

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator - Lullaby 261[699 words]

Chapter 261

“That’s right,”

Janice said thoughtfully, choosing her words with care. “My grandson, I’m not sure what’s gotten into him, but he’d really like to meet you. He hasn’t told me the details, but do you think you could come by my house in a couple of days if you have time?”

Maybe sensing Elissa’s hesitation, she quickly added, “Don’t worry, he’s not the fickle type. I think he just wants to get to know you, that’s all.”

This actually didn’t bother Elissa. She’d always believed in leading by example.

Mrs. Garrett was a truly good woman—there was no way her grandson would turn out poorly.

Still, right now, her own situation was beyond her control. “Mrs. Garrett, I’m not sure if I’ll have time to drop by. How about I get in touch after things settle down on my end?”

“Of course, dear.”

Janice agreed immediately, but her concern lingered. “Elissa, is everything all right? If you’re in any trouble, you must let me know.”

Elissa felt a warmth in her chest. “Really, I’m fine. You don’t need to worry.”

She could tell Janice came from a wealthy family, but in Vistapeak City, only Rowan could keep

Frank’s influence in check.

She didn’t want to drag anyone else into the mess.

Finally reassured, Janice was willing to end the call. “Well, I’ll let you go then. But whenever you’re free, you’re always welcome at my place.”

“Thank you.”

Elissa had barely finished replying when someone knocked on her bedroom door—a sudden interruption. As she crossed the room, Edna’s voice called from the other side, “Ma’am, it’s me—Edna. Not Mr. Frank.”

Elissa paused for a moment, then opened the door. “You know, I divorced Frank a long time ago. You can just call me Elissa.”

Edna had been present the first time she and Carmela had come to an agreement about this.

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...All right.”

Edna hesitated, then offered her a glass of warm milk and a slice of strawberry cake. “Mr. Frank said you probably didn’t eat enough tonight. He knows you don’t want to see him, so he asked me to bring this up for you.”

“Even if you’re upset, you shouldn’t take it out on your health,” Edna added, unable to hold back her

concern.

“Thank you.”

Elissa accepted the tray without another word, closed the door, and then tried calling Rowan a few

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times.

None of the calls went through—he was out of reach.

Still, she wasn’t too worried.

With Rowan’s cunning, she trusted he could handle any danger thrown his way. If he hadn’t, he’d have been swallowed up by the Murphy family’s power struggles years ago.

She’d slept so much during the day, she couldn’t fall asleep that night.

Her gaze flickered now and then to her silent phone. It wasn’t until the sky began to lighten that she finally felt drowsy.

But as soon as she heard movement downstairs, she got up and headed down.

Frank was sitting in the living room, watching the financial news. He looked up, surprised *to* see her. “You’re up early.”

It was rare for them to share a morning conversation—most weeks, they barely crossed paths at

home.

Elissa didn’t bother answering. “Can I go out today?”

She was planning to visit Rivercross Residence to figure out what was going on.

“You can,” Frank replied.

He stepped closer, gently tucking a loose strand of her hair behind her ear. “I’ve arranged lunch with Bradley Wheeler and some others. You should come along.”

“I have other plans,” Elissa replied coolly, shutting him down.

Frank didn’t seem the least bit annoyed. As if he hadn’t even heard her refusal, he nodded toward the dining room. “Let’s have breakfast first.”

Elissa felt a wave of frustration, like throwing a punch into a pillow.

She *decided* there was no point in being polite anymore. Angry, she said, “I told you, I have something else *to do*. Frank, if you keep this up, I don’t mind calling Rowan right now...”

In truth, she wasn’t sure anyone would even answer, but she figured Frank would at least be wary of the threat.

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Seeing her emotions ripple—however faintly—because of him, Frank’s lips curled in a quiet, almost invisible smile. He watched as anger flushed her cheeks, turning them from pale to a rosy brightness, her eyes burning with a vivid spark he hadn’t seen in a long time.

He knew perfectly well how much she resented him right now, yet Frank couldn’t seem to stop himself from wanting to get closer. Even if, compared with all the pain he’d caused her in the past, his attempts to make amends now were barely a drop in the ocean.

Pressing his lips into a thin line, Frank cut her off. “Rowan’s back.”

He glanced at her. “Weren’t you trying to get his help to look into your parents’ deaths? He’s joining Bradley and the others for lunch at that bistro we reserved. You’ll have a chance to talk to him face to face.”

Rowan’s back?

Elissa shot him a skeptical look. “Are you messing with me again?”

Rowan had told her he wouldn’t be back for another four days. By her count, there were still three left.

Frank caught the doubt in her eyes and let out a sigh. “You’ll see for yourself. The Lynn family reserved the private room, and word is, it’s to discuss Lorraine Lynn and Rowan’s engagement.”

Elissa’s nails traced silently over her fingertips. Her voice barely rose above a whisper. “I get it.”

So, he’d come back early. But apparently, he was too busy discussing marriage to spare her even a single call.

Or maybe, she thought bitterly, he’d lied about the date on purpose. Maybe he’d just wanted to keep his lover at arm’s length, make sure she stayed out of the way while he handled the real milestones in his life.

As noon drew near, Frank had several deliveries brought over—dozens of this season’s luxury designer dresses.

Elissa picked one at random, slipped it on, and headed out the door with him toward the restaurant.

The place exuded opulence; even the steps at the entrance were inlaid with marble. Without a reservation, you couldn’t even get through the front doors.

Frank was clearly a regular. The moment they arrived, a host greeted them by name and led them straight to a private dining room.

Just before they went in, Frank slipped his hand into hers without warning. “Work with me here,” he murmured.

Elissa tried to pull away, but as Frank pushed open the door, a loud bang erupted from inside the room. She jumped, startled, and Frank instinctively pulled her into his arms.

Colorful streamers rained down like confetti.

Bradley, seeing her fright, shot an exasperated look at the group of friends still filming with their phones. “Didn’t I tell you not to pull that stunt? She’s not used to your antics.”

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A guy at the back sheepishly rubbed his nose. “Just wanted to celebrate for you two, that’s all.”

He turned to Elissa, apologetic. “Sorry about that. Won’t happen again.”

“It’s fine,” Elissa replied quietly.

She slipped out of Frank’s arms and crossed the room to sit in an empty chair.

A friend beside her immediately moved over to give Frank the seat next to her. “Frank, here, take this one.”

Frank sat down with deliberate calm. Across the table, Bradley gave Elissa a searching look. “Frank hasn’t apologized to you yet?”

Of all the people here, Elissa only ever responded gently to Bradley. “Apologize for what?”

Bradley glanced at Frank, saw he wasn’t going to interrupt, and went on. “The whole mistake—when he thought you were someone else. Now that it’s cleared up, you two can finally move on, right?”

He had always felt bad for Elissa. Frank’s behavior in the past had been unforgivable, but Elissa had chased after him for years. Letting go couldn’t be easy. If this could clear the air, it would be for the best.

Elissa pressed her lips together. Under Frank’s gentle gaze, she dropped her words like stones: “We’ve been divorced for a long time.”

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A sleek black Bentley cruised smoothly down the road.

In the back seat, Rowan had been resting with his eyes closed, pretending to doze. When his phone **buzzed**, he opened his eyes at a leisurely pace, barely glancing at the caller ID before answering.

The moment the line connected, Rex Wilkinson's voice burst through. "Did you see the messages in the group chat?"

He'd just finished work and checked his phone, only to find the group blowing up—his emotions whiplashed like he'd just watched a melodramatic soap opera.

Little Elissa, it turned out, was the person Frank had been searching for all these years. The real deal. The one he'd never gotten over.

The chat was a frenzy of excitement, and everyone had already made lunch plans to meet up. Rex, though, couldn't even string a sentence together. He only cared about Rowan's reaction, so he called right away.

Rowan's features were cold and severe, his voice icy as he dropped three words: "I'm not blind."

Two hours ago, when his plane had landed, he'd already seen Frank's announcement in the group.

Anyone who knew Rowan could tell—he was seriously pissed.

Rex pressed on, "So... you're just giving up? I mean, she and Frank are legally family now. It's not like we can do anything out of line, right?"

Especially with someone like Rowan—proud, dignified, always above reproach. The fact that he'd lowered himself to play the secret lover was already shocking. There was no way he'd push his luck and demand answers from Elissa.

Their relationship was probably finished, just like three years ago when they'd gone their separate

ways.

Outside the car windows, summer trees cast shifting shadows across Rowan's sharply defined profile. His expression was unreadable, but his voice was faint as he asked, "Why should I give up?"

Those words, "give up," didn't even exist in his vocabulary anymore.

Back then, she'd rather risk her life jumping out of a car than not marry Frank. He'd given up once, but never again.

He'd given them their shot. If Frank blew it, that was his own problem.

Rex sensed trouble and couldn't help but ask, "What do you mean? Your flight just landed, right? Where are you headed?"

Worried Rowan might do something rash, Rex warned, "You know how stubborn your **sister** is. She's even more hardheaded than you. Don't **try** to strong-arm her..."

Those two—after their blowup three years ago—were **practically rivals**.

That they'd ever been lovers still seemed impossible **to Rex**, like something **out of a** twisted dream.

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"I know."

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Rowan's lips curled in a humorless smile. He'd raised her for nine years; no one understood her better

than he did.

Given the choice, she'd always take the gentle option.

But if there was no choice, she'd take the hardest path.

Stubborn to the core.

Rex's curiosity flared. "So what are you actually going to do?"

Rowan rubbed his brow, answering with deliberate calm, "I'm going to propose."

“What?”

Rex’s gossip radar went into overdrive, but before he could dig for details, Rowan hung up on him without a second thought.

Up front, lan, the driver, couldn’t help rolling his eyes.

Propose, huh? Saying it like it was no big deal, when everyone knew Miss Elissa and Frank were at that very restaurant—Rowan was clearly on his way to make a scene, jealous as ever but too proud

to admit it.

So stubborn.

When would his boss finally learn that being a man wasn’t about clinging to your pride and suffering

in silence?

Lost in thought, lan suddenly remembered something important and called out, “Sir, do you want to give Miss Elissa a call? Just in case she needs anything.”

Rowan’s eyes flickered. Right then, his phone pinged with a flurry of new photos.

Fresh ones—hot off the press.

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The photo of the girl curled up in Frank’s arms.

Rowan’s brow furrowed so tightly you’d think he could crush a mosquito between them. It took him a long moment to compose himself before he spoke, voice dripping with sarcasm. “What could possibly be wrong with her? She’s perfectly fine. What she really needs is a trip to the hospital to get her hopelessly romantic brain checked out.”

Frank just waved her over, and she practically ran back to him without a second thought.

Hearing this, lan knew that trying to smooth things over now would only make it worse, so he wisely changed the subject. “So, what about those kidnappers?”

“The evidence is clear. Just hand them over to the police.”

Catching the cold, biting tone from the back seat, Ian hesitated, then asked, "And... the rest? We're not getting involved any further?"

"Why should we?"

That voice grew even more irritable, bristling with sparks. "Anyone who's so eager to stick their nose in can do it themselves."

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Ian fell silent in an instant.

If it was truly none of your concern, why would you fly halfway around the world without stopping to catch your breath?

—

When Elissa dropped that bombshell, the private room went deathly quiet for a good while.

Bradley and the others exchanged looks, all wanting to ask something but not knowing where to

start.

None of them had expected gentle, soft-spoken Elissa to end a marriage with such crisp decisiveness.

But really, she wasn't the one who owed them any explanations.

Elissa was already uneasy, so she simply stood up. "I need to use the restroom."

The door opened and closed behind her just as quickly.

Frank's gaze lingered for a moment on the flutter of pale yellow fabric vanishing through the doorway. When he looked back, he found his friends giving him a mixture of wide-eyed stares. He just smiled, unbothered, and said lazily, "She's got a temper, that one. She's divorcing me, apparently."

Bradley seized on the key point. "Apparently? So it's just talk of divorce?"

"Yep." Frank nodded calmly. "I don't agree to it. How's she supposed **to** get divorced on her **own**?"

Just like that, he brushed the whole matter aside with a few casual words.

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The others didn't push it. After all, marriage and divorce both needed two signatures—Elissa wasn't going anywhere on her own.

Still, no one could quite believe how quickly things had turned around. Three years ago, Elissa had been the one determined to marry Frank. Now, it was Frank who seemed desperate to win her back.

Bradley threw him a look and said, "If you ask me, whatever trouble she gives you is exactly what you deserve. Maybe you should just grant the divorce, let her breathe a little."

"No." Frank's eyes turned icy, his answer immediate and final.

Giving her "room to breathe" was just an open invitation for someone else to swoop in. He couldn't let that happen.

Elissa stepped out of the private room and felt the tension in her body ease, if only a little.

These last couple of days at Greenwood Manor, she'd felt out of place, unable to relax, yet unable to

leave.

She let out a slow breath and headed toward the restroom. Just as she reached the corner, she saw a group emerging from the elevator at the far end of the hall—and instantly recognized the tall, distinguished figure at the front.

He really had come back.

Frank hadn't lied to her this time.

Elissa hesitated, her steps faltering, her heart heavy as if it were a sponge soaked through.

At the head of the group was Matriarch Paige Murphy, chatting warmly with Lorraine's parents, while Lorraine herself followed alongside Rowan, just as she always did at work.

A perfect match—family background, talent, looks.

As Elissa quietly withdrew her gaze, the man's dark, fathomless eyes seemed to flicker in her direction for the briefest moment.

For a heartbeat, their eyes seemed to meet—or perhaps they hadn't at all.

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They slipped into the private dining room, the heavy door closing behind them with a muffled finality—sealed up tight, much like the last eight years between her and Rowan.

How could she have fooled herself into thinking that, just because of these past couple of months—or that contract signed in black and white—anything between them might be different now?

Of course not.

He'd always been the golden boy, the kind of man everyone admired. The fact that he'd even deigned to look at her again, to pull her back into his orbit, should have been enough for her. That alone ought to have left her grateful.

How could she dare hope for anything more?

Eyes lowered, Elissa moved quietly toward the restroom, phone in hand. As she walked, she deleted the alarm set for three days from now.

-Rowan's flight lands today. Go pick him up.

He didn't need her to pick him up. He hadn't even told her he was coming back.

Trying to swallow the inexplicable heaviness in her chest, Elissa slipped into the restroom. When she emerged a few minutes later, still washing her hands at the sink, she caught sight of Lorraine in the

mirror.

Lorraine was immaculately dressed in a Chanel suit—elegant, sophisticated, every inch the perfect daughter of a prestigious family.

She looked surprised to see Elissa, but, knowing about Elissa and Rowan's connection, hesitated a moment before speaking. "Um... my family and the Murphys are having dinner here tonight. Would you like to join us?"

"No, thank you."

Elissa shook her head. "I'm here with friends—they're waiting for me."

Truth be told, Elissa *never* quite knew how to act around Lorraine.

Lorraine wasn't like Marcia, who'd do anything to get what she wanted. Even when she'd come to the clinic to ask Elissa to leave Rowan, Lorraine had at least been honest about it. Frank, maybe, but not

cruel.

Lorraine seemed relieved. "Alright, then. You should get back, don't keep your friends waiting."

"Mm." Elissa nodded and turned to leave.

But Lorraine suddenly called after her, almost against her will. "Our families are having dinner tonight to discuss my engagement to Rowan."

Elissa's shoulders stiffened, but she didn't look back. "I heard."

That contract—they both knew Rowan held all the cards. He could end things anytime he wanted.

Sensing Lorraine's lingering unease, Elissa added softly, "Don't worry. I won't make a scene."

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No matter how much she might need Rowan's help, she'd never stoop to that.

Lorraine watched her leave, lips parted as if she wanted to say something more. In the end, she stayed silent.

She'd wanted to tell Elissa that the whole engagement was Matriarch Paige Murphy's idea, and that Rowan had already had a heated argument about it with her in the private room. Rowan would never agree to a marriage arranged by his family.

But Lorraine was just an ordinary woman, after all. She had her own selfish hopes. Playing the hero, stepping aside gracefully, took a kind of courage she didn't quite have yet.

Elissa stepped out, and immediately saw him—Rowan, leaning against the wall, his gaze fixed on her.

She curled her fingers into her palm, about to walk past him, but he spoke, voice *low* and rough. “So, you’re patching things up with him, and now you’re planning to block me again?”

She turned her head, meeting his eyes, her expression cool. “I move on, you get engaged. Isn’t that perfect?”

A clean break.

He nodded. “Perfect match.”

Elissa felt her breath catch, and then he smirked, something sardonic in his eyes. “Or... are you planning to break the contract? Which of my cards should I expect that penalty payment on?”

Three billion.

She couldn’t have come up with that kind of money if she robbed a bank.

Besides, he was the one getting engaged.

What could she possibly owe him?

It was then that Frank appeared, strolling over to them with a grin, thinking the siblings were bickering again. “What penalty payment? If she owes anything, I’ll pay it for her.”

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“Closeness, distance-”

Rowan made no effort to hide his indifference. “No matter how *you* look at it, you’re hardly the right person to apologize on her behalf.”

Frank’s expression faltered at that.

He couldn’t deny Rowan’s point.

If you measured closeness, Rowan and Elissa weren’t related by blood, but they’d grown up together as siblings.

If you measured time spent, Rowan and Elissa had shared almost a decade under the same roof—far more than Frank ever had, given how absent he’d been as a husband.

In truth, Rowan had always been much closer to Elissa than Frank could ever claim *to* be.

Elissa couldn’t quite figure out Rowan’s angle. Her lashes lowered as she asked quietly, “What *do you* want, Rowan?”

He shot her a sidelong look, then—right in front of Frank—said bluntly, “Is it really that hard *to keep* your promise?”

A strange anxiety twisted in Frank’s gut.

He was suddenly worried Elissa might have agreed to something with Rowan—maybe even a deal that would keep her away from him.

After all, Rowan had never been thrilled about Frank marrying Elissa in the first place.

Frank turned to Elissa, searching her face. “What promise?”

Elissa *sneaked* a glance at Rowan, then seized the moment to fabricate an answer. “I promised to live across the hall from him and walk his dog. If he doesn’t agree, there’s nothing I can do—I can’t move back to Greenwood Manor.”

She sounded entirely *sincere*, with just a trace of put-upon helplessness, as if Rowan’s demands left her no choice.

With Rowan’s complicated relationship with Lorraine, Elissa knew she should keep her distance from him and not ask for any more favors.

Right now, she needed Frank’s help *to* investigate her parents’ deaths, but she had no desire to return to Greenwood Manor.

It wasn’t as if she was taking advantage. Years ago, she’d saved both Frank and Carmela—two lives. Asking Frank to look into something for her now hardly seemed excessive.

This was, as far as Elissa could see, the best solution.

Frank, not wanting *to* embarrass Rowan, wouldn’t push the issue, and Rowan would never mention the real, unspoken agreement between them—especially not now, with wedding arrangements underway.

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Rowan hadn't expected her to think so quickly on her feet. He quirked an eyebrow, a hint of amusement in his eyes, and looked at Frank. "You heard her, Mr. Atwater?"

Frank knew Rowan well enough—when he made up his mind, nothing could sway him.

And since Frank wanted to stay on good terms with Elissa, it was inevitable that he'd have to deal with Rowan in the future. There was no point in making an enemy of him.

So Frank's expression remained perfectly pleasant as he offered a warm smile. "Alright. After dinner, I'll drive her back to Vistapeak Gardens."

"That won't be necessary."

Rowan's voice was cool as he cut in. He reached for Elissa's wrist and strode out, leaving no room for argument.

His steps were long and quick, radiating the pent-up frustration he'd been carrying for days.

Elissa hurried to keep up, her still-healing wrist aching under his grip. She sucked in a quiet breath, but didn't pull away.

Rowan didn't slow down, but his eyes flicked to her wrist—where a red, half-healed mark still circled her skin. His face gave nothing away, but his hand slid a bit higher, loosening his hold.

He led her briskly to the parking lot, opened the car door, and jerked his chin—an unmistakable invitation to get in.

Elissa ducked into the passenger seat. As she settled in, Rowan slid in beside her and slammed the door so hard it rattled the frame.

She half-expected him to lash out about her "broken promise" and her conversation with Frank. But instead, he fixed his gaze on the injury at her wrist, his brow furrowing. "You hurt it the night before last?"

She was caught off guard by his concern for such a small wound. "Yeah."

Rowan studied her calm, detached expression. Something about it made his chest tighten. "Does it still hurt?"

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Without hesitation, Elissa shook her head. “It doesn’t hurt.”

It was just a scrape, really—barely the top layer of skin. Even when she’d cleaned the wound earlier, she hadn’t flinched. By now, it had almost scabbed over. As long as she didn’t go around banging it like before, there was no pain left to speak of.

As she shook her head, Rowan was suddenly hit with a memory of Elissa as a little girl.

Back then, she couldn’t handle the slightest bit of pain. Even a common cold would have her wailing as soon as the family doctor arrived for a house call. The moment the *doctor* started preparing the IV, she’d burst into tears, sobbing as if the world were ending.

Tears rolled down her cheeks like pearls slipping off a broken string, and she clung to Rowan with her free hand while the doctor held her other arm steady. Her mouth never stopped: “Rowan, cover my eyes! Hurry!”

She couldn’t even bear to look at the needle. She was spoiled rotten.

Rowan would do as she asked, covering her eyes, but not without a grumble: “You could just close your eyes, you know.”

Always so much drama.

But little Elissa would shake her head, hiccuping through her tears, still trying to charm him: “If I close my eyes, I can’t see anything and that’s scary. But when you cover them, I know you’ll keep me safe!”

She was so sure of herself, so unreasonably demanding.

Back then, Rowan always thought she was a handful—fussy and delicate.

But now, she wasn’t afraid anymore. She didn’t seem to fear anything. And yet, why did it feel like something was slowly tightening around his heart?

Elissa caught his distant look and wondered what he was thinking. “Rowan?”

“Yeah?” He pulled himself back, his eyes dark and unreadable as he swallowed hard. Then he leaned in and kissed her.

Ian, ever the tactful driver, raised the partition without a word.

This kiss was different from all the others. It was soft, barely there—a fleeting brush, nothing more.

Elissa hadn't even had time to close her eyes before Rowan was already pulling away. Watching her lashes tremble, he asked quietly, "Don't you think you owe me an explanation?"

He could accept that his men had slipped up, letting Frank take her, but even when she called, it was Frank who answered, never Elissa herself.

She knew what he was really asking—about her returning to Greenwood Manor. But as far as she was concerned, Rowan had been off discussing marriage with someone else.

If Frank hadn't told her, she wouldn't have even known Rowan was back in the country.

Rowan's gaze dropped to her face, waiting for her to speak. When she didn't, his patience wore thin.

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You'd think explaining herself was some great ordeal.

The air between them grew increasingly tense, as though they'd be locked in this silent standoff forever—until the partition suddenly slid down a notch.

Ian, summoning his courage, broke the silence. "Miss, today's situation was arranged privately by Mrs. Bennett and the Lynns. Your brother wasn't really involved. He only went to the restaurant because—"

Before he could finish, Rowan shot him a steely glare.

Ian cleared his throat, wisely fell silent, and raised the partition again, giving them back their "privacy."

Not that it was truly private—he could still hear everything. But at least he couldn't see, and that was good enough. If they wanted to smooth things over with a kiss or two, that was *none* of his business. If necessary, he could always pretend to be deaf.

Elissa, stunned by what she'd heard, had to ask, just to be sure. "So, you and Lorraine—you're not getting married?"

Rowan's expression didn't change. He looked steadily at her. "Does that matter to you?"

Elissa nodded. "It matters a lot."

Even with their agreement signed, she couldn't help but feel there was a world of difference between being just a lover, and being the person who wrecked someone else's relationship.

Being the "other woman" was already a moral gray area. There was no coming first or second—it was wrong, right from the start.

"If it's really that important," Rowan said quietly, "then why do you keep forgetting?"

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Rowan pressed his lips into a hard, thin line, his tone unmistakably irritable. "Why don't you count for yourself—how many times have I denied it?"

Elissa almost missed what he meant. When it finally dawned on her, the guilt that had been weighing on her chest eased, just a little.

He had denied it, over and over again.

Almost every time she was tempted to believe the rumors, he would shut them down immediately.

Elissa bit her lip. "A lot of times."

"And yet?"

Rowan's voice took on the stern, almost scolding note he'd used when they were children. "The minute someone else says something, you believe them instead."

"You'll take anyone's word for it—except mine?"

That last line hit her right in the chest, leaving her feeling inexplicably suffocated.

How much had she trusted him, once?

So much that even after he abandoned her, she couldn't believe it—she'd chased after him, begging for an explanation, crying out, "Don't leave me, big brother—don't abandon your little Elissa."

She wasn't sure how, but now, none of that trust was left.

A sharp ache rushed up behind her eyes. Elissa turned her head away, staring hard at the back of the driver's seat, blinking away the shimmer in her eyes. After a long moment, she muttered, completely off-topic, "Well, you came back to the country and didn't tell me either..."

Rowan couldn't quite catch her mumbling, but when he saw her slip back into her usual quiet, docile self, he let out a faint, crooked smile. "So, what's your explanation?"

"I didn't stay at Greenwood Manor on purpose."

This time, Elissa didn't retreat into silence. "Frank wouldn't let me leave."

-I called you, but you never called me back.

Maybe it was the years spent under the same roof, but Rowan immediately picked up on the faint trace of resentment in her eyes. "What else? Go on, say it all."

Elissa dropped her head, drew in a silent breath, and forced herself to ignore the risk of being laughed at. Summoning her courage, she blurted, "I called you, and you didn't call me back."

Maybe she just didn't have much experience with these kinds of...complicated relationships. She was never any good at this.

But she knew one thing for certain—this whole situation made her uncomfortable.

What she wasn't sure of, was whether she even had the right to feel that way, given whatever it was between her and Rowan.

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She was afraid Rowan would just brush her off and say, "Who told you you're entitled to a callback? It's not like you're my girlfriend."

Still, she couldn't help thinking—even if they were just friends, if he'd told her to pick him up, and then changed the plan, he should have at least let her know.

Above her, Rowan let out a brief, dry laugh, then spoke in that cool, matter-of-fact tone of someone holding all the cards. "Why don't you tell me, then—how did Frank end up answering your call?"

Beyond the partition, Ian listened in, thoroughly amused by their childish bickering.

Who would've thought the man with the reputation of being an ice-cold tyrant would get so worked up over a missed phone call?

"He answered my call?"

Elissa blinked in confusion, then quickly fished out her phone to check her call log. She didn't see anything unusual, but she could already guess what had happened.

She didn't need to explain-Rowan had already figured it out.

A brief flicker of self-mockery passed through his eyes.

In the end, as long as the divorce wasn't finalized, there would always be these messy entanglements.

Elissa realized now-Rowan hadn't called her back as payback. That was just like him, never one to let a slight go unanswered.

She didn't dare press further. Instead, she remembered the main reason she'd wanted to talk to him.

Frank was acting stranger than ever lately. If Rowan could help investigate, maybe, just maybe, she could finally cut ties with Frank for good.

With that thought, Elissa tried, a little tentatively, "Rowan, there's something I wanted to ask-"

She'd barely gotten the words out when two new messages popped up on her phone.

[If you get Rowan involved in investigating, I'll make sure every piece of evidence disappears.]

[I promise, even Rowan won't find a thing.]

Chapter 269

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator - Lullaby 269[651 words]

After sending his message, Frank did something he'd never done before-he didn't close the chat. Instead, he held his phone, waiting anxiously for her reply.

He really didn't want Elissa to ask Rowan to look into this matter.

Based on everything they'd investigated so far, the reasons the Murphy family adopted Elissa weren't as innocent as they seemed. There was something unclean about them.

The only thing Frank was certain of was that the Murphys weren't involved with drugs.

First, the Murphys and the Atwaters had been close for generations—there was *no* way such a secret could have stayed hidden. Second, Elissa's background was unique. When the Murphys adopted her, the orphanage had to have double-checked everything with the authorities to protect her.

But no one could have guessed that, even if the Murphys had nothing to do with drugs, they still might have a darker connection to the criminal underworld.

Until he figured out what was really going on, Frank couldn't let Rowan investigate.

If Elissa's parents' deaths truly had something to do with the Murphys, Rowan might cover things up to protect them—and destroy any evidence.

Of course, Frank also worried that if he failed to help Elissa with this, their relationship would grow

even more distant.

On the other end, Elissa frowned as she read his message. She was afraid Frank might actually do something desperate, so she had no choice but to agree for now.

Rowan noticed her sudden silence, and for once, took the initiative to ask, "What were you about to

say?"

Elissa had never expected Frank to threaten her this way, and she didn't dare bring the matter up to Rowan now. "It's nothing," she replied.

Sensing the shift in her attitude, Rowan instinctively glanced at her phone. He caught a glimpse of the chat window, just enough to see a contact name before Elissa quickly tucked the phone away.

-Frank.

Rowan's gaze sharpened, and a mocking smile played at his lips. "Separated for so long, and you two still have so much to talk about?" He arched an eyebrow, the sarcasm clear in his voice. "Barely out the door, and now you're chatting away online."

She really was quick to reply.

Elissa pressed her lips together and answered honestly, “We weren’t chatting. We were just discussing something important.”

“Oh? Something important?” Rowan’s dark eyes fixed on her, his tone casual, almost lazy. “Talking about the divorce, are we?”

They already had the divorce papers—what else was there to discuss?

1/2

14:29

Chapter 269

Before Elissa could respond, her phone rang. It was Cliff Riley.

At this hour, unless something was wrong, Cliff should be at the research institute.

Assuming it must be urgent, Elissa answered immediately. Cliff’s anxious voice came through, “Elissa, we just got the results from our last experiment, but for some reason, the data is way off from what we expected.”

Elissa’s expression grew serious. She glanced out the car window. “I’ll be there soon. Give me about ten minutes.”

Until now, every previous experiment had matched her predictions almost exactly.

This was the first time something like this had happened.

After hanging up, Elissa turned to Rowan. “Will you be driving past my office? There’s a problem with the project—I need to go in.”

Rowan had overheard most of the call and understood how serious it was. He looked at Ian, “Take

her to the office first.”

“Yes, sir.”

Ian responded without hesitation. Knowing how anxious Elissa must be, he stepped on the gas.

When they pulled up in front of Murphy Group, it was still lunchtime; employees were coming and going.

Elissa didn't wait for Ian to pull into the parking lot. She jumped out at the curb and hurried toward the building.

Inside, by the front desk, Xavier spotted her and visibly relaxed, hurrying over. "Ms. Drummond, Mr. Jones and Mr. Riley are upstairs waiting for you."

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator - Lullaby 270[602 words]

"Alright."

Chapter 270

Elissa nodded and strode quickly toward the elevator.

Inside the R&D department, her project team was already waiting *for* her.

As soon as she entered, Zachary Jones handed her a stack of lab results. "Take a look—these are the

data sets from noon."

Elissa didn't even bother to sit down. She took the report, lowered her gaze, and began to comb through the numbers with sharp focus.

It took only a single read for her to spot the problem.

She tapped several lines in quick succession. "These figures make no sense. There's *no* way they should be this far off, not under any circumstances."

She wasn't arrogant about her research method, but she was confident—if not one hundred percent,

then at least close to it.

Even in the worst-case scenario, if the experiment had failed, these results still wouldn't make sense.

Cliff frowned, catching on immediately. "You mean someone might have tampered with the results?"

"It's not a possibility," Elissa said flatly. "It's a certainty."

Her tone was so firm that Cliff's eyes grew sharp. He slowly scanned the faces of everyone on the

team.

"That's impossible," Zachary blurted out. "Only you, me, and Mr. Cliff have access to that lab."

Cliff and Elissa were close—anyone could see it—so it obviously wasn't him.

And Elissa herself? Why would she sabotage her own project? Besides, she hadn't even been to the office in the last couple of days.

That left Zachary, and the thought made him uneasy.

Elissa could see what he was thinking, and quickly reassured him. "Mr. Jones, I'm not pointing fingers. Why don't we just check the security footage?"

That lab could only be accessed by their fingerprints—or a backup passcode.

If someone with ill intent had somehow gotten hold of the code, anything was possible.

The rest of the team hadn't reacted yet, but Elissa's group immediately bristled.

James *spoke* up, clearly annoyed. "Ms. Drummond, you run into a problem and your first instinct is to suspect us? How do *you* know it's not your own protocol that's flawed, instead of someone messing with the data?"

A few others nodded in agreement.

After all, reviewing security footage made everyone feel like suspects.

1/2

14:29

Chapter 270

If word got out that they'd pulled the surveillance tapes, the whole company would know the R&D department was in trouble.

"I'm not the one who gets to decide what caused the problem," Elissa replied calmly, gesturing toward the cameras. "The footage will tell us."

Cliff spoke up, his tone cool. "It's just a security check. If you haven't done anything, what's there to be worried about?"

“Let’s check it.”

Zachary, who’d had a bad feeling about the results from the start, was convinced by Elissa’s certainty. “Absolutely. I’ll call Security right now.”

He stepped aside, made a quick call, and when he hung up, he tried *to* calm the *group*. “Look, this is for the good of the project. If we can get this sorted out, everyone benefits.”

“If someone really did tamper with the data, who knows what else they might try? What if they steal our work and sell it to a competitor?”

“Would you really be alright with that?”

After that, the rest of the team grumbled a bit but didn’t object.

Elissa’s capabilities since joining the team had been obvious to everyone.

Still, someone from her group wasn’t ready to let it go.

James gave a short laugh. “Impressive, Ms. Drummond. The data goes sideways and rather than reconsider your own method or repeat the experiment, your first move is to accuse someone of sabotage.”

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator - Lullaby 271[637 words]

Chapter 271

Seeing that Elissa Drummond wasn’t in a rush to defend herself, James kept fanning the flames, pushing his point even further.

“If we check the security footage and actually find a leak in our department, that’s one thing. But if we come up empty, the rest of the company will start looking at us sideways. They’ll probably think any one of us could be the mole in R&D.”

Elissa set down the falsified report she’d been reviewing, her voice calm and even. “I know exactly what I’m doing. Once the footage is reviewed, the truth will come *out*.”

Raymond jumped in eagerly, eager to curry favor. “Exactly! Do you all even *know* who Ms. Drummond is? She studied under Dr. Aaron Blaine, just like Mr. Riley. She’d never steer us *wrong*.”

He sounded every bit the picture of support, nodding along as if he’d rehearsed it.

But Elissa just frowned slightly, as James smoothly picked up the thread. “*And* what if the footage doesn’t show anything? Does that mean the data’s clean after all? Or does it mean the real problem is Ms. Drummond’s competence? After dragging everyone through this mess *and* making us all look suspicious, how does she plan to take responsibility?”

The two of them volleyed back and forth like a well-practiced routine, trying to put her on the spot. They were deliberately twisting the facts: just because security found nothing didn’t mean the data itself was flawless.

They were itching for her to step into their trap.

Elissa didn’t rise to their bait. Instead, she smiled. “All right then—how about this? If we do find the leak, what do *you propose* we do with the traitor?”

James hesitated for a split second, then replied with feigned outrage, “Obviously, we’ll follow the company’s protocol. *And* whoever it is, they should never work in pharmaceutical research again.”

Elissa raised an eyebrow and turned to Raymond. “Do you agree?”

“Of course I do! Catching the mole would be the best outcome for everyone,” Raymond chirped, relieved it wasn’t him under suspicion. Besides, there was no way Elissa would actually get her hands on the footage. Sooner or later, she’d have to give up her team lead position.

He looked back at her, emboldened. “And if nothing turns up? How will you explain yourself to the

team, Ms. Drummond?”

“I’ll step down as team leader,” Elissa replied coolly. “Whoever’s most qualified should have the job.”

Zachary Jones frowned. “Ms. Drummond—”

But before he could finish, Cliff Riley spoke up, his expression unchanged, “Let’s have security run the check as soon as possible. We all have work to do this afternoon.”

After working alongside Elissa for years, Cliff knew she never made a move unless she was sure of herself. His only job now was to trust her, and have her back—no matter what.

Chapter 271

Rivercross Residence.

Ian Murphy waited outside the study for two minutes, listening as the voices inside paused mid-meeting. Only then did he knock and step in.

Rowan Murphy glanced at him with cool, dark eyes. Ian quickly reported, "Sir, the deputy director from the R&D division just called. There's been an incident involving Miss Drummond."

He stepped closer and summarized the situation succinctly before asking, "Do you want to head over?"

Those middle-aged men in R&D were a tough crowd. Showing up for Miss Drummond at a moment like this might help her out—and win a few points for himself, too.

But Rowan didn't look the least bit concerned. He rolled the silver pen Miss Drummond had given him between his fingers. "No need. She can handle it."

If she wanted to lead the Traditional Medicine Unit, or someday rise even higher, she'd have to face these petty power plays herself. It was simply part of the path.

Chapter 272

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator - Lullaby 272[575 words]

Chapter 272

She was sharp enough to handle this.

And if things truly went south, all she had to do was keep her head down at Murphy Group—nothing disastrous could really happen.

Seeing Rowan's total lack of hesitation, Ian didn't press the topic. Instead, he moved on to the next

report.

"By the way, the Deputy Director of R&D mentioned something else. The *old* estate funded Marcia Carson to set up a new project team. They even pulled some strings and got the government to broker a joint development between their team and ours."

Rowan's brow furrowed. "When did this happen?"

"It's been a few days, I'm afraid."

Ian laid everything out. “Your aunt has always overseen the R&D department, and she helped the old lady sweep this under the rug. No one else in R&D dared to risk overstepping her to report it.”

In families like this, who could untangle all the hidden motives? Especially when Karol Murphy’s relationship to Rowan was common knowledge. No one wanted to risk sticking their neck out—what if, after all the drama, everything smoothed over for the family, and you ended up the scapegoat?

It was probably only this Deputy Director, picking up on Rowan’s tone about Elissa just now, who saw an opening to speak up.

A shadow crossed Rowan’s eyes as he glanced at Ian. “You know what to do, don’t you?”

“...I do.”

He hadn’t been sure, but now he was.

After all, over the years, the old estate’s influence at the upper levels of the company had been nearly wiped out. Only Karol remained.

Ian understood why. Back when Mr. and Mrs. Murphy passed away, the old matriarch hadn’t even planned a funeral. It was Karol who spoke up, and only then was a service held.

Rowan had never forgotten that favor; it was the reason Karol had always been left untouched.

But by now, that debt had been repaid many times over—with interest. What Karol never should have *done* was to team up with the old lady and meddle in Miss Murphy’s affairs.

Just as the standoff in the meeting room reached its peak, Zachary Jones got a call from Security.

Whatever was said on the other end, Zachary’s frown deepened, and his gaze toward everyone grew

stern.

When he hung up, Cliff was the first to ask, “What did they say?”

“Security says...”

Chapter 272

Even Zachary was embarrassed to explain.

Everyone on this project team had been with him for years.

He never thought grown men would stoop so low just to bully a young woman.

“Between midnight and dawn, the R&D department had a power outage.”

Zachary’s discomfort grew as he spoke. “The security cameras and other equipment are all on the same circuit. There’s no footage of anything.”

Not having evidence from the cameras was a far cry from there being nothing to find. Anyone could see someone had tampered with the system.

How else to explain the perfect timing—a sudden outage, right at the crucial moment?

And yet, James had the nerve to press, “Ms. Drummond, what do you say to that?”

Raymond chimed in, “Yeah, Ms. Drummond, does your word still stand?”

Elissa’s response was even and calm. “Of course it does.”

“We all heard it,” James said, thinking she’d run out of options, his arrogance on full display. “Ms. Drummond, as of now, you’re no longer the head of our Traditional Medicine Unit.”

“What’s the rush?”

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator - Lullaby 273[710 words]

Elissa gave a small, knowing smile, arching one brow as she turned to Zachary Jones. “Mr. Jones, do you have the number for the head of security?”

Zachary considered for a moment. “You mean Abel?”

She nodded. “Yes, that’s right.”

He looked at her, puzzled. “What do you need his number for?”

He couldn’t quite guess her intentions, but something told him she’d had things under control from the very start.

James let out a mocking laugh. “Yeah, what do you need his number for? Can’t admit your own mistakes, so now you’re going to hassle the security team?”

At her age, it wasn't surprising—young girls often didn't know how to pick their battles, and causing a fuss seemed par for the course.

Elissa's gaze turned cold as she watched their smug expressions. With a delicate finger, she tapped on the glass, pointing toward the smoke detectors on the lab's ceiling. "You ever wonder why there are two smoke detectors in this lab?"

Raymond shrugged, unbothered. "What's so weird about that? This is the most important lab in R&D a lot of sensitive data comes out of here. Of course we have to be extra careful about fire hazards..."

Though, to be fair, none of them had ever bothered to pay attention to the details.

Elissa cut him off with a slight smile. "That's not it."

She let the words hang for a moment, then clarified, "It's to guard against people, not just fires."

James shot her a suspicious look, following the line of her finger. His expression darkened. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Elissa remained calm, her voice steady as she explained, "It means the one on the left is a regular smoke detector, but the one on the right? That's a camera, disguised as a detector."

"It's wired separately, so it keeps running no matter what happens to the main power."

She turned back to Zachary. "Mr. Jones, would you mind texting me Abel's number? I need to ask him to pull up the camera footage."

As Zachary scrolled through the company directory to find the number, Raymond's face suddenly drained of color.

James shot him a warning glare, then said coldly, "Ms. Drummond, you're quite the schemer. Even us veterans didn't know about that. How did you? Maybe you should stop trying to act mysterious."

Elissa's lips curled. "If I'm just acting mysterious, then pulling up the footage will clear things up,

won't it?"

She opened her phone and tapped on the number Zachary had just sent her.

As Elissa stepped aside to make the call, Raymond panicked. He shoved James, blurting out, “It was all him! He swapped the experiment data this morning—I saw him sneaking out of the lab when I

arrived!”

James hadn’t expected him to crack so easily. Furious, he yanked off his glasses, which Raymond had knocked askew, and ground out, “You think I did this alone? Raymond, don’t you dare try to pin this all on me!”

Useless idiot—falling for a few pointed questions from this girl and spilling everything.

Some engineer. Maybe he should go back home and pickle vegetables for a living.

As the two looked like they were about to come to blows, Zachary quickly signaled for the others to step in and separate them. He turned to Elissa. “Ms. Drummond, let me handle this. I promise you’ll get a full explanation.”

He and Cliff, more than anyone, knew how many nights Elissa had lost working on this project. And now, thanks to her own team, even the experiment results were compromised.

Elissa nodded, and Zachary rubbed the bridge of his nose. “I’m afraid you’ll have to redo the data.”

“It’s fine,” she replied, glancing at the two troublemakers before picking up the ruined experiment results and heading into the adjacent lab.

Zachary was a fair manager; she doubted she’d see either of those two in R&D again.

Of course, with the data corrupted, the whole experiment would have to start from scratch.

Having barely slept the night before, Elissa felt exhaustion creeping in as dusk settled outside. No

point in wasting energy when she could barely keep her eyes open; she wrapped up her work, packed her things, and left for the evening with Cliff.

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator - Lullaby 274[707 words]

Chapter 274

“How could you be sure they’d fall for it?”

Cliff waited until she finally tore herself away from work before bringing up what happened at lunch. “And if they hadn’t, were you really planning on quitting?”

Elissa stretched her neck, trying to ease the stiffness in her shoulders, and gave him a sly smile. “Who said I was bluffing?”

“So that security camera was real?”

This time, Cliff genuinely looked surprised.

She nodded. “Yeah.”

The moment she sensed the team’s discontent, she’d started thinking about backup plans. After wracking her brain, the best she came up with was to ask Ian to have someone install a camera while everyone was away for the holidays. It was on a private line, and as far as security knew, only Abel was in the loop.

Everyone had been busy celebrating, so she hadn’t bothered mentioning it to Cliff at the time.

Cliff gazed at her, his admiration clear in his eyes. “If our mentor could see you now, thinking three steps ahead, he’d be bragging about you for days.”

Elissa’s lips curled up in a small, fond smile.

She knew her mentor treated her like family.

Back when she first started apprenticing, she knew nothing at all. But every time she managed to memorize another medicinal herb, the old man would insist on an extra glass of wine at dinner to

celebrate.

She was never sure if he was actually celebrating, or just using it as an excuse—either way, he certainly never missed a drink.

Now that she was finally making a name for herself, her mentor loved to boast about his “star pupil” to anyone who’d listen, grinning from ear to ear.

Of course, no one else actually knew who his famous student was, but they all played along, showering him with praise.

Sometimes, late at night, when she thought back on the fourteen years she'd spent with her mentor and his wife, her resentment toward Rowan for leaving her behind softened—just a little.

After all, it was Rowan who'd found her that mentor, who'd brought her to his door, and who had picked her up after every lesson for six straight years, rain or shine.

Cliff happened to live nearby, so he could give Elissa a ride home.

She felt half-asleep the whole way. When they finally pulled into the underground garage, Cliff eased on the brakes and turned to her with a grin. “Tanya Foster’s coming back soon, right?”

“Yeah,” Elissa replied, smiling. “She’ll be back the day after tomorrow.”

1/2

14:29

Chapter 274

Cliff did the math. “Perfect, just in time for your birthday. What do you want to eat? I’ll treat you both.”

She’d honestly forgotten about her birthday until he brought it up.

For the past few years, it had always been the three of them—Cliff, Tanya, and herself—celebrating together. So she answered quickly, teasing, “Alright, but your wallet’s going to take another hit.”

“That’s what I get for being the oldest, I suppose.”

Elissa laughed. “Don’t let our mentor brainwash you with all that responsibility talk.”

Their mentor loved to remind Cliff that he was the eldest and should look after Elissa more.

As they chatted, the car came to a stop in front of her building.

Elissa unbuckled her seatbelt and got out, tossing him a cheerful reminder: “Drive safe, alright?”

“Will do.”

Cliff gave her a little wave and waited until she disappeared inside before pulling away.

Exhausted, Elissa headed for the elevator, barely managing to keep a smile on her face—until she saw who was waiting for her.

Frank Atwater.

He stood behind the building's automatic glass doors, eyes narrowing as he watched Cliff's white sedan disappear down the ramp. His tone was cool and a little sharp. "Weren't you supposed to leave with your brother? How come he's the one dropping you off?"

After what had happened the other day, Elissa still felt uneasy around Frank. Her expression didn't shift as she shot back, "What are you doing here?"

"If you can't move back to Greenwood Manor, then I'll just move here," Frank replied, his gaze steady.

Seeing the flicker of resistance in her eyes, he added quietly, "Don't worry, I'll just be living downstairs."

Chapter 275

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator - Lullaby 275[688 words]

Chapter 275

Once Frank had calmed down, he realized he couldn't push her too hard.

Still, leaving her alone here made him uneasy. It would be far too easy for someone to take advantage of the situation.

Take Cliff, for example—the guy who'd just dropped her off.

Hearing that Frank was moving into the apartment below hers made Elissa distinctly uncomfortable, but there wasn't much she could do about it.

It wasn't like she could just buy the whole building.

Some things were simply out of her control.

Doing her best to keep her tone even, she said, "That's your business. You don't need to tell me about

it."

The message was clear: Move in if you want—what do I care?

Frank's chest tightened at her cold, detached expression. He even considered, just for a second, bringing her back to Greenwood Manor right now. At least there, he could keep an eye on her, make sure she didn't disappear.

But with Rowan living next door, he had no choice but to hold himself back.

Maybe he wouldn't have to wait much longer. Once he found proof that Elissa's parents' deaths were really connected to the Murphy family, he doubted Elissa would want to stay anywhere near Rowan.

The elevator doors slid open. Without sparing Frank a glance, Elissa stepped inside and pressed her floor number.

Frank followed, his long legs easily catching up to her.

Twenty-second floor for her. Twenty-first for him.

Each second the elevator climbed felt endless to Elissa.

Frank watched her press herself against the far wall, keeping as much distance as possible. For a moment, he was swept back to the past—to those holidays and birthdays over the last three years, when she'd waited for him to come home.

He never did.

The memory filled him with fresh hatred for Marcia. Even that day at the warehouse district, she'd tried to manipulate him and nearly gotten Elissa killed.

Frank's face darkened at the thought.

The elevator dinged at the twenty-first floor.

Pushing aside his emotions, Frank turned to the girl who so clearly wanted nothing more to do with him. Swallowing the tightness in his chest, he spoke gently, "About your parents—I've sent Bernard to Cresthaven personally. Whatever he finds, you'll be the first to know."

1/2

14:30

Chapter 275

“I admit, I have my own reasons for not wanting you to turn to Rowan. But I’m also looking out for you.”

Elissa gave a short, mirthless laugh. “Looking out for me?”

Frank’s lips tightened. “Once I know the truth, I won’t keep anything from you.”

He knew, given how close she and Rowan had been as kids, that she wouldn’t believe a word he said without proof. Worse, she might tip Rowan off before Frank could act.

He stepped out as the doors opened, then turned back just before they closed. “I’m right downstairs now. If you need anything, you know where to find me.”

As if that made any difference. He’d never been there before—why should she believe he would be

now?

Elissa watched the display tick up another floor, let out a silent breath, and turned her gaze away. She was already picturing crawling straight into bed to catch up on some much-needed sleep—until she saw a man waiting by her door.

She realized Rowan hadn’t been so obsessed with suits lately. Tonight, he wore a black turtleneck and casual slacks, one hand tucked in his pocket as he lounged by the entrance, looking relaxed and a little out of place.

He caught her tired expression and raised an eyebrow. “Didn’t go so well?”

He was obviously asking about the lab data fiasco in R&D.

As she headed toward her door, she shot him a sidelong look. “Don’t you already know?”

The Murphy Group was his domain now. There was no way he hadn’t heard about it.

Behind her, Rowan sounded perfectly entitled. “Can’t you at least tell me about it?”

She remembered how he used to hate small talk. When she was a kid, she’d chatter endlessly to him, only for Rowan to give her that exasperated look every time.

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator - Lullaby 276[649 words]

Chapter 276

These days, Elissa could tell that when Ian and the others gave their reports, they cut straight to the point, no fluff or unnecessary details.

She unlocked the door and kicked off her shoes. “Didn’t you always say you hated small talk?”

“I want to hear it now,” Rowan replied, following her inside with unhurried ease. He slipped his hands around her waist and, with a gentle lift, set her down on the hall console. Bracing one hand on the cabinet beside her legs, he fixed those dark eyes on her. “Tell me anyway.”

”

”

The scent of his soap mingled with a faint, woody cologne, making her ears burn. Elissa, a little flustered, obediently recited the trivial details he’d probably already heard from someone else.

“I installed a security camera a while back—asked Ian to do it. It finally came in handy today.”

“That’s it?”

Rowan hadn’t expected her to be even more succinct than his own assistants.

She used to chatter endlessly, even about the tiniest things.

“That’s it.” Elissa nodded, stifling a yawn. “I’m exhausted.”

She hadn’t slept in over a day, and her afternoon at the lab had drained what little energy she had left. Sleep was all she wanted.

Rowan glanced down and saw the fatigue shimmering in her eyes. He tapped her gently on the head. “Wait here.”

“For what?”

Before she even finished the question, he had already strode off, long legs carrying him through the door across the hall.

Chapter 276

Max—their black Labrador—spotted Elissa from afar and trotted over, only to be intercepted by Rowan’s firm arm. “Your mom’s tired tonight,” Rowan informed the dog, dead serious. “You can pester her tomorrow.”

Max got the message, whined a little, and retreated to his bed. His dark, soulful eyes followed Rowan’s every move as he grabbed an insulated food container from the dining table—the kind delivered from their favorite bistro. When Rowan headed back towards Elissa’s place, Max scrambled up, tail wagging, but stopped at the closed door, barking once in protest.

Elissa barely glanced at Rowan as he returned with the food. She was already heading toward the bedroom. “I don’t want dinner. I just want to sleep.”

She might be a doctor, but her own health habits were terrible. Skipping meals was almost routine for her—she often let herself get so hungry her

stomach hurt.

Rowan caught her ponytail in one swift motion, just as deft and quick as when he’d restrained Max.

His voice was calm but left no room for argument. “Eat something. It won’t take long.”

“1

...

”

Elissa knew better than to fight him. She reclaimed her ponytail and trudged to the dining table in her slippers, stomping a little harder than necessary—clearly annoyed at the interruption.

Rowan laid out the dishes and sat beside her. “Eat properly. Don’t just pick at it and call it good.”

“Rowan-” Elissa was so tired her brain was on autopilot. She blurted out, “Is it a midlife thing? You used to hate idle chatter, but now you want to listen to it. And you’re talking more, too.”

Rowan almost laughed in disbelief. He ran his tongue along his teeth, as if biting back a retort. “Come again?”

10:26

Chapter 276

He glanced down at his clothes, suddenly self-conscious. Wasn't he dressed like the guys her age?

Elissa realized from his tone she'd crossed a line. She ducked her head, shoveling food into her mouth. "...Nothing. Forget it."

She was so desperate to sleep that she finished her meal in record time.

As she drained the last of her corn soup, something dawned on her foggy mind.

Rowan had already showered, and here he was—back at her place, making no move to leave.

Swallowing her soup, Elissa turned to him, trying to be as diplomatic as possible. "I—I'm really too tired tonight..."

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator - Lullaby 277[704 words]

She didn't even have the energy for a quick kiss or a hug anymore.

Work had drained her dry, leaving nothing for romance, desire, or even the smallest indulgence.

Rowan glanced at her with a trace of amusement. "Well? Aren't you going to shower? Or are you waiting for me to sing you a lullaby?"

A lullaby.

He actually used to sing her to sleep.

The day her parents died, the sky over Cresthaven had been thick with thunder and rain a storm like so many others in that place. Ever since, she'd never slept soundly on stormy nights, haunted by nightmares that left her restless and shaken.

Rowan would sit beside her, gently rubbing her back and humming softly until she drifted off.

Snapping back to the present, Elissa nodded at his suggestion, eager to escape. "I'll go shower first. Make yourself at home."

As long as he didn't drag her with him, he could do whatever he liked.

But when Elissa stepped out of the bathroom, towel drying her hair, she froze at the sight of the man now occupying her bed.

He'd clearly taken her words to heart—he really had made himself at home.

He must have stopped by his place first; he'd changed into a set of silk pajamas and was lying on his side, claiming the left side of the bed.

Elissa had always slept on the right, ever since she was a child. Where she ended up overnight was anyone's guess, but she always started on the right.

As she approached the bed, she noticed the dark circles under his eyes were even worse than hers, and she hadn't slept for nearly thirty-**six**

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hours.

It looked like he'd just flown back from Meridia Country to Vistapeak City and hadn't caught a wink of rest since landing.

Elissa stood quietly beside the bed, lost in her thoughts. Suddenly, she let out a tiny laugh.

The man, who'd been dozing peacefully, reached out in his sleep, caught her arm, and pulled her into his embrace. His voice was husky from sleep. "What's so funny?"

"Nothing," she replied lightly.

No way was she confessing that she'd just remembered the time she drew a turtle on his face while he was napping.

She'd already said the wrong thing at dinner once tonight. No need to push her luck.

Rowan wrapped an arm around her waist, nuzzling her collarbone with his chin. His eyelids drooped again. "Then go to sleep."

The next morning, Elissa woke to find the space beside her empty, a note left in Rowan's place.

Take Max for a walk before work.

She'd *gone* to bed early, so she had plenty of time. After playing with Max in the courtyard and seeing to his water and breakfast, she set off for work in no particular rush,

As usual, she started her day at the clinic.

She'd barely arrived, hadn't even called for the first patient, when Cliff knocked and came in, looking calm and collected in his white coat.

Elissa smiled. "Morning."

Cliff's eyes crinkled in response, though he quickly got to the point. "William Garcia handed in his resignation today."

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"Mr. Garcia quit?" Elissa's eyebrows shot up in surprise.

Cliff nodded. "Someone saw him meeting with Marcia a couple days ago. I guess he's joining her team."

Marcia's tactics never failed to amaze.

Just yesterday, they'd finally dealt with the mole in the lab, and *now* Marcia had poached someone straight from the clinic. She clearly meant business about building her own research team.

Elissa, however, shrugged it off. "Everyone has their own ambitions."

William was a decent clinician, but he'd be way out of his depth in drug development.

If Marcia and her crew could actually deliver results, then more power to them.

She had nothing more to say about it.

By lunchtime, Cliff was still busy with patients, so Elissa headed out to the project site on her own.

Just as she was about to enter the lab, Zachary Jones strode over, frustration evident in his voice. "Ms. Drummond, I'm really sorry about yesterday. If I'd known those two were so petty, I never would've assigned them to your team."

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“It’s fine.”

Elissa smiled. “People’s hearts are hard to read. Until something actually happens, you never really know.”

She paused for a moment, then asked for confirmation. “Did they say who put them up to it?”

She suspected Marcia was involved, but the logic didn’t quite add up.

After all, Marcia had been biding her time, just waiting to reap the benefits. Why would she send someone to sabotage the data?

“No one,” Zachary Jones replied. Worried he hadn’t been clear, he added, “No one gave them orders.”

Saying it out loud, Zachary felt even more embarrassed. “Those two

idiots just couldn’t stand that you’re younger than them. At first, Raymond wasn’t planning to go along with James, but after trying to cozy up to you and realizing he still wasn’t getting anywhere, he just—”

Of course, what they said was even nastier than that.

They couldn’t get over the fact that a woman like Elissa was in charge of them.

Noticing the slight furrow in Elissa’s brow, Zachary remembered something and gave a quick grin. “By the way, we don’t have to worry about Marcia swooping in to take credit anymore.”

“Oh? How’s that?”

Wasn’t this supposed to be a government-backed joint research project?

Zachary pointed upward. “Our Mr. Murphy wasn’t happy about it. He personally made sure the joint project got canned, said we’d handle the research ourselves. Told everyone plainly that our team could get it done

on our own.”

Zachary was more than pleased at the news.

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That Marcia woman was all scheming and no substance, just waiting to swoop in and profit off others' work.

For people actually doing the research, nothing was worse than having to deal with someone like her.

Lab work was exhausting enough—having to waste energy watching your back for petty politics made it feel like the sky was falling.

Elissa was caught off guard. She hadn't expected Rowan, with everything else on his plate, to care about this.

She was about to say something when Zachary dropped his voice, eager to gossip. "Even Director Murphy got demoted over this. From now on, all she gets is a share of the profits—no real authority left."

Elissa had never dealt with the Murphy Group's upper management, but she knew Karol was the head of R&D.

She also remembered that, no matter how arrogant Rowan was when he returned home, he'd always show Karol some respect.

But this time...

Clearly, Rowan was serious about this project.

A thought struck Elissa: if she managed to finish developing this drug quickly, maybe she'd have the leverage to negotiate with Rowan. Maybe she could get him to tear up that draconian contract.

This drug could bring the Murphy Group far more profit than three billion.

Way more than enough to cover any penalty fees, several times over.

The more Elissa thought about it, the more determined she felt, and her motivation soared.

As evening fell and Elissa was preparing to work late and push the project forward, her phone rang. It was Paige Murphy, the matriarch herself.

Elissa set aside her work, walked over to the window, and pulled the

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blackout curtain shut. “Grandma.”

“There’ll be guests at the house tonight. You’ll be home for dinner.”

It wasn’t a request; it was a command.

The old woman’s style, as always.

Elissa gazed through the floor-to-ceiling window at the rush hour traffic below. Her tone was flat. “I don’t have time tonight.”

The matriarch’s voice pressed through the phone, cold and forceful. “Do you think that just because Frank’s protecting you, I can’t do anything

about it?”

Elissa silently drew a slow breath. “I really am busy.”

”

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On the other end of the line, the old woman let out a soft chuckle. “I heard Tanya Foster’s business trip is almost over, isn’t it?”

As Elissa drove toward the family estate, her mind raced through calculations—how soon could she finish this project? If she could just get it done, the Murphy family would lose their grip on her. *She* could take Tanya far away—if not out of state, then out of the country altogether.

She was sick and tired of these people constantly treating Tanya as a pawn in their schemes.

She simply couldn't wrap her head around it.

How could power and privilege divide people so ruthlessly into ranks, as if everyone belonged in neat little tiers?

For ordinary folks, just keeping their heads above water took everything they had.

Caught in rush hour traffic, Elissa sat in gridlock for over an hour before finally reaching the old mansion,

She swung her bag over her shoulder and stepped into the parlor, only to spot Lorraine Lynn already seated beside the matriarch, poised and charming as ever.

So Lorraine was the guest tonight.

A rare warmth softened the old woman's features—Elissa could tell she was quite pleased with Lorraine.

Elissa walked closer. "Grandma."

Perhaps because Lorraine was present, the matriarch actually kept a hint of kindness in her tone. "You're here. We were just waiting for you to start dinner."

Lorraine smiled politely and greeted her. "Elissa, did you get stuck in

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traffic?"

"Yes, Secretary Lynn. Rush hour was a mess."

No sooner had she replied than the matriarch cast her a reproachful look. "Why call her 'Secretary Lynn'? She'll be your sister-in-law soon."

Lorraine grinned, teasing, "Let's wait until Rowan and I are actually married before we start changing titles."

She added with a laugh, "And if you want me to call you 'sister,' you'll have to give me a gift. I forgot to bring any tonight."

Before the matriarch could say more, Butler Murphy appeared to announce that dinner was served.

The meal was lavish, as always. Even when dining alone, the matriarch insisted on at least six dishes—she might not finish them, but the display was important to her status.

Elissa couldn't quite guess why her grandmother had summoned her home this evening, so she kept her head down and focused on eating, careful not to give anything away.

The matriarch stayed silent, and Elissa didn't pry.

But she didn't get to keep her head down for long.

Halfway through dinner, Matriarch Paige Murphy set down her fork with deliberate slowness and fixed Elissa with a scrutinizing gaze. "What exactly is going on between you and Rowan right now?"

The question made Elissa's scalp prickle.

Almost reflexively, she glanced at Lorraine, but quickly dismissed the idea—this wasn't Lorraine's style. Lorraine wouldn't have said anything to stir up trouble between her and Rowan, especially not in front of the family matriarch.

Thinking fast, Elissa dabbed her lips with a napkin and replied softly, "I'm not sure what you mean."

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"I'm asking, how far have you and Rowan gotten in patching things up?"

The matriarch's patience wore thin. Her tone turned sharp. "He used to treat you like a treasure. If you so much as shed a tear, he'd do anything you wanted. And now?"

Elissa kept her answer vague. "I don't really know."

She had a hunch. The matriarch was probably planning to use her relationship with Rowan for something. Whatever it was, she doubted it was anything she could influence.

Only Elissa knew the real state of things between herself and Rowan. These days, she was the one following Rowan's lead—not the other way around. She wasn't a child anymore; she knew exactly where she stood.

But she couldn't let the matriarch see through her. As long as the old woman was still uncertain, there was a chance she'd tread carefully.

For instance, if she and Rowan didn't at least appear to be on good terms, the matriarch wouldn't have bothered with a mere phone threat—she'd have sent someone straight to the Murphy offices to drag her back by force.

As that thought passed, Elissa glanced up—and found Lorraine watching her closely.

Before she could decipher Lorraine's expression, Matriarch Paige Murphy spoke up, calm and deliberate: "Here's what you'll do. In the next couple of days, find a chance to see Rowan and bring up his engagement to Lorraine."

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Not only Elissa, but Lorraine was also taken aback.

Was the old matriarch seriously suggesting that she go and convince Rowan to agree to this marriage?

Elissa feigned confusion. "Marriage is a big deal, Grandma. That's your concern, not mine. I'm younger than him—it wouldn't be appropriate for me to bring it up."

Knowing Rowan's temperament, if he didn't want to marry *someone*, no one could force his hand.

Besides, Elissa was well aware that the old matriarch had only come to her because she'd run out of options. That meant Rowan must have refused, and refused thoroughly.

She had no intention of walking straight into that hornet's nest.

Matriarch Paige Murphy narrowed her clouded eyes, irritation plainly written across her face. She let out a cold laugh. "So now you've got someone backing you, you think you're all grown up? After everything I've done for you all these years..."

"Grandma—"

Elissa didn't want to make a scene and complicate things for herself, so she softened her tone, pretending to be earnest yet helpless. "It's true that Rowan and I get along a little better than we used to, but you know what he's like. When he left me behind all those years ago, he didn't show a shred of mercy. There's no way he'd go back to doting on me like before."

“To him, I’m just a passing amusement—here one day, gone the next. I don’t even take his kindness seriously. Should you?”

Just as Elissa finished, Rowan strode into Murphy Manor and was about to enter the dining room when he caught her words—delivered with such sincerity it stopped him in his tracks.

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His expression darkened almost instantly.

Meanwhile, Elissa heard a noise outside the door. She glanced over her shoulder, only to see one of the old woman’s stray cats darting past..

Her words, however, seemed to have struck a chord with Matriarch Paige Murphy, though the woman wasn’t about to back down now that she’d called Elissa here. “Regardless, just try. Bring it up with him when you get

the chance.”

Desperate times called for desperate measures, after all.

Who knew? Maybe that hardheaded boy would listen to this girl for once.

Elissa lowered her lashes and nodded meekly. “All right. I’ll find a chance to mention it.”

With her goal achieved, Matriarch Murphy, for once, let her off the hook.

After dinner, Elissa stood to leave. She was almost out of the old house when Lorraine called her back.

Elissa turned. “Are you going to ask me to talk to Rowan, too?”

“I just want to know why you agreed to the old lady’s request.”

Lorraine had come today at her parents’ urging, just to pay her respects to the matriarch. She had no idea she’d be dragged into this drama.

What she couldn’t understand was why Elissa would agree to it.

“I’m not going to say anything to Rowan,” Elissa replied quietly. “Back there, I only agreed to keep up appearances. Don’t take it seriously.”

If she'd refused outright, she'd probably have been forced to kneel and beg—she had no intention of putting her knees through that.

Besides, she'd already painted things in such a way that the matriarch wouldn't be holding out much hope. In a few days, she'd just mention that

Rowan didn't listen to her.

That would be the end of it.

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And the old lady would never be foolish enough to ask Rowan for confirmation.

Lorraine hadn't expected Elissa—so obedient in front of the matriarch—to be so blunt in private.

She stared at Elissa for a long moment, then suddenly smiled. “You really are... a lot like him.”

So alike.

Both of them, at their core, simply didn't care much about anything.

The difference was, one had the privilege to live that way, while the other, forced to rely on others, could only pay lip service and play along.

Elissa didn't quite know how to respond. She pressed her lips together. “It's getting late. I should be going.”

Tanya Foster was coming back, and she needed to get up early to pick her up at the airport.

She had just turned to leave when Lorraine, sounding as if a weight had been lifted off her shoulders, spoke up behind her. “Elissa, I know very well that he'll never marry me.”

“He's in love with someone else, and I'm not that person.”

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator - Lullaby 281[763 words]

Chapter 281

Lorraine spent the whole night mulling it over after she got home from the restaurant. She tuned out her parents' relentless chatter about marrying into the Murphy family, shut herself away in her bedroom, and let her thoughts spin.

She wasn't the sort to blindly chase after something she couldn't have. In fact, she'd always been clear-headed about what was within her reach and what wasn't.

There was no denying she liked Rowan; she was drawn to him in a way she couldn't help. But when it came to this engagement, her parents' wishes had always outweighed her own.

For a long time, she'd told herself it didn't matter. Rowan didn't have anyone else in his life. If she just waited long enough, maybe things would finally turn around for her.

But then, that day at the club, she saw the way Rowan looked at Elissa. The longing in his eyes was impossible to miss.

It was as if fate wanted to shatter the last bit of hope she'd been clinging to. Earlier today, Rowan had gone out for a business lunch and,

uncharacteristically, left his wallet behind on the desk in his office.

It was right there, in plain sight.

Lorraine had reached out to put it away for him, but as she picked it up, a photograph slipped out from the inner pocket where he always kept it.

A young girl beamed out from the photo, her smile bright and sweet as she cradled a birthday cake in her hands, gazing trustingly at whoever was behind the camera. The number-shaped candles on the cake read

sixteen.

It was Elissa.

Lorraine vaguely remembered overhearing something at Murphy Manor during the holidays—someone had mentioned that Rowan broke things

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off with Elissa

At the time, everyone had talked about how cold and heartless Rowan

was.

Who would have thought that, all these years later, he'd still be carrying around a photo from that last birthday they'd spent together?

In that instant, Lorraine felt something inside her snap—all *those* lingering hopes, gone.

After all, Elissa and Rowan had spent nine years growing up side by side, followed by eight years of longing. Lorraine's time was valuable, *too*; she wasn't about to waste it chasing after love that might never be hers.

Her upbringing had taught her not to lose her dignity, no matter what.

So when Elissa had been honest with her, Lorraine found herself blurting out everything she'd been holding in.

Once she'd spoken her truth, relief washed over her. It was as if she'd finally put a period at the end of years of fruitless longing.

Elissa, on the other hand, looked completely taken aback.

"You're telling me all this because..." she asked, startled.

"I just wanted *to* say," Lorraine replied, tilting her head and smiling, a weight lifted from her shoulders, "I won't be asking you about Rowan's private life anymore."

"And who knows? Maybe we have a shot at being friends."

Elissa raised an eyebrow, teasing, "You're not about to fall for me just because I'm so much like Rowan, are you?"

It wasn't just their personalities that were similar, Lorraine thought. Even the way Elissa talked was just like Rowan.

Lorraine laughed and shook her head. "Don't flatter yourself."

Chapter 281

Outside Murphy Manor, in the backseat of a black Bentley, Ian watched as his young mistress and Secretary Lynn strolled out of the house together, chatting amiably. A chill ran down his spine.

Evan Murphy was about to say something, but Ian, quick as ever, clapped a hand over his mouth.

The tension in the car was thick enough already—*no* sense making it

worse.

Rowan's gaze was icy as he turned away from the window and glanced at the driver's seat. "Drive over there."

Evan might not have much tact, but he knew his cousin well enough. With a huff, he batted Ian's hand away, pressed down on the gas, and eased the car forward to where their young mistress was waiting.

Elissa had just finished saying goodbye to Lorraine and was heading toward her own car when the familiar Bentley pulled up in front of her.

Ian hopped out and opened the back door for her, shooting her a conspiratorial look. "Miss, can I have your car keys? I'll drive your car home for you."

That way, she'd still have her own car to use in the morning.

"Thanks, Ian." Elissa handed over her keys, a vague sense of unease settling in her chest, but she pushed it aside and slipped into the backseat.

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator - Lullaby 282[676 words]

She hadn't even taken her seat before she could sense the man's irritation beside her.

Turning her head, Elissa glanced at him, catching the frosty look in his eyes. In that instant, she understood.

The commotion at the restaurant entrance earlier hadn't been a stray cat.

It had been a stray man.

Before he could say a word, Elissa hurried to explain, keeping her tone honest. "I only agreed to your grandmother's request on the surface. I never intended to actually interfere with you and Secretary Lynn..."

Of course, she wasn't about to admit she'd only agreed because she'd been pressured.

After all, no matter how strained Rowan's relationship with his grandmother was, she was still his family.

Elissa, on the other hand, was just an outsider.

But before she could finish, Rowan cut her off, his voice cold and mocking as he curled his lips into a smirk. “That’s right. Someone as heartless as me—how would you dare meddle in my affairs?”

A chill raced down Elissa’s spine.

Still, she didn’t feel guilty. She met his gaze head-on, her eyes unwavering. “Did I say anything wrong?”

All these years, every word he’d ever said was still branded in her memory—clear as day.

She truly did think he was heartless.

She’d always thought he’d lose interest in three minutes flat.

She’d never dared, not for a second, to trust his feelings again.

She always imagined that talking about these things wouldn’t stir up any

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emotion in her anymore. Yet now, a wave of bitterness rose up anyway, thick and stifling, making her eyes and nose burn.

Rowan’s anger was fierce, but when his gaze landed on her reddening eyes, his frustration melted away in an instant.

Just like before, she stubbornly lifted her chin, refusing to give in, as if demanding an explanation from him.

Rowan met her stare quietly, finally conceding. “You’re not wrong. So, what do you want?”

Elissa could hear the emptiness in his reply, the way it sounded more like condescension than real agreement.

It was the same dismissiveness she’d come to expect from men used to being in charge.

She was so angry she could cry; in fact, tears sprang up before she could stop them. She wiped them away with the back of her hand, her eyes red as she stared at Rowan. “What I want—would you even listen?”

For a brief moment, Rowan’s mind flickered back to years ago.

She'd practically been a walking tear-jerker as a kid, crying over the smallest things.

Especially when he'd first taken her in—one wrong look from him and her eyes would turn red again.

But she was clever, too. Once she realized he couldn't stand to see her cry, she started using it to her advantage.

Whenever he ignored her, she'd stare at him just like this.

In the end, he'd always given in to her.

Girls like her, he thought, deserved nothing less than peace and happiness.

Even now, the trick still worked. Rowan's voice softened, gentle in a way no one else had ever heard from him. "Go ahead. I'm listening."

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He figured, there wasn't much he couldn't give her.

Elissa picked up on the change in his tone, and her confidence grew. "Could we tear up that contract?"

"No."

Rowan's expression darkened instantly. He spat out the word with a finality that brooked no argument—cold, unyielding, and absolute.

He might as well have told her to give up hope.

Seeing the resignation in her eyes, Rowan felt his chest tighten. "Didn't you tell my grandmother I get these sudden whims and lose interest just as quickly? Well, then you can wait. When my whim runs out, I'll let *you* go."

Elissa looked at him, pressing the point. "And how long is this whim going to last?"

"Hard to say."

Rowan's eyes lowered, watching her intently. "People change as they get older, you know. Last time it was nine years. This time it could be twenty, thirty, even fifty."

A lifetime.

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A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator - Lullaby 283[664 words]

He wants to wear her down—slowly and completely.

Elissa wasn't sure when Rowan first got that idea into his head, but she knew for certain that what she'd said back at the old house had stuck

with him.

Holding a grudge. Again.

She drew a deep breath. "Fine. If you're so stubborn, then go ahead—never get married, never end up with the girl *you* actually like. Spend your whole life alone, for all I care."

Rowan's eyes flickered with amusement. "The girl I like?"

"That's right."

As Elissa spoke, her gaze drifted to the pocket of his tailored trousers.

Just before they left the old house, Lorraine had brought up

something—same as she had the last time at the café, asking about the photo Rowan kept in his wallet.

The connection seemed obvious.

Both times, it had to be about the same girl.

Rowan might be emotionally distant, but he wasn't the type to chase after every pretty face.

Frank had just stepped out of his car when he spotted the Bentley pulling up nearby. Two people got out, one after the other.

He could tell right away they'd been fighting again. Elissa strode ahead, her posture stiff with annoyance, while Rowan followed behind, looking as cool and unruffled as ever.

Frank had seen this scene play out enough times over the years.

Elissa never seemed to keep her temper in check around Rowan.

Rowan always said she was only tough at home—never out in the world.

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The smallest disagreement would spark an argument, and sometimes Frank and Bradley Wheeler would have to step in to keep the peace.

Watching Elissa disappear into the building ahead, Frank hurried after her, calling out to Rowan with a grin, "Another fight?"

Rowan's brow furrowed slightly. "Not exactly."

"We ran out of time at the restaurant yesterday. There are a few things I didn't get a chance to say."

As they walked toward the entrance together, Frank continued, his tone earnest, "I know you're still upset about *how* I treated Elissa in the past. Honestly, I was wrong—I had things mixed up, thought Marcia was Elissa. But I promise, from now on, I'll give her my undivided attention."

"I'll stay here—won't leave until she's ready to forgive me."

Rowan, whose expression rarely changed, suddenly stopped in his tracks. "What did you just say?"

Frank was genuinely trying to patch things up with Rowan, regardless of whether the Murphy family had anything to do with Elissa's parents'

accident.

At the very least, he figured Elissa might listen if Rowan tried to mediate.

Frank thought Rowan was finally softening. "I said I'll treat Elissa right from now on—"

"Not that part." Rowan's jaw tightened. "The last thing you said."

Frank smiled, undeterred. “I’ll stay here as long as it takes—until she comes around.”

He meant every word.

He’d do whatever it took, as long as Elissa was willing.

Rowan’s brow twitched. He glanced toward the elevators, noticing how Elissa didn’t even look surprised to see Frank here—her expression was cold, almost indifferent.

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Chapter 283

“Suit yourself. Hope you don’t mind if the place falls apart while you’re at it.”

Frank was used to Rowan’s sharp tongue and didn’t take offense. “That’s why I was hoping you could help talk to her. She’s always listened to you, ever since she was a kid.”

Rowan seemed to consider it for a moment, then nodded with barely a pause. “Alright.”

“Knew you still cared about her deep down,” Frank said with relief, falling into step beside him toward the elevators.

The doors slid open just as Elissa saw the two men approach. She stepped inside first, pressed her floor number, and retreated into the corner, not sparing either of them so much as a glance.

“Elissa.”

Frank started toward her, but she shifted back another step, pressing herself against the elevator wall.

He stopped short, a flicker of disappointment in his eyes, but didn’t push any further.

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A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator - Lullaby 284[640 words]

Chapter 284

Just before stepping out of the elevator, he glanced at Rowan with a trace of resignation. "I'll have to trouble you with what we talked about earlier," he said.

Rowan gave a slight nod, and he walked out.

As the elevator doors closed, Elissa frowned. "What's he need you to do?"

She had a hunch this was about her.

"He said,"

Rowan's gaze slid over her, his tone dry as kindling. "If he hadn't realized he'd mistaken you for someone else, he'd have divorced you eight hundred times by now."

"I

"I

Elissa didn't believe a single word of it.

That line had Rowan written all over it.

Still, if Frank really felt that way, she'd be more than happy to oblige.

Seeing her go quiet, Rowan smirked. "Hurt your feelings?"

"What feelings?" Elissa shot back, rolling her eyes. "At least I've been married once. You? The closest you get is keeping a photo of your crush in your wallet."

"Never realized you were the emotionally repressed type," she went on, teasing, "so dignified and restrained-"

Before she could finish, he abruptly reached out and pinched her cheeks, squashing them until her words came out garbled.

She barely had time to protest before his hand covered the elevator camera and he bent down, capturing her mouth with his. Her protests dissolved in a rush of heat as he swallowed every word she tried to say.

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In the elevator, with its mirrored walls and the ever-present threat of interruption, Elissa nearly jumped out of her skin. She squirmed, muffling a startled “mmph!”

Luckily, the elevator reached their floor in seconds.

Rowan’s hand slid down to the back of her thigh, lifting her effortlessly as

he strode out. The moment they were in the hallway, he pressed her against the wall.

His kisses came down hard and hungry, nothing like the restraint she’d just mocked. He devoured her breath inch by inch, every movement purposeful and predatory, as if he held the entire game in the palm of his hand.

Elissa felt as if she were drowning, her heartbeat wild and her breathing ragged. The only sounds in her ears were the frantic clash of their lips and the hush of tangled breaths, the air between them thick with want.

Her legs turned to water beneath her, and she clung to his shirt as if it were the only thing keeping her afloat.

BANG-

Just as the elevator vestibule turned thick with heat, a door slammed

shut down the hall, the sound hurried and awkward.

Instinctively, Elissa shoved Rowan away, chest heaving, cheeks burning. She darted a glance toward her own apartment.

After Frank had barged in unannounced last time, she’d changed the door code.

Now, only she and Tanya Foster knew it.

Tanya must’ve come home early.

And seen everything.

Elissa’s ears flamed with embarrassment. She looked up at Rowan, who appeared entirely unruffled, and forced her breathing to steady. “I’ll head

in.”

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Rowan watched her hurry off, her awkward, flustered stride making the corners of his mouth twitch in the faintest of smiles.

Turning away, he went into his own apartment.

He hadn't expected company.

Uninvited, as usual.

Rex Wilkinson was lounging on his couch, adjusting his gold-rimmed glasses and giving Rowan a slow, appraising look. After a beat, he drawled, "Didn't know Mr. Murphy could be so sweet—*one* kiss and your ears turned bright red."

"Get lost."

Rowan shot him a half-laugh, half-curse, slipping off his shoes and ignoring the teasing stare as he headed for the closet to change.

Rex, lacking all sense of timing, followed and leaned in the doorway, ready to keep needling him. But Rowan shot him a sharp look over his shoulder. "What, got locked out across the hall and decided to bother me instead?"

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As soon as Elissa opened her front door, she found Tanya Foster standing there with her hands pressed together in a mock prayer, wearing a grin that screamed pure mischief.

"My bad! I heard the elevator and figured it was you, so I wanted to give you a proper welcome home."

Tanya's apology was earnest, but she was already snickering as she nudged, "So... how far did things go with you and Rowan tonight?"

Elissa flushed with embarrassment. "Just the first step."

Tanya blinked, confused. "Huh?"

She never would've pegged Rowan as the bashful type. Honestly, it always seemed like he was the big bad wolf and Elissa the naive little lamb. But apparently, their romance was moving at the pace of a high

school crush.

Kicking off her shoes, Elissa hurried over to the kitchen counter, poured herself a glass of water, and tried desperately to change the subject. "Didn't *you* say you'd be landing tomorrow morning? What are you doing back tonight?"

She'd actually planned to get a good night's sleep and pick Tanya up at the airport in the morning.

Tanya shot her a look. "Have you forgotten what day it is?"

Elissa's brain, still fogged, lagged behind. She asked reflexively, "What day?"

"March 10th," Tanya replied, poking Elissa's forehead. "Hello? It's midnight soon, which **means** it'll be your birthday. No way was I missing that."

Rowan, with his endless to-do lists, probably wouldn't even remember Elissa's birthday. Tanya refused to let her best friend spend the night

alone, waiting for another year to begin. She had to be there. She always

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would be.

Elissa finally caught on. "But if you arrived tomorrow morning, it'd still be my birthday."

Tanya rolled her eyes as she grabbed a beer from the fridge and collapsed onto the couch. "Not the same, and you know it."

She was dead tired. She'd stayed up all night yesterday, rushed through court today, and then raced back to Vistapeak City just to make it home

in time.

Elissa could tell Tanya was exhausted. She slipped on her slippers, hurried over, and started massaging Tanya's shoulders and legs. "You're a saint, honestly. Are you hungry? I can order takeout."

Tanya looked thoroughly satisfied with Elissa's doting. "No need, your girl already ate before coming home."

Elissa perked up. "With who?"

Tanya hated eating out. Unless it was absolutely necessary, she'd rather go hungry than eat by herself in a restaurant—she called it 'wilderness

survival.'

Tanya's expression shifted, and she glanced toward the door before answering honestly, "With Rex."

"Oh..." Elissa pouted, feigning annoyance. "So Rex knew you were coming home tonight, but I didn't?"

"Ungrateful, aren't you? I wanted to surprise you!" Tanya pinched Elissa's cheek. "Besides, I never told him. No idea how he found out."

Ever since that incident that landed her in the police station, Rex always seemed to know exactly where she was. She hadn't even made it out of the airport before she spotted him waiting at arrivals, looking smug as

ever.

After a quick shower, the girls curled up on the couch, watching a reality show. Tanya hugged a bag of chips, crunching away, while Elissa, never much of a snacker, watched quietly. When something funny happened,

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they'd burst out laughing at the exact same moment.

It was one of the reasons they were so close—their senses of humor matched perfectly.

Halfway through the show, Tanya's alarm suddenly went off. She didn't even bother to silence it, rummaging around until she produced a beautifully wrapped gift box and practically launched herself at Elissa.

"Happy birthday, darling! May everything go your way—and good luck with your research!"

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A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator - Lullaby 286[592 words]

Warmth blossomed in Elissa's chest as she accepted the gift, her eyes curving with a smile. "What's this?"

Tanya Foster made a heart shape with her hand. "It's my love for you, obviously."

Elissa burst out laughing, caught off guard by the cheesy gesture. "Alright, message received. Now can you finally get some rest?"

She'd noticed ages ago that Tanya was barely keeping her eyes open, stubbornly fighting off sleep just to wish her a happy birthday right at midnight.

Tanya clung to her arm. "Tonight, the birthday girl sleeps with me."

At the clinic, tradition dictated that there were never appointments scheduled on Elissa's birthday.

She woke late, lounging in bed with Tanya for a while before finally dragging herself up and getting ready. One headed off to her research institute, the other to her law firm—each with their own daily grind.

They'd already planned: tonight, Elissa, Tanya, and Cliff would celebrate her birthday together over dinner.

With nothing pressing at home during the day, Elissa figured she might as well go in to work.

When she walked into the lab, Cliff looked up and couldn't help but laugh. "I knew you wouldn't just take the day off."

She grinned, setting her bag and coat aside. “I just want to get this project done sooner, that’s all.” With that, she headed over to her workstation.

At noon, she and Cliff grabbed a quick bite downstairs. Returning to the lab, they found Lorraine waiting by the door.

She waved as soon as she spotted Elissa, brandishing a gift bag.

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Elissa hurried over. “What’s this?”

“Happy birthday,” Lorraine said with a bright smile, handing over the bag. “A little something for you.”

Elissa glimpsed the unmistakable logo of a luxury brand and hesitated. “This is way too much...”

Lorraine waved away her protest. “Just get me something similar for my birthday. That’s how friendship works, right? You owe me a little today, I’ll owe you a little tomorrow.”

And before you know it, you’re real friends.

Elissa let her guard down a bit, the corners of her mouth lifting as she accepted the gift. “Alright, then I’ll take it. But how did you know today was my birthday?”

Lorraine shrugged. “Technically you’re not on Murphy Group’s payroll, but didn’t you submit a background form before joining the lab?”

It was only yesterday, while glancing through Elissa’s file, that Lorraine realized why Rowan’s passwords always revolved around the digits

209. 0209.

Elissa’s birthday.

Lorraine was grateful she’d had the sense to pump the brakes when she did.

But there was a question she’d been holding back since yesterday—a question she couldn’t ignore any longer.

She pulled Elissa aside, lowering her voice. “You and Mr. Atwater from Atwater Group—did you two get divorced?”

She honestly couldn’t think of any other explanation.

The first time she’d stumbled across Elissa and Rowan together in private, she’d been angry. In her world, cheating while married was absolutely inexcusable.

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But the more she thought about it, the less it fit Elissa’s character.

Elissa was a little surprised, but didn’t bother to hide the truth. She nodded. “Yeah, we split up before the holidays.”

“Does Mr. Murphy...know?” Lorraine hesitated before asking.

Did he know?

Elissa wasn’t entirely sure.

She’d mentioned it in front of Bradley and the others just a couple days ago. With the way gossip traveled among them, Rowan should have heard by now. Strangely enough, he hadn’t mocked her for ignoring everyone’s warnings and ending up with a failed marriage.

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator - Lullaby 287[651 words]

Elissa didn’t try to hide the truth. “Honestly, I’m not sure either.”

Lorraine paused, surprised by how unconcerned Elissa seemed, and couldn’t help but gently remind her, “He’s such a proud man. Now that you’re divorced, you really ought to tell him as soon as you can.”

Otherwise, sooner or later, things would explode into a much bigger problem.

After all, Lorraine never once thought of Rowan as someone particularly patient.

Elissa knew her relationship with Rowan was too complicated to explain in a few words, so she just nodded. “Yeah, I get it.”

But Lorraine only saw Rowan's pride—she had no idea about Elissa's.

For Elissa, it was almost impossible to walk up to Rowan and blurt out, “Hey, Rowan, I’m divorced now.” To her, that was like handing him an invitation to gloat over her misfortune.

Still, Lorraine knew there wasn’t much more she could do. She and Elissa were, at best, just casual friends now.

Even saying this much had taken Lorraine a lot of emotional effort. She’d given up on that old engagement, but thinking about the years she’d spent stubbornly holding on, her throat tightened with a twinge of regret.

“Well, I’ll let you get back to work. I don’t want to take up any more of your time.”

Lorraine remembered Elissa’s project team was always racing against deadlines.

No sooner had Lorraine returned to the executive office than Zachary Jones knocked on the lab door and strolled over to Elissa with a cheerful

smile.

“Holding up okay? If you need, I can transfer a couple more reliable

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“No need,” Elissa replied with an understanding smile. “Until this drug is fully developed, no one else is going to listen to me anyway.”

Better to leave it as is—no point bringing in more people only for them to stand around like James and the others, dragging their feet and slowing everything down.

Worse yet, it might just give Marcia an opening to make trouble.

MediLink Global.

Marcia’s assistant stood primly at her side, reciting the latest news in a businesslike tone. “Ms. Marcia, headquarters just notified us. Our team’s been kicked out of the joint project with the Murphy Group.”

“What?” Marcia was stunned. “That’s impossible! Wasn’t this all arranged by Matriarch Paige Murphy herself?”

Everything was fine just days ago—how could they be dropped so suddenly?

“Someone meddled and got word to Rowan,” the assistant said, her expression grave. “Look, the matriarch did everything she could for you, pulled every string. But now, not only have you been cut from the project, Director Murphy’s lost his position because of you. From here on, you’re on your own.”

Being kicked out of the joint project meant Marcia’s options had just narrowed even further.

She’d been hoping *to* ride on someone else’s success, maybe snatch a little credit for herself. Now, all of that was gone...

Fury twisted Marcia’s features, but knowing this assistant was Paige Murphy’s watchdog, she dared not lash out. She forced herself to swallow her anger.

“I get it. I have my own plans. Don’t worry.”

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“You’d better,” the assistant warned quietly. “You know exactly how much money and how many resources you’ve gotten from the matriarch. If all of that goes down the drain, even if she can’t deal with Elissa just yet, she’ll have no problem dealing with you.”

With that, she turned and left before Marcia could get a word in.

When the assistant’s footsteps faded down the hall, Marcia’s face contorted with rage. She swept everything off her desk in a crashing heap.

Bitch! Bitch! Every last one of them!

What was it about Elissa? How did she always manage to slip through the cracks and come out on top?

Marcia’s chest heaved as she spat out her curses. “Just wait! Sooner or later, I’ll make every one of you pay!”

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A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator - Lullaby 288[656 words]

That old witch.

This was supposed to be a partnership, but instead, she sent people to watch her every move, as if she needed to be guarded against.

All right, then.

Once she secured the rights to this drug, she'd turn around and sell it to another pharmaceutical company. Let's see if that old witch could handle

the shock.

Either way, no matter who ended up being the business partner, she'd still be the sole developer behind this new medication.

When that time came, even the old witch wouldn't dare to mess with her so easily.

And as for Elissa...

Ha.

When she finally made a name for herself, putting a failure like Elissa in her place would be child's play.

Meanwhile, Elissa was so busy in the lab she could barely straighten her back, completely unaware that even as her project was still in

development, someone was already plotting behind her back.

At five o'clock, Cliff washed his hands and glanced at Elissa with a smile. "Let's call it a day. The rest will have to wait for the new data anyway."

"Sounds good."

Elissa beamed and peeled off her gloves, heading to the sink.

Nearby, Xavier couldn't help but remark, "Dr. Drummond, Dr. Cliff—watching you two work together is like watching a well-oiled machine."

They almost looked like comrades who'd fought alongside each other for

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years.

Cliff grinned, making light of it. “You should ask her how many years I’ve been her assistant. I’ve picked up a thing or two over time.”

Elissa arched an eyebrow, thinking for a moment. “Four years?”

They’d met thanks to their mentor.

From the very first day, their professor decided Cliff should shadow Elissa and learn from her.

Cliff had never hesitated—he’d followed her lead all these years. It was only by chance, much later, that he discovered Elissa was the mentor’s legendary protégé.

“This is the fifth year, actually,” Cliff said, smiling as he grabbed his coat—and hers, too. “Come on, if we don’t leave now, we’ll get stuck in traffic.”

Tonight, Cliff had chosen the restaurant.

He was thoughtful, and he knew how to make a girl feel comfortable. Instead of picking some private, fancy place, he went with something stylish—one of those trendy spots that looked good on the outside, though most of them were all show and no substance.

But this one supposedly had a solid reputation.

They headed downstairs together, about to walk toward the parking garage, when they spotted Frank striding steadily in their direction.

Frank’s gaze darkened a little when he saw Cliff, but with Elissa present, he kept his composure. “Elissa, I was planning to wait upstairs for you, didn’t expect you’d finish early today.”

If Frank didn’t have the only clues to her parents’ deaths, after the incident at Greenwood Manor, Elissa would have cut him off on the spot.

As it was, her tone held no warmth. “What do you want?”

At this point, the only thing she and Frank could discuss civilly was what

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happened to her parents.

Everything else was off-limits.

Frank could sense her dislike, his lips pressed thin. "It's your birthday today. I made a reservation—I thought maybe we could have dinner together."

"I already have plans with a friend," Elissa replied, curt and resolute. She glanced at Cliff. "Let's go."

"Of course."

Cliff smiled, subtly stepping between her and Frank, blocking Frank's path without making a scene.

If she liked Frank, he'd respect that.

If she couldn't stand Frank, he'd support her just the same.

As long as she was happy, that was all that mattered.

They'd barely taken two steps when Frank caught up and blocked their way, struggling to suppress the urge to drag Elissa away then and there. He kept his voice steady. "Elissa, please. Just this once. I've never celebrated your birthday with you before. Give me a chance, will you?"

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator - Lullaby 289[715 words]

"Mr. Atwater—"

Before Elissa could say a word, Tanya Foster appeared out of nowhere, her heels clicking against the floor as she strode over. "You know, Elissa here has given you more than enough chances."

"If you really want to have a shot at talking to her in the future, maybe you should let her come celebrate her birthday with us first?"

"After all, for the past three years, Cliff and I have been the ones by her side on her birthday—not you."

The message was clear: Who do you think you are? Just because you've finally seen the light, doesn't mean Elissa is going *to* listen to you now.

If you keep trying to force your way in, you'll end up as nothing more than a stranger.

Frank seemed shaken, his tightly clenched fists easing minutely as his gaze swept over the three of them. "You're all celebrating with her?"

"Of course." Tanya slipped an arm around Elissa's shoulders and flashed a knowing smile. "Elissa knows how to draw boundaries. Cliff is just an old friend from college—why would she spend her birthday with him

alone?"

Unlike *you*, she thought, who used to sneak off at every opportunity with your sister-in-law, celebrating every holiday together. Even your own anniversary—you would've spent it with her if you could.

Frank wasn't stupid; he caught the undertone in Tanya's words. But as Elissa's closest friend, Tanya was simply pointing out all the foolish things he'd done in the past.

He *could* only look at Elissa, exhaling a shaky breath. "Then... I'll head home and wait for you."

Maybe he was afraid of hearing another rejection, or maybe he was just used to making decisions for her. Whatever the case, he didn't wait for

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Elissa to respond—he simply turned on his heel and walked away.

Tanya ruffled Elissa's hair. "Come on, don't let someone unimportant ruin your birthday."

Elissa managed a small smile. "Weren't we supposed to meet at the restaurant? What are you doing here?"

"Picking up the birthday girl after work—what better way to show my sincerity?"

Tanya tugged her toward the car. "Just leave your car here. I'll drop you at the clinic tomorrow morning on my way to work."

With that, the three of them piled into the car.

At the restaurant, a server led them to a private booth. It wasn't *one* of those stuffy, fully enclosed rooms, just a cozy spot sectioned off with elegant screens—private enough to feel comfortable, but not overly formal.

Cliff had taken care of the reservation, but left the ordering to Elissa and Tanya.

Elissa was hopeless at choosing dishes; she wanted to try everything, so Tanya inevitably took charge of the menu.

While Tanya was busy studying the options, Elissa chatted with Cliff about the latest in pharmaceutical research.

None of the three noticed the table just beyond the screens, where a trio of men sat casting glances in their direction. One of them, Evan, was hunched over his plate, frowning as he ate.

“Grandpa, Mr. Rex, what’s with this place? The portions are so tiny, they wouldn’t fill a mouse. Why do you guys always want to eat here?” he grumbled through a mouthful.

Ian reached over and patted his head. “Eat up, kid. That’s all you need to worry about.”

How could someone manage to get so much water in his brain? And with

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a head that size, there’s room for plenty.

Impressive, really.

Rex shot Rowan a sideways look. “If you’ve got the time to hang around here, why didn’t you invite Elissa to celebrate her birthday with you?”

Rowan didn’t even glance his way, his tone icy. “I’m not the most important person in her life anymore.”

Going over would only make things worse.

“Then who is?” Rex asked, curiosity piqued. He glanced over at Elissa and the gentle, well-dressed Cliff beside her. “Cliff?”

Rowan bristled, his words barbed. “No, it’s the ex you’d give anything to win back.”

Rex wasn’t fazed in the slightest. He shot back without missing a beat, “Well, if that’s the case, you’re no match for Tanya Foster. She’s been by Elissa’s side longer than you ever were.”

He smirked. “And what, you think you could win Elissa over?”

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator - Lullaby 290[729 words]

Rowan finally glanced his way and spoke, his tone almost lazy. “By the time Tanya Foster’s birthday comes around, you probably won’t even get to see her face.”

At least, for now, he still lived across the hall from Elissa.

Over at their table, the mood couldn’t have been more different from the gloomy tension elsewhere. As the last of the dishes arrived, Cliff poured fruit beer for the two women, and the three of them clinked their bottles

in a spontaneous toast.

“Happy birthday!” Cliff and Tanya Foster said in unison.

“Thank you!” Elissa’s smile lit up the room as she tipped her head back and took a generous swig, the frustration from earlier outside the office melting away.

Cliff handed her a gift bag. “Birthday present. Hope you like it.”

He always put real thought into his gifts. Tanya Foster, half teasing and half genuinely curious, peeked over. “What did you go for this year? Don’t you dare outshine my gift.”

“Anya’s new song. The demo.” Cliff grinned, then turned to Elissa, his voice warm and smooth. “It won’t be officially released until next month. You’re the very first person who gets to hear it.”

Anya was the singer Elissa had adored for years—now a superstar whose concert tickets sold out in seconds.

Tanya Foster threw up her hands in mock defeat. “That’s not even fair! You really know how to pull out all the stops.”

She couldn’t even be mad about it. After all, Cliff was the heir to Riley Pharmaceuticals; it made sense he’d have connections in the entertainment world.

Elissa's eyes sparkled. She accepted the gift with both hands and set it carefully on her lap like a treasure, her grin stretching ear to ear. "Thank

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you, Cliff. This isn't just something I like—it's something I absolutely love."

The three of them were so happy that the meal lingered on far longer than planned.

Luckily, the fruit beer was mild; by the time they left the restaurant, Elissa felt only slightly lightheaded, nothing more.

Cliff, ever the gentleman, didn't want the two women to go home alone after drinking. He called a driver for them and accompanied them back to Vistapeak Gardens, only leaving after seeing them safely into the elevator.

Inside, Elissa carried her gift in one hand and looped her other arm through Tanya Foster's, resting her head on her friend's shoulder. She couldn't wait to get home and play Anya's new song.

But as soon as they stepped out of the elevator, a large hand reached out and pulled her aside.

Startled, Elissa's nerves tensed—until a familiar, woodsy scent she'd known since childhood drifted into her senses, instantly putting her at

ease.

Her cheeks, already flushed pink from the alcohol, grew warmer as she looked up at the man beside her. "What are you doing?"

"Your best friend and your old classmate have both celebrated your birthday with you." Rowan's dark eyes locked onto hers, as if trying to judge just how much she'd had to drink. His strong hand never left her arm. "Don't you think it's my turn now?"

Tanya Foster, hearing the unmistakable jealousy in his voice, wasted no time. She plucked the gift bag from Elissa's hand. "I'll take this for you. Don't be long, okay?"

Without waiting for a reply, she strode down the hall, unlocked the door, and disappeared inside—all in one smooth motion.

Downstairs, the living room was nearly pitch-black, lit only by a few scattered points of light from the skyscrapers outside.

Frank sat slumped on the sofa, staring at the cake *box on* the coffee table, his eyes bleak and hollow.

For a fleeting moment, he felt a strange kinship with the Elissa of the past. On nights like this, had she sat here too, waiting all alone for him to come home?

He had no idea how long he sat like that before the quiet thud of high heels sounded from upstairs. A ripple of hope stirred in his stagnant gaze; he jumped to his feet.

When Tanya Foster heard the knock, she was surprised—it hadn't been long at all.

She scrambled up from the couch and hurried to answer the door. "Back already—"

"Where's Elissa?" Frank's eyes swept past her, scanning the apartment. The storm brewing behind them was impossible to miss. "She's not

home?"

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator - Lullaby 291[644 words]

Tanya Foster couldn't shake the feeling that this man had lost his mind.

The divorce was final, yet he still acted like the wounded husband, playing out some melodramatic scene of deep devotion.

The wine at dinner had barely affected her; to Tanya, it might as well have been fruit juice. Her mind was clear and quick, her expression as calm as ever. "There was an emergency at the lab. She rushed over."

If you put aside the occasional teasing, in Tanya's eyes, Elissa and Rowan's relationship was—at best—Rowan looking out for Elissa for nine years. They'd grown up together, supporting each other along the way.

But not everyone saw it that way. And if the wrong person heard about it at the wrong time, it would be prime fodder for gossip.

Especially Frank, the ex-husband.

Frank narrowed his eyes, though his face remained as composed and gentlemanly as ever. "Alright. Sorry to trouble you."

With that, he turned and walked away—calm on the surface—but headed straight for the underground parking lot.

He sped off, driving towards the research institute.

Even though Tanya Foster had played her part flawlessly, something still didn't sit right with him. His instincts screamed that something was off.

He needed to know exactly where his little Elissa was, what she was doing, and, most importantly, who she was with.

Murphy Group had security on duty around the clock.

At night, patrols were even stricter to prevent anyone from sneaking in and causing trouble when most employees were gone.

Especially now, with the R&D department's latest project—the higher-ups had made it crystal clear: this was the top priority, and nothing could be allowed to go wrong.

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So, as soon as Frank's car pulled up to the gate, a guard stopped him. "Can I help you, sir?"

"I'm here to see someone," Frank replied.

"Who? Which department?"

"The R&D department. Elissa."

"R&D... One moment, please."

The guard radioed a colleague and, after a brief exchange, turned back to Frank. "There are people working late in R&D, but no one's seen Ms. Drummond. Maybe try calling her again?"

Frank's jaw tightened, his tone turning cold. "Understood."

He got back in the car and, without hesitation, made a call. "Find out where Cliff lives."

Moments later, a text popped up on his phone—an address in a neighborhood not far from Vistapeak Gardens.

Frank's eyes darkened with anger. He drove straight there.

It wasn't terribly late, and plenty of apartment windows were still lit up when he arrived.

Frank got out of the car and, glancing up, immediately spotted the window that matched Cliff's address—a wide floor-to-ceiling pane, light filtering through sheer curtains. He could make out only shadows inside.

There was just one tall man moving about.

Frank was about to let out a breath of relief—until he saw a woman suddenly rush over and throw her arms around the man from behind.

It felt as if a sharp knife had plunged right into Frank's chest, making him double over with pain.

Before coming here, Frank had told himself that if he saw anything suspicious, he'd march upstairs, knock on the door, and bring Elissa home.

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But now, his legs felt weighed down with lead. He couldn't move an inch.

As if, so long as he didn't witness it with his own eyes, none of it was real.

Elissa stepped through the door and immediately noticed the birthday cake sitting on the dining table.

Honestly, she was a little surprised that Rowan had remembered her birthday. It had been eight years since they'd last celebrated together.

Forgetting seemed perfectly normal.

Rowan stared at the cake, lost in thought, then opened the shoe cabinet and set out a pair of slippers for her. His voice was gentle and low. "Not in the mood for cake anymore?"

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A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator - Lullaby 292[638 words]

Elissa shook herself from her thoughts, changed her shoes, and walked over to the dining table. A frown creased her brow as she glanced back at the man behind her. "Which bakery did you get the cake from?"

She was surprised Rowan even remembered her birthday. Now, she was even more surprised he'd managed to find a baker with such

questionable skills.

The cartoon character she loved—Doraemon—was so misshapen, it could probably be renamed “Doraemon Gone Wrong.”

Rowan caught her expression, then glanced at the cake. “You don’t like how it looks?”

It never crossed Elissa’s mind that he might have made it himself, so she replied honestly, “It’s a bit ugly. Next time, pick a different bakery.”

Rowan’s brows twitched. He cleared his throat, nodded seriously, and said, “Mm, maybe it got ruined on the way here. Make your wish first.”

There was something familiar about the way he said it.

She hesitated, then asked slowly, “Wait... did you make this cake yourself?”

Rowan struck a match, lighting the candles one by one with his long, deft fingers. At her question, his movements faltered for a split second. Just as he flicked out the match, his phone rang in his pocket.

He slipped out to the balcony, answering with his usual cool detachment. “Speak.”

“Boss,” came Ian’s voice on the other end.

He knew this wasn’t the best time to call, but the news was too important to wait. He kept it brief: “We’ve got the results you asked for. Miss Elissa and Frank... they’re officially divorced.”

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“The Atwater family’s been keeping it under wraps, probably worried about their stock price or something, so it’s taken us a few days to confirm. But the paperwork went through before the holidays. Miss Elissa—and Mrs. Garrett—have been telling the truth all along.”

By “Mrs. Garrett,” Ian meant Janice Garrett, not Rowan’s own grandmother.

Elissa couldn't hear who Rowan was talking to, nor could she catch any of the conversation. All she saw was Rowan's dark, intense gaze suddenly fixed on her, his eyes burning with a storm of emotion.

But when he hung up and strode back toward her, all that was left was a reckless, unguarded relief.

Sensing the sudden shift in his mood, Elissa felt a flicker of unease. "Are we still making a wish?"

Without answering, Rowan reached over and flipped off the dining room lights, crossing the space to her in three long strides. The candle flames

danced in his wake.

In the next instant, he caught her by the waist and lifted her up onto the table, his voice rough and low. "Make one."

But he didn't give her the chance. Instead, he bent down and caught her lips in a fierce, unyielding kiss.

He gave her no space to resist, overwhelming her with the urgency of his touch.

This time, even his breath was scorching.

His hand pressed against her waist, the heat of his palm searing through the thin fabric, sending shivers down her spine. The raw intensity of his kiss left her reeling, just a little bit scared. She struggled, her words muffled as she tried to speak, "Wait-weren't we making a wish?"

Rowan ignored her. One arm locked around her waist, the other cradled the back of her head, holding her in place.

They didn't separate until they were both breathless, hearts pounding out

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of sync.

Only then did he break away, resting his forehead against hers, as if he couldn't bear to let go. He brushed a soft kiss to the corner of her mouth. As he lingered there, Rowan

suddenly reached out and snuffed out the candles on the cake. Then, without another word, he scooped Elissa into his arms and carried her straight toward the bedroom.

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A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator - Lullaby 293[677 words]

Chapter 293

Even with Rowan's steady hand supporting her, Elissa couldn't shake the dizzying sense of insecurity that came from being lifted so effortlessly into his arms. Instinctively, her legs tightened around his waist, searching for any anchor.

Something was shifting, and not for the better. She could feel it—like the pressure in the air before a storm.

It all started with that phone call Rowan had answered just moments before.

Even now, the aftershocks of his mood pulsed through the room; Elissa could sense he hadn't quite let go of whatever had unsettled him.

But Rowan didn't give her time to dwell. With his long strides—deliberate and unhurried—he carried her across the room and pressed her down onto the soft expanse of the king-sized bed.

Elissa's breath caught, her lashes fluttering with nervous anticipation.

The mattress cradled her back, while above her, Rowan's eyes burned a feverish red, his chest rising and falling with heavy, restrained breaths.

She licked her lips, her voice barely a whisper. "Are... are we doing this now?"

From the moment she'd signed that agreement, she never truly believed she'd escape this moment.

Rowan never looked away, not even for a second.

Her lips, still glistening from his earlier kiss, trembled; her clear eyes shone with uncertainty and a touch of fear, betraying a naivety that hadn't been touched by experience.

Desire flickered in Rowan's gaze, dark and unyielding. His body was taut with restraint, but somehow he managed to pull back, propping himself up with one elbow at her side while his other hand brushed gently across her brow.

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Chapter 293

When he spoke, his voice sounded rough, like gravel underfoot.

"How long did you plan to keep the divorce from me?"

Elissa blinked, stunned by the sudden turn in conversation.

She truly hadn't intended to tell him at first. Part of her had been clinging to a grudge—a bitterness that had lasted eight years, shattering her trust and leaving her terrified to let anyone in again.

But the last time, in that private booth at Cloud Peak Club, the moment she'd told everyone she and Frank were over, she'd stopped trying to hide it from Rowan. There was no point in pretending anymore.

As Rowan's touch lingered on her cheek, featherlight and electric, Elissa felt her whole body react. Her voice came out softer than she intended. "I did want to keep it from you, at first. But not anymore..."

She thought, What's the use in hiding it? He can think whatever he wants. I'll accept it. After all, it was my own mistake for trusting the wrong

person.

But for Rowan, the meaning ran deeper.

His Elissa was finally starting to be honest with him again—like she once was. Maybe, just maybe, she was learning to trust him anew. If he was careful, patient, perhaps he'd become her most important person again.

This realization sent a surge of longing through him, dark and overwhelming, tearing through the last threads of his composure. He didn't want to hold back anymore—he couldn't.

He leaned down and kissed her again.

This kiss wasn't as rough as the one in the restaurant earlier, but for Elissa, it was almost too much. Rowan didn't give her a chance to breathe; his mouth devoured hers until her gasps spilled from between her lips. One hand tangled in her hair, the other slid beneath her dress, callused fingers grazing the sensitive skin of her thigh.

Just when Elissa thought he might stop, Rowan only grew bolder. He was nothing like the man in that club's private booth—there was no restraint

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now, only hunger.

A tidal wave of unfamiliar sensations crashed over her. For the first time, Elissa realized her body was no longer obeying her thoughts—she was helpless, swept along by the intensity of his touch, her mind unraveling with every caress.

At last, when Rowan finally let her lips go, Elissa could barely catch her breath. Her voice, raw and trembling, called out his name. “Rowan...”

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A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator - Lullaby 294[694 words]

The unfamiliar sensation scared her more than she'd expected.

But in the next instant, she bit down hard on her lower lip, swallowing every word before it could escape.

With her gaze lowered, she watched his movements, disbelief flooding her eyes. Then, suddenly, his kiss tilted her head back without her even realizing it.

In the dim light, she looked more beautiful than ever, almost ethereal.

Rowan glanced up at her, and in that moment, all his self-control crumbled.

This... was so much harder than he'd imagined.

Seeing her wince with pain, Rowan hesitated for a split second. He was about to stop when he noticed a tear slipping from the corner of her eye. Something about that sight hit him hard, and his brow furrowed deeply.

Elissa sensed his hesitation, coupled with that strange, unfamiliar feeling, and froze.

She didn't have any real experience with this sort of thing.

But as a doctor, she certainly wasn't lacking in theory.

It didn't take her long to figure out what was happening.

She steadied herself, tamped down her own surprise, and lifted her gaze to the man beside her. He looked as dark and stormy as midnight, but couldn't quite meet her eyes. Elissa knew this was a matter of pride for any man, so she spoke gently, careful not to bruise his ego:

"Um, you know, most **men** start to have these issues after thirty. If you're really worried, I could run a quick checkup for you. If there is a problem, it's nothing a few days of medication wouldn't fix..."

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she'd seen plenty of cases like this before. At the clinic, men came in for fertility concerns all the time, some single, some married, some just anxious about their own health

Whatever Rowan's issue was, it couldn't be serious.

At least, up until now, she'd never noticed any sign that he might have a problem

Rowan's face darkened even more at her words. He resisted the urge to silence her with a kiss and instead gave her a light pat on the rear, "Go take a shower, okay?"

"Alright..."

Elissa knew it was safer to say less at a time like this, so she slipped off to the bathroom.

By the time she finished and emerged, Rowan had already stripped the bed and replaced the sheets, making the place look as neat and inviting as it had before,

It was so like him—always composed, always in control. When their eyes met, Rowan's gaze was calm once more. He just reached out and drew her into his arms,

He held her as they drifted off to sleep,

Unruffled, as if nothing unusual had happened at all.

Maybe it was the sheer exhaustion, but Elissa was out in minutes, her breathing soft and even.

Beside her, Rowan's hand rested on her waist. When he was sure she was asleep, he felt around for his phone on the nightstand. In the pitch dark, he hesitated, then quietly typed in a search:

-Is it normal for a man to finish early his first time?

The next morning, when Elissa opened her eyes, the bed beside her was empty,

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She heard soft footsteps and the clatter of something falling in the bathroom.

When she walked over, she saw Rowan calmly pick up a glass from the floor and set it back next to another one—a pale pink tumbler, pressed right up against his.

He cleared his throat, as if nothing had happened. “Your birthday present’s on the coffee table.”

“Okay.”

She vaguely remembered seeing a box there last night.

Elissa walked out, opened the box, and when she saw the pair of beautiful, finely crafted high heels inside, she froze, completely still for several long moments.

This memory was so vivid.

The last birthday Rowan had spent with her was her sixteenth. She'd begged him for a pair of high heels.

Rowan refused, promising to get her a pair when she turned eighteen.

He'd said she was still too young, her bones still growing, and that high heels weren't good for her yet.

But when she turned eighteen, he was already gone.

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator - Lullaby 295[447 words]

Chapter 295

She'd barely squeezed toothpaste onto her brush when Tanya burst into the bathroom, eyes wide with disbelief. "Elissa, this is a property deed. The place is in your name."

Elissa froze, toothbrush halfway to her mouth.

"Did Rowan give you this?" Tanya asked, not really surprised.

Elissa shook her head, hesitated, then said, "It must've been Frank."

There was no one else it could be.

On the way to the clinic, they hit a stretch of traffic so bad it felt like the street had been sedated-absolutely paralyzed.

Tanya, unbothered by road rage, took advantage of the standstill to shoot Elissa a mischievous look. "So... last night, did you two actually go all the way, or just up to that point?"

Elissa's ears went pink. She avoided Tanya's gaze, her voice dropping. "Sort of... halfway."

Tanya blinked, puzzled. "What does halfway mean?"

With her closest friend beside her, Elissa tried to swallow her embarrassment. "It... um, didn't even really get started before it was

over."

Tanya's eyes went comically wide. "He finished already?"

Sharp as ever.

Seeing Elissa drop her head even lower, Tanya tried to hold it together, but finally had to turn away and bite her lip to stifle her laughter-her shoulders were shaking with the effort.

Elissa sighed, half-exasperated, half-amused. "Go ahead and laugh if you

want.”

Last night...

Honestly, she’d nearly lost it herself. At one point, she’d even thought about telling Rowan their little contract could go in the trash. It was

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pointless.

“Seriously?” Tanya turned back, barely getting the word out before she caught Elissa’s resigned expression and lost it completely. “Oh my God, hahahaha!”

Who could blame her?

Mr. Murphy, the famously unflappable tycoon, a kingpin in the world of money and power—brought down by bedroom antics.

But then, something seemed to cross Tanya’s mind, and her laughter faded.

She scratched her nose, awkwardly. “So, tell me, do you think Rowan seems... well, unhealthy? You know, that way?”

She trusted Elissa’s medical expertise. You didn’t need to take a pulse; observation and listening were just as important in diagnosing someone. Elissa shook her head. “No, he seems perfectly healthy. I really don’t think

that’s the issue.”

If anything, she was starting to doubt herself.

“Then...” Tanya hesitated, “I guess he’s just never been with a woman before. Got a little too excited. Honestly, I’m shocked—he’s so... devoted.” In their world, faithful men were rare enough, let alone someone who’d kept himself untouched.

Meanwhile, in his study across town, the man who’d managed thirty years of abstinence sat at his desk, his expression as serious as if he were negotiating a million-dollar deal.

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A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator - Lullaby 296[716 words]

Long, slender fingers scrolled slowly down the tablet screen.

“I think that’s normal. Back when my wife and I first started dating, I could barely last through kissing before I was done. Now that we’re married, I can go at least half an hour each time.”

“Normal? Seriously? The first time I hooked up with a random girl at a bar, I went for over twenty minutes, no problem.”

“Idiot upstairs, you really think a one-night stand and being with *someone* you love are the same? The more you care about a girl, the easier it is to get overstimulated. Especially for those late-bloomers who didn’t lose their virginity till, like, forty.”

“That’s hilarious. Stop making excuses for your premature finish, seriously. What excuse are you going to use if you’re still like that the second time around?”

“If you’re not confident, just take it slow. Wait till you’re ready before going all in.”

Rowan’s brow twitched. He’d just had a full check-up this year—every health marker was perfect. Still, he turned back to the search bar and typed out another question.

-If you finish too soon, how can you improve?

When Rex arrived at Rivercross Residence, he only found Ian, Evan, and a few others hanging out on the first floor.

He paused. “Rowan’s in the study?”

“Gym. Working out.” Evan answered first, pointing upstairs with a shrug. “Don’t know what’s up with him, but he’s been at it for two hours straight without a break.”

Usually, the boss worked out *for* an hour a day—never this long, never this intense.

Rex raised an eyebrow. “What, is he going for the bodybuilder look now?”

Elissa stepped out of the car at the clinic and reminded Tanya Foster to be careful before hurrying

inside.

The office door was open. She assumed it was just the cleaning crew tidying up.

But as she walked in, a boy with a **head** of shaggy hair pounced on her. His voice was mid-change, deep and rough. “Elissa! Did you miss me?”

Elissa couldn’t help but laugh. She hugged him lightly, ruffling his messy hair. “When did you get

back?”

“Just two days ago. He was at my house last night, wouldn’t leave me alone till I promised to bring him to see *you* today.” Cliff walked in, grinning, and shot his nephew a sideways look. “If you’re this free, why not get that mop of hair cut? Your mom won’t stop nagging me about it.”

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Ever since the kid went abroad with his dad a few years ago, his hair had only gotten longer.

Bentley pouted, tugging on Elissa’s sleeve for help. “Elissa, don’t let him boss me around. He’s just like my mom—kept lecturing me all night.”

Cliff corrected him, “It’s ‘Aunt,’ not ‘Elissa.’ Where’s your manners?”

Bentley grinned. “Then I’ll just call her ‘Sis.’ Mom said all the single women can be called ‘Sis’ by default.”

“Alright,” Cliff checked the time and smiled. “Your ‘sister’ has work now. Go hang out in my office and let her do her job.”

Bentley was good-natured and cheerful. He let go of Elissa’s shoulder. “Sis, I’ll wait outside. When you’re done, let’s grab lunch together, okay?”

“Sounds good.” Elissa smiled and agreed.

The morning was a steady stream of patients.

Remembering her promise to have lunch with Bentley, Elissa didn’t book too many extra appointments, focusing on those who had come from out of town. The locals, she scheduled for the next few days instead.

When her shift ended, both Cliff and Bentley were waiting outside her office.

Since Bentley hadn't been back in a while, they decided to have lunch at Virtue Hall, a place known for its classic comfort food.

As the three of them approached the restaurant, they nearly collided with another group just arriving.

At the head of the group was Rowan, dressed sharply in a tailored suit, quietly conversing with a middle-aged man beside him. He radiated authority.

Lorraine followed behind, clutching a folder.

On Rowan's other side was a young woman in her early twenties, beaming as she stayed close to his

side.

Elissa looked away, ready to enter the restaurant with Cliff and Bentley, when a calm, deep voice called out behind her.

"Little Nine, come here for a moment."

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator - Lullaby 297[673 words]

Chapter 297

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Elissa paused, letting Cliff and the others head in first before she turned toward Rowan and his

group.

Rowan stepped forward, putting some space between himself and the others, and reached out to gently ruffle her hair. "Out for lunch with Mr. Cliff and the gang?"

Elissa nodded. "Yeah."

"Mr. Carter-" Rowan turned his head to glance at the middle-aged man beside him, his expression calm. "Let me introduce you. This is my girlfriend, Elissa."

Elissa froze, startled. When she looked up and met Rowan's steady gaze, her heart skipped for reasons she couldn't explain.

Since when was she his girlfriend?

Lorraine had told her he already had someone he liked.

The middle-aged man was clearly surprised, but quickly recovered, smiling warmly. “Well, Mr. Murphy and Ms. Drummond look like a match made in heaven. You two seem perfect for each other. Is there good news on the way?”

The midday sun was bright, almost blinding, but Elissa could still make out the slight curve of a smile at Rowan’s lips.

Rowan’s tone was unusually relaxed. “Very soon.”

For a moment, it seemed as if they really were just an ordinary couple in love.

Elissa tried to ignore the rush of emotion inside her. She couldn’t quite figure out what Rowan was up to, but she played along anyway, giving him a small, cooperative smile. “Well, I’ll leave you all to chat. I’m heading in.”

“Go on.” Rowan tapped her gently on the head, chin lifting slightly.

Elissa made her way into the restaurant, found the private room where Cliff and the others were waiting, and had just sat down when Lorraine’s texts popped up.

That girl next to Mr. Murphy? She’s Mr. Carter’s daughter.

Mr. Carter had heard Mr. Murphy was single, so he’d planned to introduce his daughter to him today. Looks like Rowan shut that down before he even got the chance.

Elissa felt a question rising in her gut.

You said Rowan likes someone. Do I know her?

Something about all of this felt off.

If Lorraine knew Rowan liked someone, why had she kept feeding Elissa these hints? After all, her relationship with Rowan wasn’t exactly innocent.

They might be friends now, but she was also Rowan’s assistant.

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And then there was Rowan's behavior outside the door.

Unless—the girl Rowan liked was...

You do.

If you get the chance, sneak a look at his wallet.

Lorraine was supposed to be stuck entertaining clients with Rowan, yet she still replied instantly.

Elissa lowered her eyes, put her phone away, and just as she did, Bentley piped up curiously, "Hey, Elissa, that guy at the door—was he your boyfriend?"

Elissa let out a quiet laugh. "No."

She wasn't about to let herself fall into wishful thinking again.

She wasn't ready to get hurt like that a second time.

Across the table, Cliff—who'd looked a little down just a moment ago—brightened at her response, and his nephew shot him a look, chin raised as if asking for praise.

Cliff chuckled, ignoring him, and turned to Elissa. "We've already ordered. Take a look and see if there's anything you want to add."

Elissa glanced at the menu and smiled, shaking her head. "No need. These are all my favorites."

"See?" Bentley jumped in, feigning indignation. "Elissa, I'm telling you, my uncle totally plays favorites. He remembers everything you like, but forgets all about me. I had to order the iced clams myself."

Elissa's brows twitched in amusement, and she caught Cliff's eye.

Cliff just smiled, warm as sunshine. "Well, you're always overseas and your tastes keep changing. Who can keep up?"

Bentley grinned. "Well, I'm not leaving this time. You better remember what I like from now on."

"Deal," Cliff agreed without hesitation.

Elissa looked at him, surprised. "You're not heading abroad again after this?"

“Nope.” Cliff glanced at Bentley, and didn’t bother hiding the truth. “My sister and her husband are getting a divorce. He’ll be staying here with her from now on.”

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator - Lullaby 298[695 words]

Elissa understood immediately.

She’d heard Cliff mention it a couple of years ago—his sister and brother-in-law’s marriage had been on the rocks for some time.

Most likely, they’d only waited this long to divorce for the sake of their child.

After dinner, they dropped Bentley off at home first, then Cliff and Elissa headed to the research institute together.

No sooner had they stepped into the lab than Zachary Jones greeted them, face beaming. “We did it! Ms. Drummond, Mr. Cliff, your latest experimental data is flawless!”

As he spoke, he handed the printouts to Elissa.

Beside him, Xavier could barely contain his excitement. “Ms. Drummond, you two are amazing!”

Elissa took the papers, scanned the results, and felt an immense weight lift from her mind.

This put her one major step closer to the outcome she’d been working toward.

The thought that, in the near future, she might truly develop this drug—might actually see her dream become reality—filled her with a joy she’d never felt before.

When she dove back into her research, she did so with newfound energy.

She needed to move faster.

Even faster.

Cliff noticed her urgency and tried to reassure her. “Don’t rush, Elissa. One step at a time. We’ll get there, I promise.”

“Alright!”

Elissa nodded emphatically.

For days on end, Elissa spent nearly all her time in the lab, only leaving for her clinic shifts and the occasional nap at home.

There had been a time when she'd worried this drug might be nothing more than an impossible

dream,

But now, the data in her hands told her otherwise.

She was close to a breakthrough.

She was close to fulfilling the wish her parents had once cherished: to help people, to save as many lives as possible.

When she was little, she used to envy other kids whose parents were always around. Her own parents were constantly busy, hardly ever home.

She'd even thrown tantrums about it, not understanding why they couldn't stay with her.

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It was her mother who would scoop her up, soothing her with gentle pats on the back. "Little Nine, do you *know* how many people your dad and I can save every time we succeed at our work?"

"How many?"

"A lot."

In her memory, her mother was always so gentle at home. "A lot of people, sweetheart. And behind them, so many families."

After that, Elissa never complained again.

She ate her meals, slept well, and went off to preschool without causing any trouble. She didn't want her parents to worry about her.

Because her mom and dad weren't just her parents—they were heroes.

And this drug... it wouldn't just save other people's bodies and families.

It could save her own life, too.

It was past eleven at night.

Suddenly, the lab door swung open.

Elissa rolled her stiff neck and glanced back—just in time to see Rowan striding toward her.

She froze for a second. “What are you doing here?”

“Am I not allowed?”

Rowan looked down, noticing the dark circles under her eyes. A frown creased his brow. “Are you developing this drug because you want to use it on yourself someday?”

“Huh?”

“Sleep deprivation increases your risk of cancer. You’re a doctor—you should know that.”

Elissa was momentarily speechless.

Men can be so blunt.

She quickly wrapped up what she was doing and reached for her coat and bag, only to find Rowan already holding them.

A random word popped into her mind—*husband material*.

As she walked over, Rowan took her hand just like he used to when they were kids and he’d pick her up from Mr. Blaine’s house. “Come on, let’s get you home and into bed.”

“Rowan,”

Elissa let him lead her into the elevator, then suddenly remembered something. “You brought your wallet, right?”

Rowan raised an eyebrow. “Why? Planning to mug me?”

“I need to borrow it.”

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Elissa looked up at him with clear, earnest eyes, hand outstretched.

He smiled, the barest hint of amusement in his expression, and pulled his wallet from his pocket, dropping it into her palm. “Take what you want. It’s all yours.”

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator - Lullaby 299[688 words]

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Chapter 299

After handing her the wallet, Rowan slipped one hand casually into his pocket. His expression was calm and untroubled, showing not the slightest hint of guilt—just the same cool demeanor he always

wore.

Elissa hesitated for a moment. But since she’d already asked for it, she figured she might as well satisfy her curiosity, no matter what she found inside.

Her lips twitched when she opened the wallet and saw how empty it was—not a bill in sight, cleaner than a college student’s bank account.

Still under Rowan’s watchful gaze, she slid her slender fingers into a hidden compartment and deftly pulled out a photograph.

There it was—the photo Lorraine had mentioned, the one Rowan kept tucked away as if it were a secret treasure. And now, it was right in front of Elissa.

She’d seen this coming, really.

That was the whole reason she’d asked for his wallet in the first place—to confirm what she already suspected.

But still, looking at the photo—the one of herself grinning boldly at the camera, eyes impossibly bright—Elissa felt her whole body go rigid.

Because she knew better than anyone.

Back then, she hadn’t been looking at the camera. She’d been looking at the person behind it.

At Rowan.

All those years she'd spent moving forward on her own, careful and guarded, had faded so many things to gray. But some memories, once triggered, came flooding back with a force that left her breathless.

Moments that belonged to them. The birthday that year—it all played out in her mind, frame by frame, like a slow-motion film.

She *remembered* standing in front of the cake, eyes squeezed shut, making a wish out loud to the heavens: “Elissa wishes she’ll never have to be apart from Rowan.”

She even remembered the dazed look in Rowan’s eyes when she opened hers.

At the time, Elissa thought he was moved, that he’d been wishing for the exact same thing.

That they were inseparable.

Looking back, she realized he’d probably been laughing at her for being such a fool.

While she was dreaming about forever, he was probably already planning how to shake off the clingy girl who wouldn’t let go.

Not long after her birthday, he’d packed her off to his grandmother’s house without a word of explanation.

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Chapter 299

He didn’t even bother to say goodbye.

And now? Was this photo, stuffed in his wallet, supposed to magically wipe away everything that had happened?

Rowan looked down. The girl in front of him was frozen, her ponytail neat and high, exposing the delicate curve of her neck and shoulders. Her long lashes cast shadows over her eyes, hiding whatever she was feeling.

But under the harsh elevator lights, the color was draining from her face, second by second.

Rowan’s gaze darkened. He was about to speak when Elissa suddenly looked up, her clear eyes locking onto his.

“Rowan, you don’t have some secret crush on me, do you?”

Blunt. Direct. The kind of question that left nowhere to hide.

Rowan saw how pale she was and swallowed whatever he’d been about to say. The corner of his mouth lifted in a wry smile. “Actually, I’m secretly in love with Max.”

He needed to be patient with this, he reminded himself.

Because if he pushed too hard, Elissa’s stubborn streak would only make her pull away from him.

Elissa blinked, then glanced down at the photo again.

Only now did she notice the little dog next to her in the picture, sitting perfectly still for the camera.

Max—her birthday present from Rowan that year.

While she was distracted, Rowan swiftly took the photo back and slipped it into the wallet’s hidden pocket as if it were something precious. His tone was light, almost casual: “That was the day Max first came home. Had to keep a memento.”

Elissa’s tense posture finally softened. Her voice was cool and even. “Then maybe you should cut my

half out of it.”

“No way.”

Rowan’s answer was firm, almost self-assured. “That’s the best picture I’ve ever taken. The angle, the composition—everything’s perfect.”

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A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator - Lullaby 300[660 words]

From the perspective of death, with such abysmal technique.

All things considered, at least Max looked decent in the photo.

Murphy Manor.

The moment Marcia stepped inside, she was hit by a suffocating sense of gloom.

Or maybe, death itself.

That old witch from the Murphy family had rung her at the crack of dawn, shrill and insistent, summoning her as if she were calling the undertaker.

For all the world, it felt like she was being summoned to a funeral.

No sooner had Marcia set foot in the drawing room than a teacup came hurtling toward her.

She never expected the old woman—surely past menopause by a decade or two—to still have such a temper. She didn't even manage to dodge; the cup struck her square in the face.

Scalding tea poured down her skin, stinging her cheeks and dripping even from her nose, where a few soggy tea leaves clung.

Marcia bit back a scream, her face throbbing from the heat and pain.

"It's that hard to come when I call you?"

Matriarch Paige Murphy's voice was as cold and sharp as a whip, and at once, Marcia swallowed

every retort.

Even if she had to grit her teeth until they broke, she'd swallow her own blood rather than answer back.

Wiping the damp leaves from her face, Marcia forced a deep breath and stepped forward, trying for a contrite smile. "Matriarch Murphy, the butler only just called, and I left right away. It's just—traffic's a nightmare at this hour. That's why I was a little late."

"Enough."

Matriarch Paige Murphy saw right through her. With a chilling laugh, she cut her off. "I didn't call you here to listen to your excuses. I hear you and your little research team have produced nothing for weeks?"

She'd burned through a mountain of money, but the results? Zero,

"Madam—"

Of course Marcia wouldn't admit defeat. She scrambled for explanations. "Drug development takes time, as you know. No one can rush it—sometimes it takes years just for one breakthrough—"

"Hmph."

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11:38

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Matriarch Paige Murphy's eyes were icy, her contempt undisguised. "If you were really doing proper research, why would I bother with you? I could hire anyone—why should I waste time on an incompetent fool like you?"

She'd never had any respect for Marcia.

The woman's husband had barely been in the ground before she'd gotten herself tangled up in a scandal with her brother-in-law. What kind of person does that?

But then again, that was exactly the type she needed.

People with no scruples could be pushed to do anything, if you squeezed them hard enough.

Marcia wasn't stupid. She caught the real meaning behind Matriarch Murphy's words and stepped a little closer. "I'm not sure if you've heard, but Elissa's research has made new progress."

They were close—very close—to a breakthrough.

Matriarch Paige Murphy's brows knit together, suspicion flaring in her eyes. "And where did you hear that?"

Even Karol had been thrown out of the company by Rowan, that ungrateful brat. Yet somehow, Marcia still had her ear to the ground, still knew what was going on in the heart of the research

division.

"Does it matter where I heard it?" Marcia smiled faintly. "The only thing you need to know is, I'll do exactly what I promised you. No half measures."

-To steal every bit of progress Elissa had slaved over for the past year.

As for whether she'd hand it over to this venomous old hag or sell it to someone else—that depended entirely on her mood.

Matriarch Paige Murphy's gaze was sharp and measuring. Finally, her eyes narrowed. "You'd better deliver. If you don't, just wait and see if the Atwater family is willing to protect you."

The look in her eyes sent a chill straight down Marcia's spine.

She *knew* perfectly well: to the Atwaters, who mattered more—a disgraced Mrs. Spencer like her, or their relationship with the Murphys?

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A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator - Lullaby 301[754 words]

Chapter 301

As soon as Marcia Carson slid into the car, she realized her back was drenched in cold sweat.

She wasn't afraid of that old bat.

But deep down, she was terrified of the Murphy family—the family that represented power and wealth in Vistapeak City.

She had to get her hands on whatever Elissa Drummond possessed, *no* matter what.

Even as she drove down the winding road from the estate, Marcia had to pull over, hands still trembling, to send a text.

When she finally returned to the Atwater residence, Carmela took one look at her disheveled state and snapped, "Where'd you rush off to in such a hurry?"

Marcia ruffled Hickey Atwater's hair and muttered, "The Murphys."

"What did they say to you?"

Carmela shot her a sharp glare. "You look like you've been through hell. Tell me you didn't do something stupid to get on the Murphys' bad side?"

If they'd really crossed the Murphys, the Atwater family would be in serious trouble.

“Who did you piss off?”

Just thinking about it made Marcia’s blood boil. “That old woman from the Murphys—she threw something at my face the moment I walked in.”

The woman was completely unhinged.

How Elissa survived under her thumb all these years was beyond comprehension.

Seeing that there was no real feud, Carmela’s tone cooled as she leaned back, arms crossed. “You think the Murphys are so easy to cozy up to? I’ve warned you before—don’t go looking for trouble and end up worse off.”

Marcia gave a cold little laugh. “Mom, you say that as if getting close to the Murphys wouldn’t benefit the Atwaters, too.”

She had a point, and Carmela knew it.

Carmela just sighed, her voice tight. “Of course, it’d be great for us if you succeeded. But remember—if this blows up in your face, don’t expect the Atwaters to shield you.”

If she failed, Marcia’s fate would be grim indeed.

—

Lately, Elissa had been pouring all her energy into research, often working late into the night. As a result, she’d been seeing fewer patients at the clinic.

So when she did show up for consultations, even though she arrived early and started calling names right away, the number of patients seeking extra slots had multiplied several times over.

1/2

11:38

Chapter 301

She had no choice but to prioritize her regulars for walk-in appointments. Just as she was about to finish with her last patient, a knock sounded at her office door.

Elissa looked up to see Lorraine Lynn standing in the doorway and couldn’t help but smile. “What brings you here?”

“I’m here to ask for a little favor, that’s what.”

Lorraine strode in on her heels and dropped her purse onto a chair. “Can you squeeze me in? The nurse at the desk said it’s impossible to get a slot today.”

And she really couldn’t get an appointment.

The prescription Elissa had given her last time worked wonders. Not only was Lorraine sleeping better, but she actually felt more energetic and balanced.

She’d been hoping to come back for another couple rounds of treatment and really get her health on

track.

But getting a slot was impossible!

She’d set alarms, sat by her phone at the exact release time, but the appointments vanished in seconds. Sometimes she didn’t even have time to click before they were all gone.

Who could understand this pain?

She’d never tried online flash sales, but now she finally understood that crushing disappointment.

Out of options, she’d come to ask Elissa for a little backdoor help.

“Of course I can fit you in.”

Elissa’s lips curled into a smile. “Didn’t you say friends are supposed to do each other favors?”

“Absolutely, absolutely.”

Lorraine grinned, reaching out her hand like she was coaxing a little sister. “Take my pulse, quick! Lunch is on me, and you’re not allowed to refuse—I need a chance to pay you back. There’s this place right down the street from your clinic, it’s amazing...”

Elissa reached over to check her pulse, cutting Lorraine off. “Looks like my prescription really did the

trick.”

“What do you mean?” Lorraine asked, genuinely curious. “Did my pulse improve?”

Elissa shook her head. “No, I just noticed you’re way chattier than usual.”

But more talkative was good.

Actually, it was kind of cute.

Lorraine paused, cleared her throat, and managed to regain her usual poise. “I’m only talkative with friends, you know.”

Elissa just raised an eyebrow and said nothing more, focusing on the examination.