

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

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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.

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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?"

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It was a warning.

Even if Carmela refused to speak, Frank could discover the truth with a single phone call.

But Carmela was his mother—she knew his temperament all too well. With a sigh, she gave in and told the truth. "It was finalized before the

New Year."

"Before the New Year?" Frank's jaw tightened, his voice cold as ice. "At Grandma's birthday party, I distinctly remember telling you to stay out of my business with Elissa, didn't I?"

"|—"

Carmela drew a deep breath, bracing herself. "The divorce papers were already signed by then."

Frank finally understood just how far his dear mother had gone in meddling with his life.

A bitter, mocking laugh rumbled from his chest. “Your connections really do run deep, don’t they?”

“What do you think you’re going to do?” The realization hit Carmela, her voice suddenly edged with panic. “Frank, I’m your mother! Are you really going to turn against me over a woman?”

Frank was now running the Atwater Group, while his grandmother still managed the family’s social network. All Carmela had left was a handful of those connections—if Frank cut her off, she’d be left with nothing but the title of Mrs. Atwater.

He glanced back through the floor-to-ceiling windows toward the living room, his voice frosty and devoid of feeling. “You’re the one who interfered in my private life.”

“And that’s somehow my fault?” Carmela couldn’t help but snap.

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How was she supposed to know her son would take such meticulous care of Marcia, while refusing to divorce Elissa? Or that Elissa, of all people, would turn out to be the woman who had once saved their lives?

“If you hadn’t been tangled up with your sister-in-law this whole time, I wouldn’t have worried you’d divorce Elissa behind my back and immediately marry Marcia, dragging our family into the scandal of a man marrying his widowed sister-in-law! Did you ever think of that? Do you blame me?”

Her accusations made Frank pause.

Then Carmela’s next words landed with a cruel precision: “And for the record, I wasn’t the one who forced Elissa to leave. She asked for the divorce herself! You’re the one who made her want out of this marriage in the first place!”

The spring sunrise was gentle, yet dazzling.

Elissa waited for a while, and when Frank still didn’t appear, she found herself glancing toward the backyard.

He was still on the phone. Whatever the person on the other end had said, it made his usually straight-backed posture visibly slump—as if something had struck him down in an instant.

She rarely saw him look like that.

But this marriage—everything that had led them here—was his doing. Whatever the outcome, he deserved to face it.

Edna, watching Elissa ignore her bowl of nourishing soup, asked with concern, “Would you like a little extra honey?”

She remembered Elissa’s sweet tooth.

“No, thank you.” Elissa shook her head. Not wanting to waste it, she picked up the bowl and drank it down.

She was exhausted after a sleepless night and the emotional drain of it

all, but she didn’t realize just how hungry she was until that first spoonful warmed her from the inside.

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She finished quickly and had just set the bowl down when the room seemed to dim—a tall figure cast a shadow over her.

Frank pulled a napkin and gently dabbed her lips, his tone unexpectedly tender. “Why are you in such a rush? It’s not good for your stomach.”

He was so gentle, it was as if nothing had happened between them.

Elissa leaned away, dodging his touch, and got straight to the point. “You must have gotten your answer by now. Can I leave?”

“No.”

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Frank no longer wore the oppressive expression he'd had before his phone call. He was back to his usual calm civility, but the words he spoke left Elissa with no room to argue.

Elissa's brows knit together. "We're already divorced."

He had no right to meddle in her life anymore.

And there was no reason for them to keep living under the same roof.

Frank seemed deaf to everything she said. "I didn't even know about this. When did it become possible to get a divorce certificate without the other person present?"

His tone was mild. "In any case, I don't accept the divorce."

Elissa had imagined countless ways he might react.

But this—him flat-out refusing to acknowledge it—she hadn't seen coming.

For a moment, her face froze, shock flickering in her eyes. "But you signed the divorce papers yourself. That's not a mistake."

Frank's expression faltered.

Carmela had mentioned the divorce papers on the phone earlier. It was because of that signed document that Carmela had been able to process everything so smoothly.

Frank struggled *to* recall when he'd even signed it. It took him a while, but the memory finally surfaced.

It was the day his older brother's funeral had ended. Elissa had handed him two sets of papers. Maybe he'd wanted to appease her, or maybe he'd been in a hurry because Marcia was waiting for him.

He hadn't even bothered to read what he was signing—he'd just scribbled his name and handed them back.

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So Elissa had wanted to leave him even back then.

And he, back then, had cared so little that he didn't even pay attention to what she gave him.

No one knew better than he did just how much he'd failed her.

But even so, he couldn't just let her go.

No one could understand the relief and bittersweet joy he'd felt when he learned that Elissa was actually the little girl-“Little Nine“-he'd always wanted to protect. Alongside all the guilt and regret, he'd felt a flicker of hope.

Elissa was his wife. The very person he wanted to care for, to cherish.

From now on, he didn't have to hesitate, didn't have to worry about her taking offense.

He could finally give her everything. Whatever she wanted, even the stars, he'd try to reach for them if it would make her happy.

Frank realized, with absolute certainty, that he'd loved Elissa all along.

He couldn't lose her.

Seemingly oblivious to her efforts to distance herself, Frank reached out and gently rested his large hand on her head, his voice soft, almost pleading. “If I'd known those were divorce papers, I never would've signed them.”

“Elissa, I never once thought about divorcing you. Please, let me make it up to you. Just give me a chance, okay?”

“I don't want you to make it up to me,” Elissa replied, her tone unwavering. “I just want the divorce.”

With that, she could see Frank wasn't listening, and she had no patience left to wait for his answer. She stood, grabbed her bag, and headed for the door.

“Elissa,”

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His gentle voice called after her.

She didn't look back, determined to leave. But before she reached the foyer, his next words stopped her in her tracks.

"Do you know what really caused your parents' deaths?"

"I do." Elissa froze, her voice tight. "It was an accident."

She tried to sound casual, but her fingers dug into the handle of her bag until her knuckles turned white.

Frank walked over, stopping right in front of her. He brushed his thumb softly along the corner of her reddening eyes. "You never suspected anything?" he asked quietly.

Elissa's hands trembled, despite her best efforts to hide it.

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Of course she'd questioned it—who wouldn't?

She'd been just five when her parents died, far too young to do anything but believe whatever the adults told her. But as she grew older, that

gnawing doubt kept resurfacing, again and again.

Two narcotics officers. Mission completed. Died in a "car accident" on the way home.

Pieced together, those facts never sounded right. Not to her.

But the officers who handled the investigation were her parents' closest friends. At the funeral, they wept openly and mourned as if they'd lost their own family.

Elissa had always believed they did their best to find the truth. So, either it really had been an accident, or whoever was behind it was powerful enough to erase every trace.

She sniffed and looked up at Frank. "What are you trying to say?"

Frank's voice was steady, almost gentle. "Lately, I've been doing everything I can to find you."

"In the process, I dug up a few things about what happened back then—about your parents' deaths."

He met her gaze, unwavering. "I'm sure of it now. What happened that night wasn't an accident."

It was one thing *to* have your own suspicions. Quite another to have someone else state it flat out.

Elissa's knees nearly buckled. She stared at Frank, her eyes pleading. "What did you find?"

She waited, barely breathing, afraid to miss a single word. Whoever was responsible—no matter who they were—she would make them pay. Her parents had dedicated their lives to this job. They deserved, at the very

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least, for the truth to come out.

She owed them that much. She'd see to it that they could finally rest in peace.

Frank could see her composure finally slip; he knew just how much this meant to her. He hesitated, then said quietly, "I'm still working the lead. If I want something concrete, I'll need more time."

Disappointment flickered in her eyes, but she understood—this wasn't something that could be rushed. She pressed her lips together. "This means everything to me. If you find out anything, please, promise me you'll tell me first."

"I promise."

Frank lowered his gaze, then added, "But I have one condition."

She'd been expecting that.

The divorce was already final. As long as he didn't ask her to remarry him, she'd agree to anything—if it meant uncovering the truth about her

parents.

She clenched her fist, voice steady. "Anything but getting married again.

Name it."

Frank would never push that, not now. He knew if he wanted to win her back, he needed to take things slow.

So when Elissa spoke, he wasn't angry—just smiled gently. "I'd like you to move back in. But don't worry, we'll have separate rooms, just like before." She didn't answer right away.

Instead, she calculated when Rowan Murphy would be back in the country, then said carefully, "Can I have three days to think about it?"

If her parents' deaths weren't accidental, it had to be connected to that old drug trafficking case. But there was no way she could dig up anything

on her own.

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Frank had leads, but if Rowan was willing to help, he could probably find out even more, and faster.

She needed to ask him first.

Frank read her face in an instant and chuckled. "Waiting for your brother to get back? Planning to ask for his help?"

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The Murphy Group's project in Meridia was an open secret in the industry. Now that the deal was sealed, there was no hiding Rowan's upcoming trip abroad—especially not from Frank.

Atwater Group and Murphy Group were partners, but just as often, rivals.

Keeping tabs on both friends and enemies was just standard practice.

When Frank called her out on it directly, Elissa didn't bother pretending. She met his gaze and admitted it easily. "Yes."

Why make things more complicated than they had to be?

Frank was surprised by her honesty, but not angry. "He's probably too busy to care about that right now."

The Meridia project meant everything to Murphy Group's future in the chip industry—a make-or-break move for the entire year.

If they pulled it off, the company's value would double overnight. None of their domestic competitors could hope to catch up.

Rowan wouldn't have the time or energy to dig into things that happened nearly twenty years ago.

Elissa lowered her eyes. "Just give me three days, that's all I'm asking. Okay?"

Something in her gut told her Rowan would help her.

Frank studied her for a long moment. He knew she and Rowan were on good terms again, which made it harder for him to say yes. But at last, he nodded.

"All right."

His tone softened after he gave in. "But you haven't slept all night. You're still injured. I'd worry if you left like this. Get some rest first—really rest."

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The room upstairs is empty. No one's used it. You'll be safe there."

Even Frank himself only went in when he missed her, just to sit for a while.

When Elissa still looked reluctant, his voice cooled, the words a gentle warning. “If that’s not enough, then I can’t give you any more time to think.”

He’d compromised; now she had to meet him halfway.

With the question of her parents’ deaths hanging over her, Elissa’s mind and body were exhausted. She finally nodded.

Her nerves had been stretched taut all night, and the scrapes on her wrists and ankles left her weak and dizzy. She knew Frank wouldn’t let her walk out that door anyway, not the way he said it.

The clothes she’d left behind were still there—Edna hadn’t touched them, just kept them neatly hung in the closet.

The room was spotless.

The nurse had warned her not to get her wounds wet for twenty-four hours, so a shower was out of the question. Not that she had the

strength. She was already running on empty.

She locked the door behind her, changed into fresh clothes, and the moment she lay down on the bed, sleep claimed her in an instant.

Meridia, Private Airfield.

Everything had happened so quickly that the crew was still prepping for takeoff.

Rowan strode up the stairs, long legs eating up the distance, his dark pinstriped suit perfectly pressed. There was no expression on his sharply defined face, but the force of his presence filled the cabin.

He took the window seat, unbuttoned his jacket with one hand, and

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glanced up just in time to catch Ian and Evan Murphy in the middle of a disagreement.

Rowan’s voice was low and crisp. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing-” Ian started, but Evan cut him off. “Boss, Nash’s team just sent over some photos.”

Nash’s only job at home was looking after Elissa’s safety.

So the photos, of course, had to do with her.

Rowan held out a hand. “Let me see.”

Evan handed his phone over immediately.

Ian shot Evan a look. “Boss, I’m sure those photos are out of context.”

He knew Evan meant well—just thought Rowan deserved to know everything.

Loyal to a fault. But not the sharpest tool in the shed.

Most of the photos were harmless, but a few crossed the line: Elissa getting into Frank’s car, Frank gently wiping her mouth.

Who knew what Nash was thinking, letting his people send these?

Anyone could guess that with Rowan’s temper, these were the last photos he’d want to see.

Rowan scrolled through them with elegant, steady fingers. His eyes narrowed slightly. “She’s gone back to Greenwood Manor?”

His expression didn’t change, but his voice was laced with ice.

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Ian was sweating bullets on Elissa’s behalf, and he was sorely tempted to chew Evan out—again. But before he could, Evan barreled on, “Yeah, after Miss Elissa left the hospital, she went back with

Frank.”

“They just reported in—she hasn’t left since.”

As Evan spoke, his annoyance started to show. “Sir, do you think Miss Elissa’s got her head turned by romance again?”

Ian could've strangled him then and there.

Why did a perfectly good man have to be cursed with a mouth like that?

Rowan's lips twitched in a half-smile. "Call her. Ask yourself."

Evan blinked, caught off guard. "Me? You want me to call her?"

He pointed at himself, hesitant. Was that really appropriate? After all, she was the boss's daughter—he was just an employee.

Before Evan could protest further, Ian had already pulled out his phone and started dialing. "I'll call

her now."

Rowan added, "Put it on speaker."

Elissa, meanwhile, was fast asleep. She never kept her phone volume up, and exhaustion kept her in a deep slumber. If she heard anything at all, it was only as a vague buzz at the edge of her dreams. She had no idea that, despite locking her door, someone else was now in the room.

Frank slipped the room key into his pocket, careful not to wake her as he crossed over to her bedside. He'd heard the phone ringing and was about to silence it when he glanced at the caller ID.

-Ian.

Frank recognized the name immediately. One of Rowan's men.

Given Rowan's reach, it was almost certain that last night's events had made their way overseas. Figuring there was *no* use pretending otherwise, Frank stepped out onto the balcony, answered the call, and cut straight *to* the point. "Hello, this is Frank. Tell your boss not to worry—Elissa's fine."

On the other end, Rowan's face went *cold*. The edge of his mouth curled, as if mocking himself.

Ian was stunned. In his mind, the call would go through, Elissa would answer, and all the rumors sparked by that photo would be put to rest. But now—Frank? Seriously? Who did he think he was, answering her phone?

"Mr. Atwater, where's Miss Elissa? Why are you picking up her phone?"

“She just fell asleep,” Frank replied, glancing back with gentle eyes at the girl curled up peacefully in bed. Some of the tension left his shoulders.

Ian, noting the shadow that flickered across Rowan’s gaze, felt a pang of discomfort. He forced his tone to be icy. “Next time, please don’t answer Miss Elissa’s phone.”

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With that, he hung up. No pleasantries.

Frank stared at the screen, momentarily taken aback by how abruptly they’d ended the call. But he didn’t dwell on it. He returned to the bedroom, set the phone back where he’d found it, and hesitated a moment before erasing the call log.

He sat on the edge of the bed, watching Elissa sleep. The tenderness in his eyes was almost painful—he ached to be closer, but didn’t dare wake her. He settled for gently twirling a strand of her dark hair around his finger.

He hadn’t slept at all the night before, but sitting there, watching over her, he didn’t feel tired in the slightest.

He could have watched her forever.

He was just grateful she’d been found.

He’d make it up to her. He wouldn’t let her go again.

Frank didn’t know how long he sat there—long enough for his phone to start buzzing in his pocket. He slipped out of the room to answer.

Bernard reported, “Mr. Atwater, I brought some men and swept the area. Still no sign of the kidnappers from last night.”

It was odd—they seemed to have vanished after leaving the industrial district, as if into thin air.

Frank’s expression hardened. “The scarred man said they’d rigged the factory with explosives. Did you find anything?”

“I checked. There were definitely bombs set up,” Bernard replied, voice low. “But someone disarmed them. Otherwise, with the fire last night, those explosives would’ve gone off—none of you would have

made it out.”

Even now, Bernard sounded shaken.

Frank frowned. “Someone disarmed them?”

Who?

Bernard offered, “Want me to investigate-?”

“No need,” Frank interrupted. “Whoever removed the bombs wasn’t our enemy.”

He paused, then gave a new order. “Look into something else for me.”

“What’s that?”

“The truth about how Elissa’s parents died.”

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Hearing this, Bernard looked puzzled. “Are you saying you suspect there’s something suspicious about Mrs. Elissa’s parents’ deaths?”

Frank’s gaze darkened. “Yes. But I’m afraid it won’t be easy to uncover the truth. For *now*, I want you to make this your top priority.”

Bernard nodded. “Understood.”

He had lied to Elissa again.

Up until now, Bernard’s investigation had focused solely on finding people—he hadn’t looked into the circumstances surrounding her parents’ deaths at all. But he needed some way to keep her close. And, in truth, he never really believed what happened back then was just an accident.

He would get justice for her—personally.

Something else occurred to Frank, and he added, “Dig into the Murphy family while you’re at it.”

Based on what Marcia had overheard at the orphanage years ago, Matriarch Paige Murphy’s decision to adopt Elissa had always seemed intertwined with that notorious drug lord.

So it was likely that the deaths of Elissa’s parents were, at least in part, connected to Matriarch Paige Murphy as well.

At that thought, Frank glanced back in the direction of the master bedroom.

Elissa and Rowan had finally reconciled; if it turned out her parents’ deaths were linked to Rowan’s grandmother...

Bernard seemed to read his mind and couldn’t help but ask, a note of worry in his voice, “If this really does lead back to Matriarch Paige Murphy, do you think Mrs. Elissa can handle it?”

Matriarch Paige Murphy was Rowan’s grandmother, after all. And Elissa had grown up with Rowan by

her side.

Frank’s concern echoed his own. “Let’s find out the truth first. Until we’re sure, don’t let her know anything.”

As soon as Frank hung up, he saw Edna coming up the stairs with something in her hands, heading straight for the master bedroom.

He called out, “Elissa’s still sleeping. What is it?”

Edna paused and walked over to him, holding out a photograph. “Sir, the family photo that Mrs. Elissa asked to have restored after Mr. Hickey tore it up—it’s finished. She sent it out for repairs before she moved, so they mailed it here.”

“Family photo?”

Frank took the picture, and the moment he saw it, his knuckles whitened from the force of his grip. Regret spread through his chest, flooding every limb—so sharp it ached to breathe.

He suddenly remembered where he’d seen the childhood photo of little Nine that Bernard had shown

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him last time—it had been in Elissa’s bedroom.

This family photo had always been displayed in the master bedroom, ever since he and Elissa got married. But he rarely set foot in there, never paid attention to her things.

If he’d cared even a little more—if he’d just noticed—he would have recognized Elissa the moment Bernard sent the photo. She never would have been kidnapped.

Edna nodded. “It arrived in the mail a couple of days ago. Since she’s back today, I thought I’d give it

to her.”

“There’s no rush.”

Frank closed his eyes and let out a slow, shaky breath, trying to loosen the suffocating tension in his

chest.

When he opened his eyes again, a red haze rimmed his gaze, stubborn and unyielding. “She’s never leaving again,” he said quietly.

His tone was steady, almost calm, but it sent a chill down Edna’s spine.

After nearly twenty-four hours without eating, Elissa woke with a sharp pain in her stomach.

Her sleep had been restless and disjointed; after everything that happened the night before, fear lingered, haunting her dreams in broken fragments.

The blackout curtains kept the room in darkness. Reaching for her phone, she realized it was already

evening.

She rubbed her aching stomach and, as usual, went to the bathroom to freshen up before heading

downstairs.

Dusk had settled over the house. Only a few scattered lights kept the wedding home from being swallowed by gloom, the downstairs bathed in a dim, yellowish haze.

Elissa never liked how the house felt after she'd just woken up—so heavy and somber, the darkness hanging in the air.

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It made her uneasy.

She liked the lights bright, every corner lit up so nothing hid in the shadows.

But this wasn't her home anyway. She picked up her pace, hurrying down the stairs.

"Little Elissa."

She was just stepping off the last stair when Frank's gentle voice drifted from the living room.

Yet, something in the way he said it was different. There was an undercurrent she couldn't quite place.

She looked over and saw him sitting quietly on the sofa, his amber eyes clouded and distant, loneliness etched in every line of his face. But when their gazes met, his eyes suddenly softened, growing clear and bright.

Frank stood, crossing the room with those long strides. Maybe it was the sleepless night, but his voice sounded rough. "You must be hungry. Come eat something first."

As he spoke, he glanced at her hand, which was absentmindedly pressing against her stomach.

Elissa was, in fact, uncomfortably hungry, but she didn't want to linger here. "That's alright. I'm fine."

"After you eat, I'll have someone take you home," Frank said firmly, blocking her path. The message was clear. The bodyguards still stationed outside weren't going anywhere until he said so.

Elissa took a deep breath and turned toward the dining room.

Edna, who'd been fretting in the kitchen, worried the two might start arguing again, instantly brightened at the sight of them together. She bustled in, beaming, carrying a steaming dish. "Everything tonight was made by the young master himself, just for you. Go on, try it while it's hot."

Edna worked quickly, soon filling the table with five dishes and a pot of soup, then setting out plates

and silverware.

Elissa had never known Frank could cook. But it didn't really matter. In three years of marriage, they'd hardly shared a meal together.

Frank pulled out the chair she always used. "Give it a try. If you don't like my cooking, Edna made some soup for you, too."

"Alright," Elissa replied, sitting down without hesitation.

Instead of taking his usual seat across from her, Frank settled into the chair beside her.

She wondered if he'd asked Edna about her favorite foods—he'd even made a green bean and sausage stir-fry, something he never ate himself. The other dishes, too, were things Elissa used to enjoy.

She'd barely taken her first bite when Frank couldn't hold back any longer. "How is it? Is it too salty?"

"No," she shook her head. "It's alright."

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She'd never thought Frank was a fool—quite the opposite. He was sharp, capable of seeing through Marcia's old manipulations time and again. He was clever, but he indulged people. He forgave without boundaries.

Hearing her answer, Frank finally relaxed, a gentle smile tugging at his lips. "Then have some more. If you like something, just tell me. I'll make it for you anytime."

"That's not necessary."

Elissa's refusal was calm, her tone flat and unyielding.

There was no "anytime" left between them.

If Frank heard the meaning behind her words, he didn't show it. His smile stayed as he *placed* a piece of braised beef onto her plate. "Well, at least eat a little more tonight."

Elissa said nothing, focusing on her meal. Her stomach was upset, so after eating just enough to take the edge off, she reached for a steamed crab. She didn't bother with the special utensils, just tried to break it open with her hands.

She hadn't counted on her fingers slipping on the oily shell. The sharp edge sliced her finger, and she drew in a sudden breath. "Ow-"

"What happened?"

Frank's eyes snapped to her hand, catching sight of the small bead of blood welling up. He frowned and, without thinking, took her hand and pressed her finger to his lips.

His eyes were filled with nothing but tenderness.

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The instant her fingers brushed against something damp, Elissa froze. Shock filled her eyes. "What are you doing?"

Even if he had figured out she was that little girl from the past, this was over the top.

Frank's intensity was almost frightening.

She tried to yank her hand back, but he only let go when he realized he might hurt her again. Yet he didn't actually release her—he just stood up and pulled her along to the bathroom, turning on the faucet to carefully wash her wound.

When he was done, he led her back to the living room, grabbed a cotton swab and antiseptic, and started cleaning her injury.

Elissa frowned slightly. "You haven't even finished disinfecting it and it's already healing."

"Doesn't matter. It still needs to be treated properly."

Frank ignored her protest, crouching by her side, his long lashes lowered in concentration as he tended to her wound.

His movements were gentle. It was only a scratch, but he acted as if he was terrified of causing her pain.

Elissa sat still, her thoughts swirling. Maybe it wasn't some sudden realization on his part—maybe he was under a spell.

If this had been the old Frank, he'd have said something like, "How'd you manage to be so careless?" And that would've been the end of it.

Now he was making a scene over the tiniest cut.

After all the fuss, Elissa lost her appetite. When he finally stuck a bandage over her finger, she seized the chance to speak up. "It's getting late. I should head home."

She stood decisively and strode toward the door.

Behind her, Frank said nothing. But when she pushed open the front door, two bodyguards stepped into her path.

Frank's gaze never left her—not for a second—so he didn't miss the look of disbelief in her eyes when she glanced back at him.

She stared at him silently, lips curved in a faint, mocking smile. "What, are you planning to keep me here by force?"

She'd never imagined Frank would stoop to this.

He was nothing like the courteous gentleman she used to know.

Frank saw the distance and wariness in her eyes—a thin thread tightening around his heart. Still, he showed none of it on his face. He walked over, resting a large hand on her shoulder, leaning in just a little.

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14:27

Chapter 259

"Just stay here a few days, all right? When your brother gets back, if he agrees to help you look into your parents, I'll let you go. I promise."

His tone was all reason and compromise, but Elissa let out a cold laugh. "You really mean that?"

First he pretended to agree to give her three days, then tricked her into going upstairs to rest. Now he wanted her to stay here "for a while."

And then what?

If Rowan refused to help her, this man would probably keep her here forever.

Frank hesitated for a moment, letting her pull away, but he reached out to rest his hand on her head. “Little Elissa, I don’t know what else to do.”

“I really can’t think of any other way to keep you by my side.”

His voice was soft, but the helplessness beneath it was unmistakable—a far cry from the always-composed man she remembered.

He knew he couldn’t keep her here forever.

Even if Rowan didn’t intervene, he didn’t have it in him to go that far.

But right now, he just wanted to be near her—even if it meant nothing more than sharing the same space, doing nothing at all. That would be enough.

Elissa, however, felt a chill run through her. She slapped his hand away, her tone icy. “Aren’t you afraid Rowan will come back and make you pay for this?”

Frank’s gaze lingered on her, hungry and desperate. “I don’t care anymore.”

If it meant he could have a little more time with her, he’d take whatever consequences came.

“You’re insane!”

Elissa caught the possessiveness in his eyes, and a shiver ran down her spine. “Frank, you-”

She glanced out at the yard, where several burly bodyguards stood watch. Suddenly, she changed tack. “Fine. I’ll stay here for now. But you are not allowed to set one foot in my room.”

Chapter 260

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator - Lullaby 260[652 words]

She couldn’t afford to provoke him any further. All she could do now was think of another way out.

Arguing with him here would only make him do something even more reckless.

Rowan...

He must have left someone behind in Vistapeak City.

As long as she didn't set Frank off, she'd find a way to leave safely.

Frank had come prepared with a whole arsenal of arguments to convince her, but to his surprise, she agreed so quickly that he couldn't help the smile that lit up his eyes.

"Alright. Whatever you say, I'll agree to it."

As soon as he finished, Elissa extended her hand toward him. He paused, momentarily startled. "What is it?"

"My key."

Elissa looked at him, her voice leaving no room for negotiation. "The key to my room. Hand it over."

She'd picked up this habit years ago, back when Slate Murphy had forced it on her. Even when she locked her door, she'd tie a strand of hair around the doorknob in a loose knot.

It wouldn't fall off from just a breeze, but if anyone so much as touched the handle, it would drop to the ground.

She'd done the same thing before going to bed last night. But when she woke up this morning, the hair was gone.

Frank hadn't tried anything, and she didn't want to burn bridges with him on his own turf, so she let it

slide.

But if she was going to be staying here for a while, there was no way she'd leave her room key in

Frank's hands.

Instead of being annoyed, Frank seemed even more gentle, his gaze softening. He liked her when she stood up for herself, and he liked it when she made demands.

He reached into his pocket and set the key gently in her palm. "Here you go, both sets are on there."

"I'll head upstairs, then."

Veridian and Meridia had a time difference. By her estimate, it was still early here, but Rowan should be waking up soon.

She knew how important Rowan's business trip was to the Murphy Group. His schedule was probably packed, so she had to call him now—once he got busy, he wouldn't have time to answer.

Frank's smile was warm. "Go ahead. If you need anything, just call me."

"Mm."

Elissa nodded absently, quickly heading upstairs.

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Chapter 260

Once inside her room, she locked the door behind her. This time, she didn't bother with a strand of

hair. Instead, she hooked a ceramic mug over the doorknob, so if Frank tried to come in, she'd hear it immediately.

She pulled back the curtains and glanced out the window—right into the eyes of the bodyguard stationed below.

Frank might have seemed trusting, but he was still keeping a close watch.

Elissa closed the curtains and pulled out her phone, dialing a number she knew by heart.

"We're sorry, the number you have dialed is not in service..."

The cold, mechanical voice on the other end made her hang up quickly and scroll to Ian's number.

Same result.

They should have landed in Meridia last night. Why would both phones be out of service?

Had something happened overseas?

The possibility sent a chill through her. Rowan had made too many bold moves expanding his influence these past few years, making more than a few enemies. And this project had sparked plenty of jealousy.

It wasn't impossible that something had gone wrong.

She took a deep breath, about to try calling again, when her phone suddenly rang.

Her eyes

Garrett.”

lit up for a moment, but the caller ID made her sigh. Still, she answered right away. “Mrs.

“Elissa, is this a good time to talk?”

Janice Garrett was a kind woman, always cheerful and warm. Hearing her voice right now, Elissa felt

a rare sense of comfort. “Of course, Mrs. Garrett. What’s up?”

Chapter 261

Chapter 261