowan's lips had unmistakably belonged to Elissa. And the atmosphere between the two of them had been all wrong. Even if no one else believed her, Marcia

was sure of it.

Carmela's brow furrowed. "What exactly are you saying?"

Popping a cherry into her mouth, Marcia spoke slowly, “Elissa and Rowan... They’re not just siblings anymore.”

Carmela’s anxiety flared. “Speak plainly, Marcia! Enough of these hints and riddles!”

2/3

16:47

Chapter 226

She was old but not stupid. She could read between the lines—but Elissa and Rowan were supposed to be siblings! Elissa had practically been raised by Rowan.

Seeing Marcia hesitate, Carmela’s patience snapped. “If you’re just spreading rumors, you’d better keep them to yourself. If you dare slander Rowan, you’ll regret it!”

The last thing she wanted was for the Atwater family’s name to be dragged through the mud.

Marcia knew if she told the truth about what she’d witnessed, Carmela wouldn’t believe her—just like Frank and the others, she’d dismiss it as nonsense. But, gritting her teeth, she said it anyway.

“I saw them kissing.”

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator - Lullaby 227[ 635 words ]

**Chapter 227**

At Carmela’s words, her anger erupted—her eyes went wide with disbelief. “Are you serious?”

They hadn’t even gotten the divorce papers yet, and Elissa was already making a fool of the Atwaters?

The more Carmela thought about it, the angrier she became, completely forgetting how her own son had treated Elissa in the first place.

If Elissa was still living in Atwater Manor, she’d have no trouble figuring out where Frank’s double standards came from—clearly, it was in his

DNA.

Mother and son, both cut from the same cloth.

Marcia, seeing Carmela's reaction, knew she'd hit her mark. Smiling sweetly, she said, "Why would I lie to you? Remember last time at Vistapeak Gardens? You probably haven't heard, but Rowan's living right across the hall from Elissa now."

Carmela nearly choked in outrage.

How was that any different from shacking up together?

One minute she's divorcing her son, and the next she's cozying up to someone as powerful as Rowan. If word got out, people would say something was seriously wrong with the Atwater family.

Her chest heaved as she fought to steady her breathing, eyes icy with fury. "So that's why she was in such a rush to get those divorce papers—she was worried her little affair would blow up in her face and ruin her reputation!"

It all made sense now

Elissa hadn't been devastated by Frank; she'd just found herself a better option.

But if she was already involved with Rowan, why had she come running to

1/3

16.175

Chapter 227

the Atwaters for help when Tanya Foster got into trouble?

Still, Carmela was too worked up to care about those details.

Marcia, on the other hand, was momentarily thrown by Carmela's words. "Wait—divorce papers? Who's getting divorced?"

The answer hovered right in front of her, making her heart pound.

"Who else could it be?" Carmela shot her a sharp look. "Frank and Elissa, of course."

Marcia's delight was impossible to hide. "They're divorced?!"

She knew her chances with Frank were slim—but just knowing Elissa’s marriage had failed brought her a mean sort of satisfaction.

Elissa, that smug little witch—always pretending to be above it all. Turns out it was all for show.

Getting dumped by Frank... she must be miserable.

Now that things had reached this point, Carmela didn’t bother hiding anything. “They split right before New Year’s. I just didn’t want to...”

She cast Marcia a cold look.

Marcia wasn’t stupid; she caught on right away, forcing a nervous laugh. “No need to worry about me now. Frank’s been turning all of Vistapeak City upside down looking for her.”

Mentioning this only made Carmela more agitated.

If her son ever found out Elissa was the one he was searching for—and that she had been the one to finalize the divorce behind his back—it

would tear their whole family apart.

All Elissa’s fault.

Carmela shot Marcia a glare. “How’s that project coming along? I heard from Matriarch Paige Murphy that you guaranteed you’d get your hands on the research results, or she wouldn’t have given you the funding. If you fail, you know what the Murphys are capable of.”

2/3

**16:47**

Chapter 227

“Don’t let your scheme backfire and drag the Atwaters down with *you*.”

That much was true.

Marcia’s current project only existed because Matriarch Paige Murphy had invested in it.

Research and development was a money pit.

Paige had been hesitant at first. After all, Rowan was the real power in the

Murphy family these days, and the old lady only controlled a limited amount of funds.

But Marcia had made a solemn promise—if Elissa could pull off the research, the results would be hers.

And since Paige was bankrolling the whole thing, the ones who'd profit in the end were Marcia and the old matriarch herself.

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator - Lullaby 228[ 605 words ]

## **Chapter 228**

Landing this project would be enough—Paige could finally regain her leverage in negotiations with Rowan.

So, the matriarch gritted her teeth and agreed.

Marcia smiled, her confidence barely contained. “Don’t worry. As long as Elissa can finish the research, there’s no way she’ll slip through our fingers.”

The thought made Marcia grin in her sleep.

Just imagining herself as a lead researcher for a cancer drug was almost surreal; she didn’t dare picture what her life might look like after that.

If she wanted to marry Frank, even Carmela wouldn’t have much to say about it anymore.

All she could do was hope...

That Elissa wouldn’t let her down.

After chatting a bit more with Carmela, Marcia took Hickey upstairs to play.

Something occurred to her. She turned onto the balcony and dialed a number.

“Matriarch Paige Murphy, I just heard something and thought you ought to know.”

“What is it?” Paige’s voice was stern.

Marcia’s expression was cold, but her tone was lightly amused. “Elissa and Frank are divorced/

There was a note of surprise in Paige's reply. "Divorced?"

Given Elissa's character, she wouldn't let go of the Atwater family unless she'd truly been pushed to her limit.

Paige hadn't expected the girl's tolerance to have dropped so much over

1/3

Chapter 228

the years.

Marcia nodded. "That's right. My mother-in-law told me herself. The divorce papers were signed before New Year's. Frank must have been so fed up that he finally agreed to it."

"Perhaps," Marcia suggested, her voice sugary sweet, "you could start arranging another match for her now. After all, her future is yours to decide!"

Paige let out a cold laugh. "I didn't realize your grudge ran so deep."

She hadn't expected Marcia to come up with something so vicious. Then again, Elissa certainly knew how to make enemies.

Marcia laughed lightly. "It's not really a grudge."

If she had to call it anything, it wasn't hatred.

It was just that Elissa's luck had always been too good—so good that Marcia wanted to be the one to destroy it.

She could hardly wait to see how miserable Elissa would become after

Frank tossed her aside.

Paige raised an eyebrow in disdain. "Enough. If Elissa is divorced, I'll take *care of* it."

No sooner had she spoken than she caught Slate Murphy, who'd been lounging in an armchair with his phone, suddenly looking over at her.

She hung up and glared at him, exasperated. "Why are you mooning over someone another man didn't want? Have some self-respect, will you?"

"Grandma, she's not like that," Slate shot back.

He hadn't forgotten what Elissa had once confessed to him in that hotel room. The more he thought about it, the more he couldn't wait. "Frank

never even touched her."

He honestly wondered if Frank was insane.

How could anyone turn down Elissa and go for someone like Marcia?

212

16.40

Chapter 228

Either he was out of his mind or blind.

Paige scowled. "And how would you know? Were you hiding under their bed every night? Don't tell me you believe every word that girl

says--haven't you been fooled enough?"

She grew more convinced that Elissa needed to be married off as soon as possible.

Otherwise, one day her own grandson would be duped by Elissa and even help her count the money for it. Sweet-faced as she was, that girl had never had good intentions.

Spoiled by his grandmother's favoritism, Slate shamelessly dug in his heels. "I don't care. If you're planning to find her a new husband, pick

me."

"What are you talking about?"

"I want to marry her."

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator - Lullaby 229[ 825 words ]

Chapter 229

**Chapter 229**

The words slipped out of Slate's mouth before he could stop himself, and even he was taken aback.

Every woman he'd ever been with, he'd grown bored of eventually. That was just how it went.

Even Elissa—at first, he saw her the same way. It was just a shame he'd never had the chance to actually be with her. Still, if he did get the chance, maybe marrying her wouldn't be out of the question. And if he ever got tired of her? Well, there was always divorce. None of it really mattered; it was all just for convenience.

Of course, Grandma would never agree to any of this. The moment the words left his lips, Matriarch Paige Murphy looked as though she might explode, her face twisting in anger as she glared at him. “Have you completely lost your mind? Do you even know who you are? And who is she? What makes you think she's good enough for you?”

Other than Rowan, he was her only grandson. Slate was already well past the age to settle down, but his grandmother had always doted on him, insisting that no woman was ever good enough, which was why his marriage had been postponed for so long.

And now, Slate was talking about marrying Elissa?

Forget whether Elissa was worthy—there was a more important problem. *Once* that man got out of prison, Elissa would be as good as dead. And then Slate would be stuck with the reputation of a man whose wife had brought him nothing but misfortune.

But Slate, stubborn as ever, wouldn't hear any of it. “She's perfect for me—every bit of her. Even her toes are perfect.”

The words were crude, almost embarrassing to hear. Matriarch Paige Murphy, a woman of her age, felt her face flush. “You're absolutely hopeless!” she snapped. Lord only knew what kind of spell Elissa had

cast over him.

1/2

**16:48**

Chapter 220

If she'd known this would happen, she never would have brought Elissa into the family home; she should have left her to be raised elsewhere.

But Slate was undeterred, standing his ground. “I'm not marrying anyone else. It's her or no one.”

“Don't even think about it!”

Matriarch Paige Murphy jabbed him hard in the forehead. “I’ll be arranging a meeting with a proper young lady from a respectable family for you soon. In the meantime, I want you to keep your head down and stay out of trouble.”

She truly couldn’t understand what was so special about Elissa. Any one of those well-bred young women—pick one at random—would outshine Elissa in education, character, and family background.

But Slate was acting like he was under some kind of spell.

He remained defiant. “I won’t do it! Grandma, if I can’t be with Elissa in this life, I’ll die with regret...”

“Then why don’t you go ask Rowan if he agrees to this?”

Matriarch Paige Murphy let out a cold laugh. “If you end up dying with regret, I’m sure he’d be happy to help you on your way.”

She paused, watching as her grandson fell silent, then softened her tone, trying once more to reason with him. “And use your common sense for once, will you? Rowan cared for Elissa when she was young, didn’t he? But even then, he only treated her as a sister—he never once considered marrying her.”

“Why not?”

“Because he has to marry someone of equal standing. That’s the only way he can take control of the entire Murphy family.”

She pinned him with a look. “And you? What do you spend your days thinking about? One of these days, Rowan is going to toss you out of the family, and you’ll still be here, stubbornly insisting on marrying Elissa!”

2/3

16 48 #

Chapter 220

“Grandma...”

Slate knew exactly what kind of person he was, and he couldn’t be bothered to pretend otherwise. “If my cousin’s so capable, then let him take over. I’ve never had his brains—why should I compete?”

He couldn’t help but grumble, “Besides, what exactly happened between you and Rowan, anyway? Why are things so tense between the two of you?”

His cousin had always seemed to have it out for him, and Slate suspected it had a lot to do with their grandmother. Otherwise, carrying the Murphy name would have let him do whatever he wanted in Vistapeak City.

At this, Matriarch Paige Murphy fell silent for a long moment, then finally asked, “Do you know why your parents ended up in prison six years ago?” “Of course.”

Slate remembered it vividly. It was the main reason he’d always been afraid of Rowan. “They were responsible for the deaths of my uncle and aunt.”

Seventeen years ago, Rowan was only thirteen when his parents both died in an accident. The police never found any evidence, and in the end, it was ruled just that—an accident.

Chapter 230

### **Chapter 230**

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator - Lullaby 230[ 680 words ]

Six years ago, someone anonymously handed a complete chain of evidence to the police, exerting pressure behind the scenes. The case was cracked in record time—less than five days.

Slate’s parents were named as the murderers, convicted, and sentenced to life in prison.

Matriarch Paige Murphy’s sharp, icy gaze swept over him. “Then you don’t know who put them there, do you?”

Slate blinked, caught off guard. “Who?”

“Your dear cousin.”

Paige’s expression remained cold as steel, her voice just as frosty. “It was him he gave the police the evidence and applied the pressure. Back then, he realized there was something suspicious about his parents’ deaths. So, while quietly building his own influence, he moved out of the family estate.”

But Rowan’s methods were ruthless and decisive, leaving the Murphy family no chance to prepare.

Within just three years, he’d expanded his territory at a breakneck pace. By the time Paige realized what was happening, Rowan’s forces had taken over most of Murphy Group.

Paige, who had controlled Murphy Group for nearly half her life, was finally forced *to* step down and hand over her power.

She could have refused, but the other companies under Rowan's control would have quickly devoured the Murphy family's shares, swallowing up the once-mighty Murphy Group.

It looked like she had a choice—but in truth, there was no way out at all.

Only after all this did Paige finally realize what kind of wolf they'd been raising within the Murphy family.

1/2

16:48

Chapter 230

Slate stared, stunned, disbelief flickering in his eyes. "Rowan? It was him? But my father is his uncle—his own flesh and blood..."

When the police reopened the old case, Slate had considered all kinds of possibilities.

He'd thought the person who submitted the evidence might have been one of his father's business rivals. The idea that it was Rowan had never

crossed his mind.

He hadn't even finished speaking when Paige cut in. "Your uncle—Rowan's father—was illegitimate. He was born to another woman."

Slate's mind went blank.

All the questions that had lingered in his heart suddenly made sense.

For years, he'd wondered why his grandmother always favored him and never seemed to approve of Rowan, no matter what he did.

Now he understood why.

With the divorce certificate finally in hand, Elissa felt a weight lift from her shoulders.

Even her work seemed to go more smoothly than before.

The drug research project was progressing steadily. After several days of burning the candle at both ends, she decided to give the Traditional Medicine Unit a day off.

On this particular day, she didn't need to go to the research institute. Once she finished her work at the clinic, she could head straight home.

Business had picked up after the holidays, with a visible increase in patients at the clinic. Since she didn't have to go to the lab, she squeezed in as many appointments as she could.

By the time she slung her bag over her shoulder and left work, it was almost four o'clock.

**2/3**

**16:48**

Chapter 230

She was just about to reach the door when a young nurse came bustling in from outside. Glancing back over her shoulder, the nurse shot Elissa an incredulous look. "Elissa, someone's here to see you. You never told us your family was loaded-like, unbelievably loaded..."

Following the nurse's gaze, Elissa spotted a gleaming, stretched Rolls-Royce parked right out front.

The very car Matriarch Murphy was known to use.

"They're not my family," Elissa replied offhandedly, gripping her bag a little tighter as she walked outside.

As soon as she appeared, Butler Murphy stepped out of the car and opened the back door for her. "Miss Elissa, if you would, please."

"Thank you, Butler Murphy."

Elissa's palms were clammy, but she knew there was no avoiding this. She took a breath, bent down, and slid into the car.

Paige was seated on the far side, her expression severe and cold, eyes sharp, lips pressed into a tight line. Without any preamble, she spoke in a chilling tone: "You've divorced Frank?"

## A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator - Lullaby 231[ 735 words ]

### Chapter 231

Elissa had no idea how news traveled so fast to the old woman.

Still, she didn't rush to confirm anything. Her gaze lowered. "What are you getting at?"

Paige could read her face well enough—close enough to the truth, no doubt.

A smile spread across Paige's lips. "That's perfect, then."

"Perfect for what?"

Matriarch Paige Murphy shot the driver a look, signaling him to start the car, then turned back to Elissa with an almost cheerful tone. "You're still young, and it's hard for you to judge which men are worth a lifetime. This time, I'll make the decision for you."

"I have no intention of getting married again. Not for now."

From the moment she'd decided on divorce, Elissa had known this day would come. She just hadn't expected it to arrive so soon.

Matriarch Paige Murphy let out a cold, dismissive laugh. "You don't get a say in this. After years of living off the Murphy family, don't you think it's time you gave something back?"

Elissa clenched her fists, nails digging into her palms. "And who exactly are you planning to marry me off to?"

"The fourth son of the Crest family. Impeccable character, excellent background—you should count yourself lucky."

For once, Paige allowed herself a genuine smile. "I've arranged a dinner with their family tonight at The Assembly. We'll settle everything then."

Elissa almost laughed out loud.

Impeccable character? The only thing remarkable about him was his lack of any. If sins had a face, he'd be the portrait—worse even than Slate, with a reputation so filthy you'd feel unclean just glancing his way.

Chapter 231

Excellent background? Maybe the Crest family had some standing in Vistapeak City, but the fourth son certainly didn't. His mother had been a prostitute who'd forced herself into the family after giving birth to him, refusing to leave. The legitimate Mrs. Crest had tolerated her in public, but behind closed doors had set a fire that turned her to ash.

The fourth son survived by a stroke of terrible luck, but not without consequences—his face was ruined.

Clearly, Matriarch Murphy had worked overtime to find the worst possible match for Elissa, probably losing sleep combing through every eligible bachelor just to land on this disaster.

It was almost impressive.

Elissa gave up any pretense at being the dutiful, obedient girl. She pulled her lips into a thin line and spoke plainly, "Absolutely not."

"I told you," Paige's face hardened, her tone brooking no argument, "this isn't your choice to make."

Three years ago, the girl had moved too quickly, and Frank had insisted on marrying her—Paige had been forced to allow Elissa into the Atwater family, letting her enjoy a few years of comfort. Now that they were divorcing, Paige wasn't about to let this chance slip through her fingers.

Elissa's lashes, lowered in submission, suddenly lifted. Her eyes were clear and bright, her voice steady. "I'm not divorced."

She was gambling—gambling that Carmela hadn't yet told Frank, and that Frank himself hadn't made up his mind to leave her.

"What did you say?" Matriarch Paige Murphy's disbelief was immediate. "Don't play games with me. Someone already told me—"

Marcia wouldn't dare lie to her. But Elissa's mouth? Truth was never its strong suit.

Elissa replied, "Divorce is between Frank and me. You're just going to believe what someone else says?"

Paige's eyes narrowed. "You know what happens to people who try to fool

**16:48**

Chapter 231

me.”

“I’ve always known,” Elissa answered, voice calm as water, betraying not a hint of fear. “If you don’t believe me, *you* can call Frank yourself.”

Truth or lie, either way, she had nothing to lose. So why not lie?

Paige studied her suspiciously, weighing her options, then gave Butler Murphy a look.

He understood at once and placed a call, putting the phone *on* speaker.

After a moment, Frank’s steady voice came through the line. “Who is this?”

“Mr. Atwater,” Butler Murphy began, “this is the Murphy Manor butler. Our matriarch would like a word with you.”

He handed the phone to Paige.

Her *tone* was noticeably gentler now, even tinged with a smile. “Frank, Elissa is with me right now. Why don’t *you* come by the house this evening and take her home?”

Paige was no fool. She wouldn’t risk everything by bluntly asking, “Are you divorced?”

Chapter 232

**Chapter 23**

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator - Lullaby 232[ 696 words ]

**Chapter 232**

But that one simple sentence was enough to test where Frank’s loyalties lay.

If they were truly divorced, who would bother picking up their ex-wife to bring her home?

After Matriarch Paige Murphy’s words faded, silence hung *on* the other end of the line for a long moment.

Elissa's fingers trembled almost imperceptibly. Matriarch Paige Murphy shot her a sideways glance, a mocking little smirk hinting at Elissa's overreach, then spoke into the phone, "If it's a bother for you, Frank, never

mind..."

She hadn't finished when Frank's calm, low voice came through.

He seemed to be giving instructions to an assistant—postponing an urgent meeting, canceling his evening appointments.

Then Frank's tone lightened with a hint of a smile. "Why would it be a bother? I'll head to the manor right now."

"That's good of you, Frank. I appreciate it."

Matriarch Paige Murphy's brow furrowed sharply, but she still managed a smile, unwilling *to* let the conversation end without probing further. "Elissa was lucky to marry you, Frank."

Frank replied without missing a beat, "I'd say I'm the lucky one to have married her."

Once the call ended, Frank glanced at Bernard, who looked a little troubled. "What's wrong?"

Bernard hesitated. "Mr. Atwater, I'm afraid that meeting isn't so easy to reschedule..."

"Move it to this evening," Frank said, checking his watch. "Eight o'clock should work."

1/3

16:49

Chapter 232

Bernard looked like he'd swallowed a lemon. "Sir, are you going to..."

"Pick up Elissa," Frank answered simply.

He stood, slipped on the suit jacket draped over his chair, the silver watch on his wrist catching the light. "I'll be heading out *now*."

Bernard could only stare after him, dumbfounded. Since when was Mr. Atwater so completely love-struck?

The moment the call ended, Elissa could sense that Matriarch Paige Murphy was genuinely annoyed.

And after that little episode, there was no way they'd be going to the Assembly tonight. The driver turned the car around and took them straight back to Murphy Manor.

As soon as the car stopped, the old matriarch was out in a flash, storming inside and up the stairs with surprising energy.

Elissa watched her charge away, a silent smile curving her lips.

Upstairs, Matriarch Paige Murphy marched into her study and slammed the door behind her. She immediately dialed Marcia.

Marcia picked up instantly, all deference. "Yes, ma'am?"

Matriarch Paige Murphy snapped, "Where on earth did you get your bogus information?"

"Bogus information?"

"The news about Elissa and Frank's divorce!"

Marcia was stunned. "That can't be a mistake—"

Carmela had told her personally. She'd even said the divorce papers were finalized. How could it possibly be false?

"Still insisting?" Matriarch Paige Murphy's voice rose, her patience fraying. "Don't spread these ridiculous rumors to me again. And as for Frank dumping Elissa? From what I can see, he's practically obsessed with her!"

2/3

**16:49**

Chapter 232

He'd rescheduled meetings, canceled appointments—what was he, crazy? Marcia was left completely bewildered. Carmela had said they were divorced. If Frank hadn't left Elissa, could it be Elissa who dumped

Frank?

Before she could sort out her confusion, Matriarch Paige Murphy's voice came icy through the phone. "Don't let me down about the

pharmaceutical research again. I'm not as soft-hearted as Frank. There are a thousand ways I could end you."

With that, she hung up without waiting for a reply.

Marcia knew it wasn't an empty threat. Uneasy, she sat for a *long* moment before finally making a call of her own.

"What's the status on Elissa's research?"

-

Elissa sat quietly in the drawing room.

Matriarch Paige Murphy hadn't come down, and Frank wouldn't be arriving just yet.

Cliff had just sent her a new proposal, so she bent over her phone, completely absorbed in a serious discussion with him.

"Waiting for me?"

She startled at the sudden voice, nearly dropping her phone.

She looked up to see Rowan standing not far away, dressed in a sleek, dark gray tailored suit—a sight that gave her a second, sharper jolt.

Was he out of his mind? With all the household staff around, even Butler Murphy was standing right there!

**3/2**

16.10

Chapter **233**

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator - Lullaby 233[ 841 words ]

Elissa averted her gaze, refusing to meet Rowan's intense stare. She drew a long breath, willing herself to sound composed. "I'm waiting for Frank."

"Wait all you want," Rowan replied without even a hint of subtlety, his tone blunt and direct. "Just don't forget what's written in our agreement."

Elissa nearly blacked out on the spot.

Seizing a moment when the housekeeper wasn't looking, she shot Rowan a fierce glare.

Rowan, knowing she couldn't withstand much teasing, just shoved one hand into his pocket and strode off toward the staircase, his long legs making quick work of the distance.

He paused at the top of the stairs, then turned, as if suddenly remembering something important. "Oh, right. Come up here—I've got something for you."

Elissa knew from experience that once Rowan set his mind on

something, there was no point arguing. The more she resisted, the more suspicious it would look. So she stood tall, feigning nonchalance, and followed him upstairs.

Though Rowan had moved out, nobody had dared touch his suite all these years. Even the family matriarch kept a room for him in her own wing, just in case anyone talked.

He led her straight into his old room without a second thought.

"What is it?" she demanded.

"Why are you waiting for Frank?" he shot back.

The moment she crossed the threshold, Rowan pressed her up against the *door*. Both spoke at once, their words colliding in the charged air. Their eyes met, neither backing down.

When he said nothing further, Elissa knew she'd have to answer first. She

**1/4**

16:49

Chapter 233

huffed impatiently. "Go ask your grandmother if you want *to* know."

There was no way she could tell him the truth. Besides, the old lady would never tell him either. If Rowan wanted to argue, he'd have to take it up with her.

Checking the time, Elissa guessed Frank would be arriving any minute. Rowan still wasn't talking, so she pressed, "Well? What exactly did you want to give me?"

As soon as the words left her mouth, footsteps echoed from downstairs.

Frank must be here.

Rowan watched the anxious expression flicker across her face, then gave a small, crooked smile. “Funny. When Frank keeps secrets, you never *look*

this nervous.”

He was, of course, talking about Frank.

Elissa sighed. This wasn’t even close to the same thing. She wasn’t worried about Frank discovering anything—she was terrified the old lady would see through her and realize she was divorced. Then she’d be forced to marry that fourth son of the Crest family, just as the matriarch

wanted.

Deep down, Elissa had always known divorce wasn’t her best option. But that last shred of pride wouldn’t let her cling to Frank’s influence, not after everything that had happened.

She pressed her lips together, half truthful, half evasive. “I’m not nervous—I just don’t want your grandmother finding out that Frank and I aren’t exactly a happy couple.”

Rowan’s eyes darkened. “And then she’d make things difficult for you?”

Elissa nodded, She wasn’t surprised he saw right through her; Rowan was nobody’s fool.

But then, his rich, cool voice cut through the silence. “Did it ever occur to you that you have better options?”

16:49)

## Chapter 233

The look on his sharply handsome face practically screamed, \*I am the best option you’ve got.\*

Elissa’s brows drew together. “You mean... you?”

“Why not?” Rowan shrugged, then started listing the pros and cons as if this were a business deal. “Compared to Frank, the old lady’s probably more wary of me.”

You’re being modest, Elissa nearly blurted. It wasn’t “probably”—the matriarch was definitely more afraid of him.

She stared at him in disbelief. “So you want me to tell your grandmother I’m your mistress?” She wasn’t insane. In families like theirs, every

official wife hated and feared that kind of scandal. The matriarch already disliked her if she found out Elissa was involved with her own grandson,

she'd be lucky to survive the week.

Knock, knock.

She'd barely finished speaking when someone rapped on the door.

Outside, she could just make out Butler Murphy's voice, talking to Frank. "Miss Elissa went upstairs with Mr. Rowan. They should be in this room." Rowan didn't seem bothered at all. He actually stepped closer, caging her in. "What's wrong? Am I not good enough for you?"

This isn't about whether you're good enough, she wanted to shout. It's about whether I want to live.

"Elissa, are *you* in there? I'm coming in," Frank's voice called through the door, accompanied by another round of knocking.

Panic rising, Elissa lunged for the door, desperate to escape.

But Rowan blocked her path, his voice ice-cold. "Don't want your present?"

She spun around, about to retort, when she saw him pull something from his pocket—a chocolate bar, old-fashioned and familiar. It was the kind

3/4

**16:49**

Chapter 233

she'd adored as a child, a classic brand you couldn't find in stores or

online anymore. She had no idea how he'd managed to get his hands on

1. it.

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator - Lullaby 234[ 863 words ]

**Chapter 234**

Who knows how he even remembered that detail.

Elissa hesitated for a split second before accepting the chocolate.

“Thanks.”

She was about to head out when his voice stopped her. “That’s it? You’re just leaving?”

The man’s hand closed casually around her wrist, his *voice* lazy and drawling. He sounded easygoing, but there was an edge to it that said

otherwise.

A sharp knock at the door made Elissa’s heart pound. She reached up, tugged open Rowan’s shirt collar, and quickly pressed a kiss to his collarbone. With nimble fingers, she fastened the buttons again.

She’d learned her lesson after the last two times–no more leaving lipstick marks behind.

While Rowan was still caught off guard, Elissa slipped out the door–and walked right into Frank.

He reached out to steady her by the shoulder. Elissa knew he’d been waiting outside, but she still flinched instinctively, her nerves betraying her before she managed to collect herself.

“You’re here?” she asked, trying to sound calm.

“Yeah,” Frank replied.

His gaze flicked *to* the crack of the door behind her, but his expression stayed neutral. “Why weren’t you downstairs?”

Elissa lifted the chocolate in her hand. “My brother insisted I come up and get this for him.”

Frank glanced at the wrapper and smiled, warm and familiar. “That’s an old brand. Any good?”

Elissa nodded. “Yeah, I loved it when I was a kid.”

1/4

17:13

Chapter 234

Frank studied her delicate face, his smile easy. “Mind if I try a piece?”

Her brows drew together in a fleeting frown. She hesitated.

Rowan never liked her being around Frank more than necessary. If he found out she'd given away the chocolate he'd just handed her...

Knowing how unreasonable Rowan could be, she shuddered to think what trouble he'd make for her.

She was still searching for a way to refuse when Frank teased, "What, don't want to share? Aren't you a little old to be so protective of your food?"

Elissa rubbed her nose, letting him off the hook with a reluctant, almost sheepish smile.

Frank offered his hand. "Come on."

"Frank."

Matriarch Paige Murphy appeared, her tone unusually pleasant. "Since you're already here, why not stay for dinner?"

Elissa knew Mrs. Murphy still hadn't given up. Maybe she was just holding on to some unspoken grudge, unwilling to let things go.

Together, they all walked toward the dining room. Frank pulled out a chair for Elissa.

She was unused to his attentiveness—and now that they were divorced, she wanted nothing more than to keep her distance. But under Mrs. Murphy's watchful eye, she had no choice but to play along.

Frank adjusted her chair as she sat, making sure she was comfortable, every gesture thoughtful and precise.

He then undid a button on his suit jacket and reached for the chair next to hers. Just as he was about to sit, a sudden chill swept over him.

He looked again—and saw someone already seated there.

Frank recognized Rowan and smiled politely. "Didn't see you come out

2/4

Chapter 234

earlier. Thought you weren't having dinner at home tonight."

Elissa didn't need to look up; the familiar scent of Rowan's cologne already told her he was near.

Rowan's voice was as cool and flat as ever. "In my own home, do I need anyone's permission to eat dinner?"

Frank didn't argue. He knew he'd overstepped—after all, he was just the brother-in-law. He crossed to sit on the other side of the table instead.

Elissa noticed Matriarch Paige Murphy's expression sour. She shot Elissa a look, silently urging her to swap seats and sit by Frank.

Elissa pretended not to notice, quietly focusing on her meal.

As long as Frank kept denying the divorce rumors, the old woman couldn't force anything.

Frank, ever the gentleman, peeled a shrimp for Elissa and spoke up for her: "It's fine, it doesn't matter where you sit. Elissa and Rowan grew up together—they're close."

There was a time when Elissa had longed for Frank to bring her home to the Murphy family. Now, she dreaded the thought.

The only relief was knowing Matriarch Paige Murphy would stop

suspecting anything, and at least for now, she wouldn't have to marry into the Crest family.

After dinner, Elissa naturally left with Frank.

With Mrs. Murphy's eyes fixed on her, she had no choice but to get into the passenger seat.

Even after the car had driven some distance, she could still feel a prickling at the back of her neck, like a snake was watching her.

"You barely ate anything at dinner," Frank observed as he drove. He knew the Murphy family wasn't as kind to her as they seemed. "Want to grab a

3/4

17:13 #

Chapter 234

bite somewhere else?"

“No, thanks.”

Elissa refused, her voice flat.

The rest of the ride passed in silence.

Soon, they arrived at Vistapeak Gardens.

Just as she unfastened her seatbelt and stepped out, Frank caught her wrist. He looked at her, his gaze steady. “I did help you out tonight. Aren’t you going to invite me in?”

They were both adults—Elissa knew exactly what “invite me in” meant.

Chapter 235

### **Chapter 235**

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator - Lullaby 235[ 650 words ]

### **Chapter 235**

Without thinking, Elissa instinctively used her best friend as a shield.

“Tanya’s here. It’s not really a good time.”

Frank saw through her excuse instantly. “Didn’t she head out of town for work?”

Elissa froze, caught off guard, as he went on, “Bernard ran into her at the airport this morning.”

When he finished, he looked at her with a gentle expression, his meaning clear as day.

Elissa hesitated for a moment, then decided it was time to lay everything on the table. “The reason I asked you to go to Murphy Manor today—it was me using you. We’re already sepa-”

“I don’t mind.”

Frank suddenly leaned in, closing the space between them so quickly that their breaths mingled.

His voice softened, full of warmth. “We’re married. Helping each other is only natural. How could that be using someone?”

As soon as he finished, he dipped his head.

Their lips were a whisper apart.

Elissa's breath caught in her throat. She shoved him away, panic rising, and scrambled out of the car. "Frank, calm down. I'm going upstairs!"

She dashed into her building, jabbing the elevator button with desperate urgency.

Thank God Rowan hadn't seen that.

If he had, she'd be dead meat.

Frank opened his door and got out, intending to chase after her and clear the air.

**1/3**

17.13 D

Chapter 235

He wouldn't treat her the way he used to. He'd get closer to her. He'd finally do what a real husband should.

Just then, his phone buzzed twice in his pocket.

Hurrying toward the building, he pulled it out to check the message.

Bernard: [Mr. Atwater, we should have her whereabouts.soon.]

Frank's eyes gleamed with excitement. He stopped in his tracks and immediately dialed Bernard. "You're sure you're close to finding Little Nine?"

Bernard replied, "Yes, Mr. Atwater. I've already gone through all the business records of the major families in Vistapeak City with any drug connections. No leads. But in Cresthaven, our guys just tracked down the license plate of the car that picked up the kid from the orphanage all those years ago."

Frank's tone grew urgent. "Have you traced which family owned the car?"

By now, that drug lord was about to get out of prison.

He should've been sentenced to more than twenty years, but someone powerful must have pulled strings for him, or found a scapegoat.

Whoever this guy was, his influence was dangerous. Frank needed to find Little Nine before he walked free.

Bernard said, “We’re working on it. The car’s been scrapped for years, but we’ll have an answer in a few days, tops.”

Frank let out a long breath. “Work faster.”

A short distance away, in the parking lot behind a pillar, Marcia’s face was twisted with rage,

She’d come here to confront Elissa, to demand why she still hadn’t publicly acknowledged the divorce, why she was shamelessly clinging to Frank.

She hadn’t expected to overhear that call.

**2/3**

17.12

Chapter

Frank was close to finding out.

And then what? Elissa would become the apple of his eye.

She’d live better than Marcia ever could—forever.

Marcia clenched her teeth so hard it felt like her molars would shatter.

She’d never allow that to happen.

No way Elissa could be that lucky.

And if she was-

Then Marcia would make sure Elissa didn’t live to see it.

Back home, Elissa showered and realized how hungry she was.

Earlier that year, Janice Garrett had dropped off some holiday groceries, and there was still food left over.

She rummaged in the fridge and decided to fry up a beef pie.

But she'd barely made it to the kitchen, pie in hand, when the doorbell rang.

She frowned.

Don't tell me Frank followed me upstairs.

Peering through the peephole, she saw a man standing outside. As if sensing her gaze, he looked up—and their eyes met through the door.

3/3

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator - Lullaby 236[ 601 words ]

It was Rowan.

He'd clearly just showered, dressed now in deep blue loungewear—a far cry from his usual tailored suits. The edge in his demeanor remained, but there was a new, almost lazy ease about him.

Elissa let out a quiet breath of relief and opened the door. “Not staying at the manor tonight?”

Rowan shot her a sidelong look, his tone laced with obvious disdain for her halfhearted question. “When have I ever stayed at the manor?”

Right. That was a pointless question. He'd moved out eight years ago and hadn't spent a single night back there since.

Knowing how particular he was, Elissa had set out a brand-new pair of men's slippers by the entrance.

Rowan glanced down, his voice cool. “Whose are these?”

She headed for the kitchen, not bothering to look back. “Yours.”

The faintest hint of a smile tugged at his lips as he stepped inside, moving with the casual confidence of someone who belonged there.

He spotted her holding a box of beef pie and seemed unsurprised. “Midnight snack?”

Elissa had never once felt satisfied after a meal at Murphy Manor—especially not after tonight's disaster. She hadn't had the appetite for it.

“Yeah,” she replied, flicking on the kitchen light as she nodded.

Rowan pulled out a chair and sat at the dining table, issuing his request as if it were the most natural thing in the world. “Make one for me too.”

Elissa paused. She wanted to ask, Didn’t you eat enough either? But remembering the tense atmosphere at the manor’s dinner table, she wisely kept quiet and disappeared into the kitchen to heat up another

1/3

**17.13**

Chapter 236

beef pie.

She wasn’t much of a cook, but baking a beef pie was easy enough.

Since she lived alone, Elissa rarely turned on the main lights in the living. room—just enough low lighting to get by. The kitchen, though, was bright as day, the overhead light illuminating her as she worked. Fresh from the shower, she wore a floral nightdress that swayed softly with her movements, her lashes casting delicate shadows over her cheeks.

Rowan’s gaze was fixed on her, drinking in every detail.

Funny, how the same house felt completely different with just one other person bustling around the kitchen—just reheating a simple beef pie. Yet somehow, it felt both grounding and electrifying.

Elissa could feel his eyes on her, but it wasn’t the sharp, cutting stare she’d grown used to at the manor. There was something gentler there—a warmth she’d never imagined possible from him.

When the beef pie was ready, its golden crust filling the kitchen with a mouthwatering aroma, Elissa swallowed hard, resisting the urge to dig in immediately. She plated the pie, adding the usual seasonings for both of them—an old habit. Years ago, Rowan had preferred his food nearly bland, but after a while, he’d picked up her tastes, their palates blending until they were practically identical.

She set out the plates and cutlery in front of him. Just as she took her seat across the table, Rowan dragged his chair closer and brought his plate and utensils over beside her.

They ate in comfortable silence.

After a while, Rowan paused, a faint note of recognition in his voice. “Where’d you get the beef pie?”

Elissa replied, “A grandma down the street makes them.”

Rowan’s mind wandered—he thought of Janice, who’d tried to set him up with that doctor she knew. Janice had mentioned the woman was divorced now.

2/3

12. 12.

Chapter 236

His tone grew more curious, following Elissa’s lead. “A grandma?”

Chapter 237

**Chapter 237**

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator - Lullaby 237[ 668 words ]

**Chapter 237**

“Yeah.”

Elissa swallowed the last bite of her beef pie. “She’s one of my patients.”

She smiled. “Tastes good, right?”

The man nodded, admitting sincerely, “Delicious.”

Elissa took the chance to bring up Janice. “That grandma is really sweet, but she worries herself sick over her grandson.”

Rowan’s brow twitched almost imperceptibly. “Worries herself sick?”

“Uh-huh...” Elissa nodded. “She’s always hoping her grandson will find someone to settle down with, but he’s so reserved. Oh, and you two are the same age, by the way.”

A couple of men pushing forty.

The man in question didn’t catch her teasing. He finished his beef pie, wiped his lips with a napkin, and asked with deliberate calm, “And?”

Elissa hadn't expected him to be so interested in gossip, but since she'd started the topic, she kept going, "When I visited over the holidays, she mentioned he'd finally found a girlfriend. But whether the girlfriend will actually marry him is up in the air."

By now, Rowan was almost certain who she was talking about.

He just wondered why Elissa had told the grandma she was already divorced. For now, though, he had no intention of bringing it up.

He quirked a brow. "So, do you think his girlfriend would want to marry him?"

"Me?" Elissa blinked, a little exasperated. "I'm not his girlfriend—what's my opinion got to do with it?"

"But if you were?"

Rowan's dark eyes lingered on her, something intent flickering in their

1/3

17:14

Chapter 237

depths.

Elissa played along, thinking for a moment. "If I had to imagine it, I guess I would."

A faint smile tugged at Rowan's lips. "So just from what the grandma told you, you've already figured he's a decent guy?"

Elissa shook her head. "No, I just think the grandma's really nice."

And a great cook, too.

”

Score one for grandma.

Rowan considered this, then said, "Well, that's not a bad reason."

Whether it was for the grandma's sake or his own—either worked.

Elissa had no idea what he meant by that.

But with her beef pie nearly finished and Rowan showing no sign of leaving, she gently hinted, “You should probably head back soon, shouldn’t you?”

He lifted his chin slightly, giving her a half-smile. “Wasn’t I waiting for you to leave with me?”

You can’t dodge fate forever.

Elissa didn’t put up a front. “Alright, let’s go.”

She seemed calm, but the flush creeping up her ears gave her away.

Rowan, however, didn’t move.

Elissa hesitated. “Aren’t you coming?”

He nodded toward the bathroom, as if it were the most natural thing in the world. “I’ll freshen up first.”

“Oh, sure.”

Didn’t really matter whose bathroom, after all.

**2/3**

**17.14**

Chapter 237

Elissa headed to the master bath. As she reached for her cup, Rowan shuffled in behind her, still in his house slippers.

This time, Elissa realized what he was after. “I don’t have a spare cup for you.”

Other than Tanya Foster and her old mentors, there weren’t many people she’d invite to stay over. And her former teachers wouldn’t just drop by for a sleepover.

So, she’d never thought to keep extra bathroom supplies on hand.

Rowan raised an eyebrow. “But you have a toothbrush?”

“Yeah...”

Last year, during the holiday sales, Elissa bought herself a new electric toothbrush. To hit the free-shipping minimum without overthinking it, she just ordered two.

She figured she'd use the extra eventually—just hadn't expected it to be so soon.

Under Rowan's watchful gaze, she stood on tiptoe to open the mirrored cabinet, grabbed the unopened toothbrush, and handed it to him. "Here you *go*."

Rowan didn't say anything. He unwrapped it, attached the brush head, then moved to the other sink. He rinsed it thoroughly, then reached for her toothpaste.

And right in front of her, he picked up her cup and took a sip of water.

Funny, they'd kissed plenty of times, but watching him use her cup so casually still made her cheeks warm.

**3/3**

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator - Lullaby 238[ 761 words ]

### **Chapter 238**

He, on the other hand, seemed completely unfazed, moving about with an ease that made it clear he felt right at home.

Maybe it came from growing up together—side by side in front of the bathroom mirror, their routines were almost perfectly in sync.

They looked, in that moment, just like a couple who'd spent years together—so attuned it was as if they shared the same heartbeat.

As the thought flashed through her mind, Elissa's heart gave a startled little jolt.

After they finished washing up, the two of them headed back to Rowan's place, one after the other.

Mindful of his obsession with cleanliness, Elissa changed into a different pair of slippers. She hadn't even set her heel down when a pair of arms slipped around her waist from behind. Before she could turn around, his kiss crashed down on her, fierce and overwhelming.

He didn't give her the slightest chance to refuse.

When his hand tugged up the hem of her nightdress, she shivered.

But she didn't fight him; she let herself melt under his touch.

Then, his large hands swept her off her feet, and she instinctively wrapped her legs around his lean, muscular waist.

Striding across the living room, he carried her straight to the master bedroom.

Elissa's camisole nightgown slipped off one shoulder, baring her smooth skin. Her face and neck flushed a deep crimson—she couldn't bring

herself to meet his eyes.

He caught her chin, and his next kiss burned against her lips.

Elissa thought, for sure, that everything would just happen, naturally, as if it were meant to be.

**1/3**

17:14

Chapter 238

But then Rowan glanced down at her trembling eyelashes, and suddenly pulled the comforter over her, wrapping her up like a cocoon in his arms. She looked at him in confusion.

He brushed her hair back and murmured, "Let's get some sleep."

Elissa's dark hair fanned out across the sheets like silk, her eyes

shimmering with startled tears. "Sleep?"

Rowan's arm tightened around her, the veins on his forearm taut, his voice rough and low. He smirked. "Don't want to sleep?"

"I—I want to," she stammered.

She just hadn't expected it. She'd already braced herself, but Rowan had suddenly called it off, right in the middle.

Not that she minded, really—maybe it was for the best.

Watching her curl obediently into his embrace, Rowan felt the tension in his stomach tighten painfully.

But now wasn't the right time.

Not yet.

The next morning, Rowan woke with a jolt when someone kicked him in their sleep.

He snapped awake immediately, his eyes sharp and cold. But when he saw the culprit was the sleeping woman beside him, all that fierceness melted away, replaced by indulgence.

Stretching out an arm, Rowan grabbed his phone from the nightstand to check the time. Without turning on the light, he made his way to the bathroom to wash up in the dark.

Ian Evan Murphy arrived early that day. Still, when he saw his boss stride out of the building and head for the car, he was caught a little off guard.

They weren't supposed to leave until six thirty.

It wasn't even six yet.

2/3

17:14

Chapter 238

Ian quickly hopped out to open the back door for him. Once Rowan was settled in, he couldn't help but ask, "Sir, what brings you out so early?"

Rowan, fastening the buttons on his suit jacket with one hand, cocked an eyebrow. "She has a habit of kicking in her sleep,"

Woke him right up.

Evan, missing the point entirely, suggested, "Sir, maybe you should let Miss know, or... sleep in separate beds?"

Ian rolled his eyes in the front seat.

Idiot.

Couldn't he hear the fondness in Rowan's tone?

Separate beds? Not in a million years.

Before they reached the airport, Rowan checked the time and made a quick call.

The sun hadn't even risen, but Janice picked up almost immediately.

Her voice was sleepy. "Didn't you say you have a girlfriend now? Why are you calling me so early?"

Rowan chuckled. "Having a girlfriend means I can't call you anymore?"

"That's not it," Janice replied, sounding genuinely concerned. "But aren't you worried you'll wake her up? What if she thinks you're not considerate enough and breaks up with you?"

Rowan pinched the bridge of his nose. "You that worried I'll end up single?"

"Of course I am. Now, spit it out-what do you need?"

Rowan didn't bother beating around the bush. "That herbalist you wanted to introduce me to-what's her name again?"

373

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator - Lullaby 239[ 719 words ]

v

## Chapter 239

Janice couldn't figure out why he'd suddenly asked about this, and found it all a bit bewildering. "She's a sweet girl, really. Her name's Elissa. And let me tell you, she's just as lovely as her name sounds-bright eyes, charming smile, and her personality is even better-"

"I'm heading to Meridia Country for a few days."

Hearing the name, Rowan cut off his grandmother's enthusiastic praise. "When I get back, why don't you invite her over? I'd like to meet her."

He was genuinely curious to see what this girl was really like.

"Are you serious? You're not just teasing me again, are you?"

Janice sprang to her feet, excitement lighting her face. Then she paused, suspicion flickering in her eyes. "Wait-what about your girlfriend? Don't tell me you're trying to juggle two women..."

“No, nothing like that.”

Rowan’s expression showed rare exasperation, though there was a hint of a smile tugging at his lips. “Just wait for me to get back, okay?”

–

Elissa slept better than she had in ages, only waking up when her alarm blared insistently. She reached out, half-asleep, but the space beside her was empty.

She was alone in the bed.

A strange emptiness tugged at her chest. She silenced the alarm and glanced at her phone, noticing a new pinned message at the top of her WhatsApp chats.

Brother: [I’m going on a business trip to Meridia Country for four days. I’ll be landing in Vistapeak City at 5pm on the 21st. Come pick me up.]

He wanted her to pick him up?

1/3

12:07

Chapter 239

He had a whole team at his disposal—surely any one of them could do a better job than she could.

Still, a wise person knows when not to argue. Elissa replied obediently: [Okay, sure.]

Only after sending the message did she realize something felt off.

It was almost like a boyfriend texting his girlfriend to let her know his travel schedule—down to the time and place.

Frank, her ex-husband, had never once bothered to keep her in the loop about anything.

Yet, for reasons she couldn’t quite explain, her mood was bright all day.

As usual, she spent the morning at the clinic seeing patients, then headed to the research institute in the afternoon to check on their latest

progress.

“Ms. Drummond.”

She had barely set foot in the lab when Raymond hurried over, clutching a coffee cup and flashing an eager smile. “I owe you an apology. I underestimated you before, and I hope you won’t hold it against me. Please—take this coffee as a peace offering.”

Nearby, James watched, confused by Raymond’s sudden about-face. Sure, Elissa had managed to cut the drug’s side effects by fifty percent—but until it was published, nothing was set in stone. Who knew what might happen? Besides, Raymond had been openly dismissive of Elissa at first, and now here he was, all humble and ingratiating.

Elissa ignored Raymond, keeping her focus on her work.

Raymond’s smile faltered for a moment, but he pressed on. “Ms. Drummond, we’re all on the same team, working toward the same goal. There’s *no* need for divisions between us. I know I was careless before, and I’m sorry. Would you consider letting me join your project?”

She didn’t take the coffee, nor did she agree to his request. Her tone was cool but even. “If you want in, show me what you can actually do.”

2/3

12:07

Chapter 239

She wasn’t about to let someone else coast on her hard work.

Raymond’s face lit up. “Of course, of course! Anything you need, just say the word.”

Today, Cliff was running late, so Xavier was helping Elissa in the lab.

Elissa worked with quick, practiced movements, as if she’d rehearsed every step a hundred times over. Xavier, meanwhile, was clearly struggling to keep up. He rubbed the back of his neck, embarrassed. “Ms. Drummond, I’m sorry. I’m just not up to your level yet. As soon as Cliff gets here, I’ll hand things off to him.”

“It’s fine,” Elissa reassured him. “Everyone has a rough start.”

She remembered her own long hours of training under her mentor, the countless mistakes before she finally got it right.

If Aaron Blaine ever heard her say that, he’d probably be bursting with pride.

Chapter 240

## A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator - Lullaby 240[ 630 words ]

Elissa had always been gifted. For most people, learning was a journey from zero to a hundred; for her, it was more like starting at ninety and racing straight to a hundred and fifty.

She stayed in the lab until evening, so busy she barely remembered *to* eat lunch. It was only as she was wrapping up her work that she realized she was absolutely starving.

Tanya Foster was out, and Elissa wasn't in the mood to grab dinner alone. She decided she'd just go home and whip up a beef pie.

She snatched her phone, grabbed her bag, and headed down to the underground parking garage.

The Murphy Group had spared no expense building their tower. Unlike most garages, this one was bathed in LED lights so bright it could have been midday, and the place was meticulously maintained every month. Surveillance cameras watched every corner. It felt safe—safer than anywhere else, really.

Elissa had never been the type to scare easily.

But tonight, as she stepped out of the elevator, she found the garage shrouded in darkness, the only light a faint, ghostly glow.

It was well past the evening rush, and the silence in the nearly empty garage made her skin crawl.

Still, the red light blinking on the security camera overhead was reassuring enough. Murphy Group's security was nothing if not professional,

"Ms. Drummond, is it?"

She'd barely reached her car when two large men emerged from a nearby black van. One of them spoke, his voice low and calm. "Someone paid us to end your life."

Before she could react, everything went black.

1/3

12:07

Chapter 240

When Elissa awoke, her head was pounding and her vision slow to clear. She was in the backseat of a moving car, hands and feet bound.

A man sat beside her, talking quietly on the phone. Noticing she'd come to, he didn't even glance her way—just kept speaking into the receiver.

“Mr. Atwater, if you want her alive, you'll come alone. If *you* call the police, trust me—Ms. Drummond won't live to see tomorrow.”

Frank Atwater was on his feet the instant he heard the threat, his movements cold and purposeful as he strode from his office. “Who are you? She's my wife. If you so much as touch a hair on her head, I'll make sure you regret it.”

Bernard, following close behind, knew Frank wasn't making idle threats. Everyone saw the CEO as a gentleman—charming, composed—but few had ever witnessed his temper. That was only because it rarely surfaced. The kidnapper just chuckled, unfazed. “Mr. Atwater, men like us make our living dancing on a knife's edge. We're not afraid of threats.”

“I've sent the address to your phone. Make sure you come alone.”

He hung up before Frank could reply.

Frank's fury was palpable as he glanced at the location sent to him. Elissa was already outside Vistapeak City, in an abandoned industrial zone.

Narrowing his eyes, Frank turned to Bernard. “Have our people secure the entrances to that site. And don't spook them.”

Bernard hesitated. “Sir, are you really going alone?”

Frank was capable, but this was a setup—going solo was dangerous.

As the elevator doors slid open, Frank stepped inside, voice cold. “You really think they're after me?”

It was obvious the real target was Elissa.

Bernard looked unconvinced. “I'm just worried—”

2/3

12:08

Chapter 240

Frank cut him off, his eyes icy. “If you’ve got time to worry, use it *to* find out where Marcia’s been these past few days.”

As the elevator reached the garage level and the doors opened, Frank barely stepped out before Marcia came running toward him, tears streaming down her face.

“Frank! Frank, you have to help Hickey!”

“Hickey?” Frank’s brow furrowed. “What happened?”

“He’s been kidnapped!”

## A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator - Lullaby 241[ 600 words ]

Marcia’s eyes were red and puffy, panic making her words tumble out in a jumble. “Someone–someone just called. They told me to come alone and save Hickey...”

Frank latched onto the one thing that mattered. “Where do they want you to go?”

“H–here. This place.”

With shaking hands, Marcia fumbled for her phone and thrust it at Frank.

It was the same abandoned industrial park.

They’d taken both his wife and his nephew.

Frank barely glanced at the screen before striding to the car, his voice icy. “I’ll handle this. You go home and wait.”

“No!”

Marcia grabbed his arm, her desperation flaring. “Hickey is my son. He’s been kidnapped–how could I possibly just go home and wait?”

Frank shot her a skeptical look, but there was no time to argue. “Fine. Get

in the car.”

“Okay.”

Marcia nodded frantically and scrambled into the passenger seat.

It didn't take long before their SUV pulled up outside a derelict factory at the edge of the old industrial district.

Elissa's instincts told her they'd left Vistapeak City far behind.

As the car screeched to a halt in front of the crumbling warehouse, the tattooed man beside her yanked her out with rough hands.

From the passenger side, a middle-aged man with a jagged scar across

1/3

12:08

Chapter 241

his cheek climbed out, his tone sharp with annoyance. "Can't *you* show a little more respect for a lady?"

The tattooed man just shrugged. "She's not gonna be alive much longer. What's the point?"

It was obvious the Scarred Man was in charge. The tattooed guy lowered his voice.

The Scarred Man gave a chilling laugh. "With a face like that, you're not even tempted to have a little fun before she dies?"

The tattooed man understood immediately, and his grip on Elissa eased a little.

Elissa wasn't stupid—she caught the implication right away, her scalp prickling with fear. "Who sent you? Who are you working for?"

Neither man answered. They dragged her inside, ignoring her struggles, and tied her tightly to a chair with thick ropes.

The sharp tang of gasoline filled Elissa's nose.

She was sure it was gasoline—her years learning to identify medicinal herbs by scent made her much more sensitive than most. Some herbs looked almost identical but could be distinguished by smell alone. That ability had been drilled into her; now, it might save her life.

But tonight, these men really intended to kill her.

Inside the warehouse, she counted several more tough-looking men—no way she could fight her way out alone.

Forcing herself to stay calm, Elissa fixed her gaze on the Scarred Man—he was clearly the one in charge. She took a steadying breath and got straight to the point.

“Someone hired you to kill me. How much are they paying?”

The Scarred Man licked his teeth, eyeing her with a look that made her skin crawl. “So what’s the plan? You want to buy your life back? Or maybe... sell yourself?”

2/3

**12.08**

Chapter 241

Elissa swallowed the bile rising in her throat, forcing her voice to stay steady. “I’m a married woman. What would you really gain from that? I have money—a lot of money. How much are they paying you? I’ll give you

double.”

The men laughed, exchanging glances. The tattooed one sneered, “Big talk. The client’s offering half a million for your head. What, *you* think you’ve got a million lying around?”

They’d already looked into her background before snatching her—a small-town doctor couldn’t possibly have that kind of money.

Elissa exhaled, not hesitating for a second. “I can pay it.”

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator - Lullaby 242[ 651 words ]

These guys were clearly desperate—dangerous men with nothing to lose. All they cared about was the money.

It wasn’t just a million; even if it were two million, Elissa wouldn’t have hesitated for a second.

The tattooed man stared, almost in disbelief, and shot a look at the man with the scar. “Boss, is she... is she really that rich?”

“I can go higher,” Elissa offered, catching the glimmer of interest in their eyes. She pressed the advantage, her voice smooth and persuasive. “Tell me who hired you, and I’ll add another half a million. That’s one and a

half million in total.”

One and a half million.

Now it wasn't just the tattooed guy—every man in the room had their eyes fixed on her, hungry and wide with greed.

ww

With five hundred thousand, each of them would barely scrape together fifty grand apiece, which was already a fortune to men like this.

But now? One and a half million.

Even after the boss took his cut, each of them would walk away with at least a hundred grand—money that would take the average person a lifetime to earn.

They'd landed this job purely by chance. Who knew when they'd get another opportunity like this?

The scarred man looked Elissa up and down, suspicion flickering in his eyes. "You really have that kind of cash?"

"I do," Elissa replied, not the least bit rattled. Despite being tied up, she met his gaze coolly. "Your client just wants me dead, right? You've already got gasoline ready—planning on burning me alive?"

1/3

12:08

Chapter 242

Their surprise was obvious, but Elissa pressed on. "And you've got

explosives prepared, too, I bet. When everything goes up in flames, who's going to know if you let me go or killed me?"

"One and a half million. I can wire it to you as soon as I walk out of here. And you'll still get your client's payment—two million in total. That's more than enough to get out of this life for good, isn't it?"

Her words set off a ripple of excitement. The tattooed man and his crew couldn't hide their grins now.

It was just too much money.

They glanced at the scarred man, barely able to contain themselves. “Boss, maybe we should-”

“Maybe we should what?” Scarred Man snapped, though a flicker of uncertainty crossed his face. He quickly shoved it down, barking, “You think you can just take the money and not worry about your life? Did you forget who our client is? In Vistapeak City, besides the Murphy family, there’s only-”

He caught himself mid-sentence, glancing warily at Elissa and cutting off the rest.

But Elissa already knew.

In Vistapeak City, if not the Murphy family, then it had to be the Atwater family.

The Atwaters...

If someone wanted her dead this badly, who else could it be but Marcia?

Elissa was about to speak when a child’s sobs broke through the tension.

“That little brat’s awake,” the tattooed man grumbled, annoyed. He shot a look at two of his buddies. “Go bring him out.”

Moments later, Elissa watched as they dragged a small boy from a side room.

2/3

12:08

Chapter 242

It was Hickey.

Marcia never tired of using her own son as leverage.

As soon as Hickey spotted Elissa, the terror in his eyes turned instantly to hope. He wailed, “Auntie Elissa! Please, save me!”

He fought the men holding him, struggling toward Elissa with all the strength he could muster, desperate for her protection. There was no trace left of the usual disdain or resentment he’d shown her before.

Elissa realized, perhaps she'd always been a little cold-blooded.

Even now, seeing Hickey sobbing his heart out, her eyes remained hard. She glanced at the scarred man and said flatly, "Let me guess. Your client told you not to lay a finger on him, didn't they?"

12:08

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator - Lullaby 243[ 660 words ]

"How did you know-?"

The tattooed man couldn't help but blurt out the question, shock written all over his face. But he cut himself off halfway, silenced by a sharp, warning glare from Scarred Man.

Scarred Man was just as surprised. While ordering his crew to tie Hickey to another chair, he studied Elissa more closely.

She was just a small-town doctor, yet she'd kept her wits and managed to negotiate with a gang of kidnappers like them—calmer than most

silver-spoon heiresses from old money families.

Scarred Man eyed her with suspicion. "Who the hell are you, really?"

Elissa's voice was steady. "Didn't you just call Frank from the car?"

He narrowed his eyes. "And what's your point?"

He couldn't read her at all. Their employer had said this woman was one of Frank's flings, someone the Atwater estate had grown tired of. The job was simple: get rid of her. If anything went wrong, the Atwaters would shield them. Frank couldn't touch them.

But Elissa seemed to sense the setup. A faint, knowing smile tugged at her lips. "She wants you dead, and you're still doing her dirty work."

Scarred Man frowned, suddenly uneasy. "What's so funny? What are you getting at?"

"You took this job without even checking my background?"

Lowering her gaze to conceal her nerves, Elissa bluffed, "My name is Elissa. I'm the adopted daughter of the Murphy family. Ever heard of Rowan Murphy? He's my brother. You think you can't afford to cross the Atwaters, but you're fine picking a fight with the Murphys?"

Their stunned expressions only bolstered her confidence. She added calmly, “Oh, and by the way—Frank’s wife is also—”

1/3

12:08

Chapter 243

Before Elissa could finish, the warehouse doors burst open.

Marcia stormed in first. “Let go of my son!” she shouted, her glare full of warning as she shot Scarred Man a murderous look—don’t even think about trying anything.

She’d caught snippets of Elissa’s earlier conversation with the kidnappers as she approached the door. This girl was craftier than she looked,

Kidnapped and still full of tricks!

If she’d shown up even a minute later, these fools might’ve really let this little witch go.

Elissa’s gaze shifted past Marcia, focusing on Frank as he stepped in behind her.

Frank saw her too.

She was tied tightly to a chair, her usually tidy dark hair tangled across her face. Her skin, always delicate, was now scraped raw at the wrists from the rough rope—she was already bleeding.

Frank felt as if something was twisting his heart. He strode forward, face like thunder, but before he could get too close, a gun was shoved against Elissa’s head.

“Mr. Atwater!” Scarred Man barked at him. “Take one more step and she’s dead.”

All traces of Frank’s usual charm vanished. He stopped cold, his face hard as stone.

“Alright. You’ve got me. My wife and my nephew—what’s this really about?”

“Wife?” Scarred Man’s voice faltered. Elissa’s earlier words clicked into place.

They’d been played.

Damn it.

Marcia, that treacherous bitch, had managed to talk them into attacking

2/3

12:08

## Chapter 243

Frank's wife and nephew for half a million. High risk, lousy payoff.

No wonder this job landed on their laps.

Shit.

But they'd come this far; they couldn't just walk away empty-handed.

Frank's lips curled into a cold smile. "You seriously don't *know who* you've kidnapped? That's not exactly professional."

Scarred Man forced a laugh. "Of course we know."

He glanced at his crew, then back at Frank. "We brought you here for one reason. We want to know—which is more important to you, your wife or your nephew?"

The words hung in the air, icy and sharp.

Frank's face darkened even further. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Scarred Man grinned, teeth bared. "It means only one of them gets to walk out alive."

A choice. One or the other.

Elissa's hope flickered out. Her face grew pale as the reality set in.

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator - Lullaby 244[ 689 words ]

She was long since used to being the one left behind.

Frank's hand, hanging at his side, curled slowly into a fist. His eyes smoldered with barely contained anger, but before he could speak, Marcia grew frantic.

She clutched his arm, her voice trembling with sobs. "Frank, *you* have to save Hickey—he's your own nephew!"

Frank's gaze darkened, his expression unreadable. "Elissa is my wife."

"So that's how it is..."

Marcia suddenly let out a twisted laugh, her face etched with bitter disappointment as she stared at Frank. “Then let your brother turn in his grave. Let Hickey go down with him! Let him see that his own brother doesn’t care about his only child!”

“Frank, how could you do this to Spencer?”

Her accusations struck Frank like physical blows. He squeezed his eyes shut in pain.

He’d sworn at his brother’s grave that he’d watch over his nephew, that he’d protect Spencer’s son no matter what.

But Elissa...

The scarred man, growing impatient with their indecision, rapped the muzzle of his gun on Elissa’s head. “Time’s running out, Mr. Atwater. I’m going to count to ten. If you keep hesitating, they both die.”

“Ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five...”

Frank’s fists trembled with the effort not to act rashly. At the very last second, he shouted, “The boy! I choose the boy!”

He chose the child.

1/3

12:08

Chapter 244

He chose Hickey.

Elissa wasn’t surprised in the least.

“I can tell, Mr. Atwater. You must be quite the doting uncle,” the scarred man said with a mocking smile, then waved for his men to untie Hickey.

As soon as Hickey was free, he bolted straight into Marcia’s arms, sobbing, “Mom! I was so scared...”

Frank dropped his gaze, his voice cold and clipped as he ordered Marcia, “Take him and get out.”

“What about you?”

Marcia refused to leave so easily. Watching Frank risk himself to save Elissa made her ache with hatred, though her face betrayed nothing.

“Come with us, Frank. Please?”

When he stood firm, unmoved, she suddenly thought of something. “Frank, I’ll never feel safe if you stay behind alone. If you come with us right now, I’ll tell you where that little girl went all those years ago. Deal?” She truly meant to tell him.

After all, as soon as they walked out that door, Elissa wouldn’t survive the next five minutes. What harm was there in telling?

“What did you say?”

Frank glared at her, jaw clenched. “You know where she is?”

Marcia nodded, “Yes, but only if you leave with us.”

Frank instinctively glanced at Elissa, his throat working painfully as his fists tightened until his knuckles stood out white. He still couldn’t make

the choice.

He found himself wondering, when had Elissa become so important to him?

Elissa, for her part, knew him well enough to read the hesitation in his

2/3

12:08

Chapter 244

eyes with a single glance.

He had already chosen to abandon her once. Now, it seemed like he was about to do it again.

It’s fine, she thought.

As Frank was about to turn away, and Elissa’s heart went cold and numb, his phone suddenly rang, shattering the silence.

“Don’t move!”

The scarred man whirled, instantly on edge. “You called the cops, didn’t you?”

Frank glanced back at him, icy calm. “If I wanted you dead, would I bother calling the police?”

The Atwater family practically ran half of Vistapeak City. If he wanted this to end, he had other means.

“Answer it,” the scarred man ordered, still suspicious. He shot a look to one of his men, a tattooed thug. “Go listen in.”

Frank, careful not to provoke the man holding the gun, pulled out his phone and answered, voice rough and impatient. “Speak.”

“Mr. Atwater...”

Bernard on the other end sounded nervous, knowing full well this wasn’t the best time, but he had no choice. “We’ve found it. The car that picked up the girl from the orphanage all those years ago—that belonged to the Murphy family. And the only child the Murphy family ever adopted... was the lady of the house.”

3/3

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator - Lullaby 245[ 772 words ]

Frank’s tall, broad-shouldered frame actually swayed, his Adam’s apple bobbing as he almost failed to find his voice. “What did you just say?”

Beside him, Marcia had heard every word Bernard said, and her mind went completely blank.

She never imagined that Frank would discover the truth at a moment like this.

What now??

How was it that Elissa, that wretched woman, always managed to slip through disaster unscathed?

No.

She couldn’t let this happen.

Jealousy was about to drive Marcia mad. Her eyes flashed with venom as she glared at the Scarred Man, frantically signaling for him to do it-now! Just one shot. All it would take was one shot, and Elissa would be dead.

Then everything would finally be over.

But the Scarred Man wasn't an idiot. Ever since he'd learned Elissa's true identity, he'd made up his mind—not to actually kill her. Tricking this conniving woman, Marcia, out of her money was reward enough.

Frank stood frozen for a long moment before slowly, painfully turning around. He couldn't even bring himself to look at Elissa.

On the other end of the phone, Bernard's voice was steady and earnest. "They covered their tracks when the adoption happened all those years ago, but I personally verified it—the woman is exactly who you've been searching for."

"The timeline matches perfectly. The day she joined the Murphy family. was the same day the little girl was adopted from the orphanage."

1/4

12:08

Chapter 245

A thunderous silence fell. Frank's phone slipped from his hand and clattered to the floor.

The person he had spent years searching for, the one he'd moved heaven and earth to find, was the very woman he'd neglected all this time—his

own wife.

She'd always been right there beside him.

His wife.

He was breathing hard now, chest tight with shock and regret. When he finally mustered the courage to look at Elissa, their eyes met—and what he saw was utter disappointment.

She was calm.

Cold.

Nothing like the little girl from his memory who used to chase after him, pleading, "Promise you'll never forget me!"

But he was the one who'd turned her into this—he'd done this to her, with his own hands.

It felt as if a knife had been jammed straight into his heart. Frank's hands shook violently. Suddenly, as if possessed, he lunged for Elissa, voice raw and desperate. "Let her go!"

The Scarred Man hadn't seen it coming—he froze for a split second, but that was all Frank needed. With a swift, powerful kick, he knocked the gun from the man's hand.

In the blink of an eye, Frank seized the weapon and shoved Elissa behind him, shielding her with his body.

"Fire!"

Someone shouted the word, and Elissa whipped her head around to see flames racing across the floor, igniting barrel after barrel of gasoline.

Marcia and her son were nowhere to be seen—they'd already slipped

2/4

12:08

Chapter 245

away.

"Who the hell started the fire?!"

The Scarred Man panicked, and, terrified Frank would turn on him, quickly warned, "Mr. Atwater, once the flames get any higher, the bombs rigged upstairs are going to blow! You need to get out of here—now!"

Even as he spoke, the fire surged, and the Scarred Man bolted for the exit with his crew, abandoning everything in the chaos.

"Elissa! Elissa!"

Frank's eyes were bloodshot as he tore at the ropes binding Elissa's wrists, his hands working frantically.

Elissa didn't know why Frank was suddenly so determined to save her, but there was no time for questions. As soon as she was free, she tried to get up and run with him, but her body betrayed her—she'd been tied up for too long, her wrists raw and bleeding from the rough rope.

The moment she stood, her legs buckled from numbness and pain, and she nearly collapsed.

“Don’t be afraid,”

Frank swept her into his arms, clutching her tightly as if she were the most precious thing in the world. “I’ll get you out. I promise—I’ll get you out of here.”

“I’ll never leave you behind again,” Frank vowed.

Maybe it was her imagination, but Elissa thought she heard a tremor in his voice, as if he were on the verge of tears.

Frank carried her toward the exit, only to find the factory’s heavy iron doors had been locked from the outside.

Those people shouldn’t have had the guts to do this.

The heat was nearly unbearable, flames licking at their heels. Frank had no idea where Bernard was or what he was doing, but they were running

3/4

12:08

Chapter 245

out of time.

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator - Lullaby 246[ 665 words ]

The last of the thugs had fled, but he still hadn’t brought his team inside.

Elissa had already surveyed the factory earlier—there was no way out through the front door. Struggling to her feet, lungs burning from the thick smoke, she pointed to a high window above them. “You—you need to climb out through there,” she gasped.

The window was high up and she was far too weak to make it herself. But if Frank could get out, he could unlock the door from the outside.

Frank hadn’t expected this. After everything he’d done to her, she was still thinking of his safety in a life-or-death moment. “Elissa, I’m the one who wronged you before, I—”

“I don’t have time for this,” Elissa cut him off, urgency tightening her voice. “Can you just climb out already?”

If he didn’t move, the bomb would go off and they’d both die here.

“Alright.”

Frank knew this wasn’t the time for apologies. He grabbed a chair, propped it under the window, and with a practiced push, vaulted himself out with ease.

He’d always been athletic–this was nothing for him.

But then, strangely, the bomb didn’t go off.

Bang!

Frank had barely landed outside when, behind him, the heavy metal door was kicked open from the outside.

Whoever it was, it wasn’t Frank.

A group burst in. One of them swept Elissa up and rushed her toward the exit. She was half-delirious from the smoke, only vaguely aware of fresh air hitting her face as she staggered, then was lifted into someone’s

arms.

1/3

12.08

Chapter 246

“Elissa!”

Frank eyed the newcomers warily. “Who are you people?”

“Move!” barked the leader, not bothering to answer. Satisfied that Elissa was safe, he signaled the rest–men in dark uniforms, clearly highly trained–and they vanished as quickly as they’d come.

On the way to the hospital, Frank couldn’t shake the feeling they were being followed.

Up front, Bernard was still apologizing. “Mr. Atwater, I’m sorry. I should have been quicker. I was so focused on chasing down those kidnappers, I didn’t realize you and Mrs. Atwater were trapped.”

Frank ignored the explanation. “Forget whoever’s tailing us. Just get to the hospital,” he ordered the driver.

A private jet touched down on the runway, gliding to a halt under the gray Meridia sky.

Ian answered a call, his expression darkening at once. “Is she alright?”

Rowan, seated beside him, pulled off his eye mask, his sharp gaze cutting over.

Noticing Rowan’s attention, Ian didn’t even bother to hang up before lowering his voice. “Sir, there’s been an incident with Miss Elissa.”

“Give me the phone.” Rowan’s face was icy, not a hint of warmth in his eyes. He stretched out his hand, and Ian quickly passed the phone over.

Rowan’s voice was dangerously low. “Didn’t I tell you to protect her? Where is she now?”

“Sir, it was our mistake!” came the anxious reply.

Before leaving the country, Rowan had tasked Nash with Elissa’s security. He never expected trouble to strike on the very first day.

2/3

12:09

Chapter 246

“She’s not badly hurt,” Nash reported quickly, then explained, “She was abducted from the company’s underground parking garage. We realized it immediately and gave chase, but not knowing what was going on inside, we couldn’t just storm in. I managed to scale the outside wall to the second floor and disable the bomb while they were distracted. We waited until the kidnappers left before rushing in to rescue her. But we did manage to detain all of them.”

Rowan’s eyes narrowed. “Bombs and arson? They were trying to kill her.”

Nash replied, his voice grim, “That’s what it looks like.”

“Where is she? Put her on.”

“She’s...” Nash hesitated, immediately understanding who Rowan meant. “She’s in Frank’s car.”

Even separated by thousands of miles, Nash felt a chill crawl down his spine.

Rowan ended the call abruptly, his expression like a winter storm. He turned to Ian. "Book the next flight home. Now."

## A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator - Lullaby 247[ 682 words ]

### Chapter 247

"Sir..."

Evan knew just how much his boss cared about Miss Elissa, but he couldn't help but remind him, "The Meridia Country project... it's critical for our overseas business-"

Ian didn't try to persuade him. After glancing at the booking app, he responded crisply, "Sir, the earliest flight isn't until tomorrow at noon."

"Then apply for a private route."

"Yes, sir."

Ian immediately dialed the number to request clearance for the private jet.

He understood that if anything happened to Miss Elissa, nothing else would matter to his boss.

There had been a time, years ago, when his boss had no choice but to put the family feud—the blood debt for his parents—above everything else. For Elissa's safety, there was no other way.

If he hadn't fought back then, if Matriarch Paige Murphy had completely crushed them, both he and Elissa would have been nothing more than prey on the chopping block.

But now, as long as he had any say in it, Elissa would always come first.

The black Maybach sped toward the hospital.

Elissa drifted back to consciousness, groggy and disoriented, in Frank's arms.

As soon as her eyes fluttered open, Frank's worried voice met her ears. "Elissa, are you alright? Are you hurt anywhere? We're almost at the hospital."

1/3

12:09

Chapter 247

“I’m fine.”

Her throat was raw from smoke, her voice hoarse. “I just want to go home. Vistapeak Gardens, please.”

Feeling the warmth of his body through her clothes, she instinctively braced herself against the seat, trying to move away.

She didn’t like being this close to him.

Frank noticed and felt a sharp ache in his chest, but he knew better than to push her right now. He let her go and spoke gently, “Let’s at least have a doctor look at you first. Your wrist and ankle are hurt, and you should get checked for anything else.”

As he spoke, the car rolled to a stop at the ER entrance.

Elissa was too weak to argue, so she let herself be helped into the hospital, quietly cooperating with the doctors.

Frank darted around the ER: paying bills, picking up prescriptions, making sure everything was done.

When he returned with her medication, a nurse tending Elissa’s wounds couldn’t help but smile with envy. “Your husband takes such good care of *you*. He hasn’t left your side for a second, and now he’s watching me dress your wounds—like he’s afraid I’ll hurt you by accident.”

Elissa glanced at Frank, almost involuntarily.

He really was watching, just as the nurse described, his gaze fixed on the nurse’s hands as she worked.

Sensing her eyes on him, Frank finally looked back at Elissa, worry etched between his brows. “Does it hurt?”

He knelt beside her, taking her small hand in his, his voice low. “If it hurts, just squeeze my hand.”

Elissa froze, caught off guard. Frank was acting so strange tonight.

He'd always been a gentleman—at least in public. But he was the type to

2/3

12:09

Chapter 247

offer words, not gestures. What had gotten into him tonight?

No, she corrected herself—he'd been acting off for a while now. But tonight felt different, almost as if he'd made some kind of decision.

She pulled her hand free and looked down at him. "That call you got earlier, at the industrial park—what was it about?"

She was certain everything had changed with that call. He'd been ready to leave with Marcia, but after answering, he'd suddenly rushed back to save her.

Frank's eyes grew even softer at the memory. "Let's get you patched up first. I'll tell you everything once we're home."

This mattered too much to him. He needed space and time to explain it all to Elissa properly.

Looking back on their three years of marriage, he realized just how much he'd gotten wrong.

"Alright," Elissa said quietly, letting the nurse finish cleaning her wounds.

The truth was, she wasn't all that afraid of pain. But every time the cotton swab touched her skin, Frank's brow would knit just a little tighter.

3/3

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator - Lullaby 249[ 716 words ]

Elissa's brows knit tightly, her face troubled by whatever she was dreaming. Her fingers clung desperately to the car door handle, and her lips—half hidden beneath a veil of dark, silky hair—murmured restless words.

Frank, seeing her caught in a nightmare, felt a surge of protectiveness. Wanting to reassure her, he inched closer, reaching out to draw her into

his arms.

But the moment his fingers brushed her shoulder, Elissa flinched violently, pulling back as her eyes snapped open. “Rowan!” she cried out

instinctively.

Brother.

She’d been dreaming of Rowan—how he’d rushed into that crumbling old factory to save her. But then the explosion came.

Her chest heaved with uneven breaths as she blinked, disoriented, at her surroundings. It took her a moment to realize she was still in the car.

And the car had stopped.

But they weren’t parked in front of Vistapeak Gardens.

Frank, hearing her whimper in her sleep, had called out for Rowan in his panic. The reaction only deepened his own sense of inadequacy—what kind of husband was he, if she called for another man in her fear?

He reached over, gently smoothing Elissa’s hair. His voice was soft. “Bad dream?”

“Yeah...” Elissa rubbed her eyes, glancing out the window. Only then did she notice they were parked at the gates of Greenwood Manor.

She turned her head, frowning at Frank. “Didn’t you say you’d take me back to Vistapeak Gardens?”

“Elissa,” Frank’s patience was stretched thin as he tried to coax her. “This

1/3

Chapter 249

is your real home, remember?”

After everything that had happened today, Frank was determined not to let it repeat—not to let her slip away from him again. He’d only just found her. He couldn’t bear for her to be in danger, not even for a moment.

“This stopped being my home a long time ago,” Elissa replied, barely listening. She pushed the car door open and stepped out.

From the moment Frank had let Marcia and her son move in, this house had nothing to do with her anymore.

A home was somewhere she could feel safe—and that wasn't here.

Frank hurried after her, catching her wrist. "Didn't you want to know about that phone call I got in the industrial district? Come back inside and I'll tell you everything."

Elissa met his gaze, her voice calm. "If I go inside with you, will I be able to leave again?"

"If I don't want you to—" Frank's tone was gentle, but there was a stubborn intensity beneath it. "—then you can't."

The man in front of her felt more and more like a stranger.

She stared at Frank for a long moment, realizing he wasn't bluffing. Wordlessly, she followed him through the gates of Greenwood Manor.

Dawn had broken fully by now. In the kitchen, Edna was already preparing breakfast.

For a fleeting second, it felt to Elissa as if she'd stepped back in time—back to the days when this place had felt like home.

But the feeling vanished almost instantly. She knew better than anyone: there was no going back.

Frank tried to lead her upstairs, but Elissa stopped, pulling free of his grasp. She walked toward the living room. "Let's talk down here."

Frank hesitated, watching her determined face, but found himself unable

2/3

12:09

Chapter 249

to argue. He followed, asking Edna to bring over a bowl of nourishing broth for Elissa. "Have something to eat first," he urged quietly.

But Elissa only felt drained. "Is it really that hard to say?" she asked, her voice weary.

He'd never been one to shy away from uncomfortable truths before. No matter how unreasonable his demands, he'd always made them sound simple and justified. What was different this time? Had his conscience finally woken up?

"Little Elissa..." Frank paused for a long while, struggling to find the words. At last, he spoke, voice gentle but trembling slightly. "Do you remember that car accident nineteen years ago? The one where you saved a little boy?"

Elissa froze, caught off guard.

It was so long ago—her memory of it faded, nearly erased by all the suffering that had followed. Nineteen years was a long time to survive in the shadows; pain and darkness had eaten away at her childhood recollections, leaving only fragments behind.

3/3

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator - Lullaby 250[ 655 words ]

It took her a long time before fragments of that memory finally floated back.

It must have been outside their apartment complex.

Her father had just returned from an assignment that day. She'd been so overjoyed, tugging him along to buy her some cotton candy.

He'd already paid, and while the vendor was still spinning the candy, a sudden, thunderous explosion rang out.

Neither of them waited for the treat. All they could think about was running to help.

After that day, she never tasted the cotton candy her father bought for her again.

Or her mother's, either.

They both died on the way home after finishing their next assignment.

From that moment on, her life was turned completely upside down.

Frank watched as her eyes reddened, his large hand gently covering her smaller one. He asked, hesitantly, "You remember now, don't you?"

"So—"

Elissa missed her parents terribly. She sniffed, pushing down the sting in her eyes, and forced a crooked smile. “Are you about to tell me—you were that little boy back then?”

If that was true, it was almost laughable.

Fate really had a cruel sense of humor.

The person she’d saved with her own hands had gone on to shatter all her illusions about marriage.

He’d been the one to push her, time and again, right to the very edge.

1/3

12:09

Chapter 250

Frank heard the sarcasm in her voice. Inside, it felt like thousands of ants

were gnawing away at his chest. His voice was strained as he admitted, “It was me.”

“Little Nine, I... I’ve been looking for you for so many years.” His eyes shone, glistening with tears.

The person he’d been searching for had been beside him all along.

The endless days and nights he’d spent trying to find Little Nine, and the three years he’d spent neglecting Elissa in their marriage—all of it crashed together in his mind, wave after wave, until he could barely breathe from guilt and regret.

Elissa, though, just felt absurd. She’d never been the foolish type, and now, suddenly, everything made sense—why Frank had always treated Marcia so differently.

He’d mistaken Marcia for her.

Because of that jade pendant.

Elissa lowered her gaze, taking in the sight of the once-proud man kneeling beside her, guilt etched into every line of his face. She let out a heavy breath, trying to ease the tightness in her chest.

She managed a smile, though it was stiff and cold. “If you’re really that guilty, then you shouldn’t mind doing me a little favor, right?”

Maybe she really was cold-hearted.

At this moment, all she could think was that she should use this chance to settle things with Frank—finally talk about the divorce and be done with it.

They'd go their separate ways. No more interference.

Hearing her about to make a request, Frank actually felt a strange sense of relief. "Whatever it is, just say the word. There's nothing I wouldn't give you."

Anything at all.

2/3

12:09

Chapter 250

Even if she asked for everything in his name, he wouldn't hesitate.

He was willing to pay any price for his past mistakes, desperate to make it right.

Elissa let out a quiet sigh, her voice calm. "I don't need anything from you. I just want you to understand that our divorce is final. That's all."

Frank stared at her, at a loss. What did she mean, it was final?

He parted his lips, thinking she must have misspoken, and said helplessly, "I told you, I won't divorce you."

"I'm telling you, we're already divorced."

There was no point hiding it anymore. Elissa had no desire to keep playing along with the Atwater family's charade. She decided to lay everything bare.

Meeting Frank's stunned gaze, she enunciated every word with icy clarity: "Our divorce papers are already signed. Your copy is at Atwater Manor. You can pick it up whenever you want."

3/3

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator - Lullaby 251[ 681 words ]

**Chapter 251**

Frank Atwater's fingers trembled almost imperceptibly as they rested on the back of Elissa Drummond's hand.

For a moment, it seemed as if he'd heard some dark joke; a hollow laugh escaped him. "I know you're still angry with me, and I don't expect you to forgive me anytime soon. But don't say things like that."

He wasn't about to get a divorce now—and truth be told, the thought had never even crossed his mind before.

The idea that they could already have divorce papers finalized was unthinkable.

He had all the patience in the world. He'd give her time, coax her, wait until her anger simmered down.

He could never take her words at face value when she was upset. But seeing the seriousness in her delicate features, a wave of unease spread restlessly through his chest.

Elissa wasn't surprised by Frank's reaction. She didn't rush or even seem to notice the tremor in his touch. Calmly, she drew her hand away and said softly, "You can ask your mother if you don't believe me. She handled it herself. Your copy of the papers is still with her."

"Impossible!"

Frank's denial was automatic. He shot to his feet, all long limbs and looming presence, suddenly towering over Elissa with an intensity that was hard to ignore.

But Elissa didn't so much as flinch. Her voice remained as even as before. "I told you. Ask your mother."

Her composure was absolute.

Just like every time before,

Frank fought to keep his irritation from boiling over, staring at her for a

1/3

12:10)

Chapter 251

long moment.

He realized he'd never seen her lose control.

Never once had he seen her cry.

He used to appreciate that about her—her obedience, her quietness, her gentle nature. She never caused a scene, never shed tears or made a fuss.

She was always dignified, always rational.

But now, Frank felt like something was deeply wrong.

Where was the girl who used to clutch his hand outside the hospital, sobbing and clinging to him, her face streaked with tears?

Frank's hand, hanging by his side, curled into a tight fist. He searched her face for even a flicker of emotion, but found nothing.

After a moment, he drew a deep breath, turned on his heel, and strode quickly out to the backyard, pulling his phone from his pocket. Even as he left, he made sure to instruct the security guard to keep an eye on Elissa and not let her leave.

When Carmela saw Frank's name flash across her phone, her heart skipped a beat. She glanced sharply at Marcia Carson, who was downstairs trying to soothe Hickey Atwater, then forced herself to answer in a steady voice. "Hello, Frank."

That morning, the moment Marcia had come home clutching Hickey, both looking utterly disheveled, Carmela knew her plan had failed.

She'd warned Marcia before she set out to confront Elissa: if you're going to do something, do it cleanly. No need to draw things out or force a choice. But Marcia wouldn't listen—she insisted on twisting the knife, wanted Elissa to hurt before she died.

And now, not only had Elissa survived, but Marcia had managed to drag herself—and Carmela—down with her.

Fool.

2/3

12:10

Chapter 251

Frank's blood was already simmering, and his words came out clipped and edged with anger. "When did you file the divorce papers for me and Elissa?"

The calmness he'd seen on Elissa's face had told him this was almost certainly true.

More importantly, he knew his mother had the connections to pull it off.

That's why he didn't ask, "Did you file the divorce papers?" He went straight to the point.

He wanted to know just how far his mother had gone behind his back.

Hearing her son's furious accusation, Carmela's nerves frayed further. "Divorce papers? I—I don't know what you're talking about..."

"Mom."

Frank's hand clenched as he yanked his tie loose, veins standing out on his neck. He cut her off, his impatience razor-sharp. "I'll only ask you once. When did you do it?"