

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator

“Yeah, the visa.”

Elissa made something up on the spot. “Tanya Foster invited me to take a trip to Europe. I thought it sounded like a hassle, so I wasn’t interested, but Mom heard about it and said she’d make arrangements for someone to take care of the visa for me.”

No sooner had she finished speaking than her phone chimed.

-A bank notification: five hundred thousand dollars had just been deposited.

Frank didn’t press her any further. He shifted the conversation back to last night. “Weren’t you looking for me about something? What was it again?”

Elissa hesitated for a moment, pressing her lips together. “It was just the visa thing. I figured if you helped, it’d save me some trouble.”

“So, I got back a little too late?”

Frank gave a small, amused laugh, glancing over at the empty gift box on the coffee table. “Was that for me?”

“Mom saw it and liked it, so she took it.”

Elissa shrugged. “If you really want one, I’ll ask Mom to get you another next time.”

Frank nodded, not pushing for details. “If Mom likes it, then let her have it.”

He seemed entirely unbothered.

Just as he’d always been over the past three years of their marriage.

Elissa used to think it was because he was gentle, easygoing—someone who didn’t get upset easily. Only now did she realize **it** was because he just didn’t care.

It didn’t matter to him whether he got the gift or not, whether she was there or not. From the start, he’d always kept his distance.

But now, Elissa found she didn’t mind anymore. She just smiled. “Alright. As long as I don’t have to spend money to buy another one myself, I’m fine.”

“Such a penny-pincher,”

Frank shot her a sidelong look. “I’m not stingier with you than Rowan is, am I?”

Elissa’s fingers absentmindedly traced her palm as she smiled faintly. “You’ve always been generous.”

Growing up, there were plenty of birthdays she’d celebrated with Rowan’s friends.

14:47

When it came time for gifts, Frank always managed to pick just what she wanted.

He was never stingy.

He was a gentleman, always willing to make his friend’s little sister happy.

But that’s all she ever was to him—his friend’s little sister.

Her answer seemed to satisfy Frank. He grinned. “Still got such a temper? Are you still fighting with your brother?”

“I’m not fighting with him.”

Elissa’s voice was calm and cool.

She never had been.

Carmela had left the front door open, letting a cold draft snake through the house. Elissa sniffed, not wanting to continue the conversation. She looked at Frank. “Frank, I’m heading out.”

“Back to the health clinic again?”

Frank didn’t pick up on her tone.

Elissa didn’t bother to explain, just nodded. “Yeah, Cliff said he’s busy today and asked me to help out.”

“Go ahead. Want me to have the driver take you?”

“No, thanks.”

Elissa shook her head. “I can manage on my own.”

She’d gotten used to being on her own a long time ago.

Pulling on her long winter coat, she stepped out onto the icy, slippery ground, sunlight glinting off the frozen surface.

Once she reached her car, Elissa pulled out her phone and transferred the entire five hundred thousand dollars to a charity that supported girls from underprivileged backgrounds, helping them go to school and build a future.

She thought, every girl deserves to have a real life, to stand in the sunlight and live freely.

Not like her.

Never like her.

Frank watched her walk away, a touch of nostalgia in his eyes.

The little girl he once knew was all grown up.

14:47

Edna's anxious voice sounded from behind. "Hey! Careful with that—don't drop it!"

Frank turned to see Edna directing some people as they moved boxes into the backyard.

He walked over, frowning slightly. "What are you moving?"

Edna answered honestly. "No idea. Mrs. Elissa had them packed up and asked me to ship them out for her."

Frank felt something was off. He lifted his chin. "Open one up and take a look."

“Isn’t that a bit much? Mrs. Elissa might get upset if she finds out...”

“Are you listening to me, or to her?”

“Yes, sir.”

Edna knew perfectly well who signed her paychecks. She fetched a pair of scissors and carefully opened a box.

14:47

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator

Chapter 32

She was just about to open the envelope when Frank’s phone rang.

“Let go of me!”

Marcia's panicked voice came through, her cries breaking down into sobs. "Frank! Help me!"

Frank's face turned grim, and without a second's hesitation, he bolted out the door.

Edna stared after him, confused. "Sir, if you don't look at it now, I'll have to send it off straight away..."

"Then send it!" Frank snapped, not even slowing down.

He raced to the hotel, running red lights and barely registering the world outside. When he arrived, he ignored the front desk's protests and sprinted down the hall. One swift kick, and the door burst open.

There was more than one man in the room.

Thankfully, Marcia's clothes were still intact. The moment she saw Frank, she collapsed to the floor, tears streaming down her face.

Frank's expression was terrifying—his eyes bloodshot, barely restrained fury radiating off him in waves.

He grabbed a chair and hurled it at the three men without thinking.

When the chair broke, his fists did the rest.

Every punch landed hard.

Elissa felt a sense of absurdity when she got the call from the police.

Frank, the ever-gentlemanly Frank, had gotten into a fight.

Not just any fight—a three-on-one, and he'd left the other guys thoroughly beaten.

When she arrived at the station, she almost didn't recognize him through the bruises.
“What happened?”

“Elissa, please don't be mad,” Marcia said, her eyes swollen and red. “It's all my fault. I had too much to drink. If Frank hadn't come-”

Elissa got the picture before Marcia finished. A classic tale: a man fighting for a woman's honor.

14:47

Only, the man in question was her husband—in name, at least.

Frank glanced at Elissa, sheepish. “Sorry to trouble you.”

“It’s no trouble,” Elissa replied, brisk as ever, and followed the officer *to* complete the paperwork.

She paid what needed paying, settled the fines, and apologized to the other men’s families—formality after formality.

The officers were taken aback by how calm she was, especially for a wife.

Elissa noticed and, without hesitation, explained, “We’re getting divorced. We just haven’t signed the papers yet.”

The officer was genuinely impressed. “Not many ex-wives would handle it this well.”

Elissa said nothing.

She thought to herself, It's fine. I'm being paid.

This was just business—cleaning up someone else's mess for a fee.

Tanya Foster had driven her here and was waiting outside.

Once it was all squared away, Elissa didn't bother speaking to Frank again. She simply walked out of the station.

The weather had turned since the morning's clear skies. Though it was barely past three, the clouds hung low and heavy, and a cold drizzle soaked the streets. The wind, sharp and relentless, seemed to cut straight through her coat. Elissa felt chilled to the bone.

Frank caught up with her before she reached the car. "Don't let Grandma or the others find out about today."

"Alright," Elissa replied, nodding without hesitation. "I know."

With the Atwater family's wealth and connections, this sort of incident was nothing—they could make it disappear without a trace.

Frank's refusal to involve the family was simple: he didn't want them digging into it, didn't want anyone tracing things back and coming down hard on those responsible.

He wanted to protect Marcia. Elissa understood that perfectly.

Frank's gaze lingered on her for a moment, then he managed a small smile. "Are you angry?"

"No," she answered, calm as ever.

"Really?"

14:47

"Really."

Frank studied her, searching for any hint of resentment. "Let's go. I'll drive you both home."

Both of you.

He'd promised Marcia would move out.

So much for that.

Elissa was quietly glad she'd never once considered trusting him after learning the truth

about him and Marcia.

For her, trust had always been a luxury she couldn't afford.

She'd given Frank one chance. There would never be a second.

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator

Chapter 33

Elissa glanced past Frank to Marcia, who was trailing a step behind him. Her voice was cool and distant. “No, thank you. Tanya Foster’s waiting for me.”

“Elissa-”

Frank finally seemed to sense that something was off. He caught her wrist and said quietly, “Wait a second.”

Elissa tried to pull away, but he didn’t budge. Instead, he turned to Marcia. “Go wait in the car. I’ll be there in a minute.”

Marcia managed a polite enough smile, but her hands clenched tight at her sides. Before getting in the car, she shot Elissa a glare, making her annoyance all too clear.

Frank’s thumb moved in slow circles against the inside of Elissa’s wrist as if he were still weighing his words. “About what happened at the hospital with Marcia—she’s agreed not to press charges. She says she’s willing to let it go. I promised her we’d postpone moving

out for now.”

It was supposed to sound like Marcia was being generous, turning the other cheek. But really, Elissa had only given Marcia a taste of her own medicine. And yet Frank acted as if both he and Marcia were doing Elissa a favor, as if they were the ones paying the price for her so-called recklessness.

But the truth was, he'd only agreed to stay for Marcia's sake—the woman he really cared about—not for Elissa. It was as if everything was her fault, and everyone had to clean up after her.

“And what if I'm the one who wants to call the police?” Elissa asked quietly.

“What?”

“I was pushed down a flight of stairs. I cracked my head open, was bleeding everywhere. Am I not allowed to call the police?”

She met his eyes, her gaze steady and calm. “If I'd called the police that day, what would you have done, Frank? Would you have been thinking about me at all? Or would you have just tried to help Marcia cover it up?”

She remembered what she'd overheard on the hospital balcony—how those two words, “clean up,” always seemed to come up. It was almost laughable. She'd been lying there, battered and bleeding, and her husband's first instinct was to worry about Marcia.

Frank's expression flickered, and Elissa didn't miss it. She continued in a level tone, matter-of-fact. "If you wanted to, you'd have found a thousand ways to take care of

14:48

things, no matter who called the police. You always know how to make problems disappear when you want to. The only reason you're staying here isn't *for* me—it's for yourself."

He was the one who wanted this, who relished every minute spent with the woman he truly loved. Why blame her for any of it?

Elissa's five-foot-four frame seemed small next to Frank, but she stood tall, her voice unwavering, simply stating the truth.

Frank couldn't find a single word to argue back. For a moment, he was thrown—this girl who used to be so gentle, so accommodating, was suddenly so sharp, so clear in her words. If it had been anyone else, he might have brushed it off, but looking into Elissa's clear, earnest eyes, he couldn't bring himself to lie.

The rain was coming down harder now. Frank crossed to the car, opened the trunk, and pulled out an umbrella. He walked back and pressed it into her hand.

"Just give me some time. I'll figure out what to do about Marcia."

Elissa knew exactly what she wanted. She just smiled and asked, “And can you really cut things off with her?”

Her relentless honesty seemed to strike a nerve. Frank’s jaw, tightened in frustration. “Elissa, she’s my sister-in-law, the mother of my nephew. How am I supposed to cut her off completely? Not everyone is ”

He stopped, the unfinished sentence hanging in the air.

Not everyone is what?

Elissa’s slender, pale fingers curled around the umbrella handle. Her damp lashes lifted slightly as she spoke, her voice quiet and strained. “Not everyone is a nobody, an orphan with no family, right?”

Frank fell silent. Elissa didn’t bother waiting for his answer. She set the umbrella at his feet, turned, and walked toward Tanya Foster’s car.

Watching her slight figure disappear into the rain, Frank was suddenly filled with a strange panic. His anger faded in an instant. “When are you coming home?” he called after her.

Elissa paused but didn't look back. "Later. The clinic's been busy lately."

She didn't intend to go back at all. After all, Frank was always busy—and when she was out of the country for several days, he hadn't even noticed she hadn't come home.

<MTIPI

14:48

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator

She'd only promised Carmela not to mention divorce to Frank—she never agreed to keep living under the same roof.

On the drive back to Greenwood Manor, Frank sat in the back seat, gaze unfocused, lost somewhere in the distance.

Marcia reached over and shook his arm. "Frankie, what are you daydreaming about?"

Ever since they got in the car, he'd been distracted. Who knew what Elissa had said to him this time?

“Nothing,” Frank said, snapping back to the present. He rubbed his brow just as the car passed by the clinic where Elissa worked.

An expression of helpless resignation flickered across his face.

She must be going through a rebellious phase, he thought. Lately, she’d been more defiant than ever.

Marcia didn’t miss the shift in his expression. She followed his gaze, instantly alert as she glanced toward the clinic.

The clinic... If she remembered correctly, Elissa worked there as a physician.

Carmela, clearly worried Elissa might stir up trouble, wasted no time sending over the money and arranging for someone to accompany her for the property transfer.

By noon, after a whirlwind of paperwork, Elissa was holding two property deeds in her hands.

Juniper Road—one of the most exclusive streets in Vistapeak City.

Tanya Foster, suspicious that something was off, had taken the day off to go with her. To her surprise, the entire process was above board and went off without a hitch.

Walking out of the real estate office, Tanya grabbed Elissa's arm and squealed, "You're loaded! I give up—I need a sugar mama!"

Elissa laughed, ruffling Tanya's hair. "Sure, sure. Want to move in with me?"

Tanya's eyes lit up. She grinned. "Move in? Nah, I'm working late every night—I'd drive you nuts. But... maybe I could crash for a few days, just to see how the rich live."

Without even stopping for lunch, the two of them hurried off to Juniper Road, dragging their suitcases behind them.

14:48

The delivery Elissa had ordered arrived just as they got there.

Tanya devoured her meal with relish. "This place has the best spicy food. I can never get this stuff delivered to my place—have to eat in every time."

She leaned back with a sigh. “I swear, I could just move in and never leave.”

“Then don’t leave,” Elissa said, grinning.

“No way!” Tanya flopped onto the sofa, rubbing her stomach.

Elissa tidied up the takeout containers, then paused, fixing Tanya with a curious look. “Why not? You have a secret boyfriend?”

“Please. Men just get in the way of making money.”

Tanya’s childhood had been a mess, and she’d always known exactly what she wanted.

“Then why won’t you live with me?” Elissa pressed.

“I’m not seeing anyone, but you still are,” Tanya said, giving her a knowing look. “I just have a feeling—it won’t be that easy for you and Frank to split for good.”

“Why not?”

“Woman’s intuition.”

“Well, your intuition sucks,” Elissa shot back as she started unpacking. “He’s into Marcia, you know that. The only reason he’s dragging this out is to spare Marcia from bad gossip.”

“And how’s that?”

“He doesn’t want her getting blamed for breaking up our marriage.”

But once Carmela delivered the divorce papers, whatever Frank wanted wouldn’t matter anymore. Elissa was done letting herself be a pawn in someone else’s game.

Tanya got up and helped her unpack.

As they worked, Elissa pulled out her phone and started ordering housewares and kitchen supplies online.

Watching the new house slowly take on the warmth of a real home, Elissa felt her heart settle bit by bit, she was finally starting to feel grounded.

But as it turned out, the person most excited about her successful divorce wasn't Elissa herself.

The moment the news broke, someone else rushed to the clinic to wait for her to finish work.

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator

Chapter 35

Elissa sat at her desk, feeling the weight of pressure settle over her. Every prescription she wrote had to be checked by Aaron first.

Today's patient had come in on a friend's recommendation and joked as she handed over the paperwork, "Dr. Drummond, with this much attention, you're making me wonder if I'm sicker than I thought."

Everyone who frequented the clinic knew Aaron was both her and Cliff's mentor.

Aaron just chuckled, "Don't worry, she specializes in the tough cases. Yours is a walk in the park for her. It's just that in front of me, she still thinks of herself as a kid."

He glanced over the prescription, then handed it back to Elissa.

All these years, Elissa remained the most gifted practitioner of traditional medicine he'd ever met. If it weren't for Mrs. Murphy's constant interference, his protégé would have achieved a hundred times more by now. She probably wouldn't even hesitate to put her name on a research paper.

"Your approach is right, and the dosage is spot on. One round of this, and you'll see results," he said.

The patient's colonoscopy had revealed severe colitis. She'd tried every medication in the book, but her symptoms kept coming back, which was why she'd ended up in Elissa's office.

After checking her pulse, Elissa had determined the root cause was anxiety, not just the physical inflammation. So she'd decided to treat the underlying stress rather than just the symptoms.

The patient had only come in hoping for a new angle, but after hearing Aaron's

reassurance, she immediately relaxed and grinned, "Dr. Elissa, next time I come, I'll have to bring you a thank-you banner!"

Elissa waved her off, laughing. “I’d much rather you not need to come back at all. Just remember to take care of yourself and keep your spirits up—nothing’s more important than your health.”

With the medicine she’d prescribed, seven doses should do the trick, though as a doctor, Elissa would never promise outright cures.

Once she finished with her last patient, Aaron stood up and stretched. “Let’s go. My wife’s expecting us for dinner.”

“Looks like Cliff and I are in for a treat again,” Elissa replied.

14:48

Jacqueline was a wonderful cook and always thoughtful. Whenever she knew Elissa was coming, she’d prepare all her favorite dishes.

Cliff was waiting outside with the car. Aaron only came to the clinic once a month, so Cliff seized the opportunity and spent the whole drive peppering him with questions about tricky cases.

After a while, Aaron shot him a look. “Elissa never pumps me for information like you do,”

he teased.

Cliff just grinned at Elissa in the rearview mirror. “Elissa studied with you for so many years, I should really be calling her my senior.”

That was true enough. Aaron had been Cliff’s professor at university, but Elissa had grown up learning medicine at his side. He’d always had a soft spot for her, even delaying his retirement until she got into Vistapeak University and graduated. After that, no amount of pleading from the university or the education board could lure him back.

Truth be told, Elissa was Aaron’s only true apprentice.

The idea of her boss calling her “senior” made Elissa laugh. “If you dared, I wouldn’t even know how to answer.”

Their banter filled the car as they pulled up to Aaron’s house—a quiet retreat tucked away in a lively neighborhood, with plenty of space between the old cottages and sunlight spilling through the windows.

As the car engine hummed to a stop, Jacqueline stepped out to greet them, feigning exasperation. “Elissa, Cliff, it’s been ages since the two of you visited!”

She looked radiantly healthy, not a day over fifty, thanks to her devotion to wellness.

Cliff, ever the gentleman, had brought gifts for their hosts. Elissa helped him carry the packages and grinned at Jacqueline, “I’ll be coming by more often from now on, if you don’t mind.”

Now that she was no longer Mrs. Frank, her days were finally her own.

“Oh, I’d love that,” Jacqueline replied warmly.

Jacqueline had only one son, but she’d always treated Elissa—who’d grown up at her husband’s side—like a daughter.

Aaron ushered everyone inside, but Jacqueline paused at the door, as if remembering something. “Oh, by the way, we have a visitor.”

Her gaze lingered on Elissa, a flicker of hesitation in her eyes.

“Who is it?” Aaron asked.

14:48

At his level, guests always called ahead at least a week in advance. Judging by Jacqueline's look, it wasn't a relative!

Whoever this was hadn't called first, wasn't family, and yet had the nerve to stroll right in.

Aaron stepped into the entryway, curiosity piqued, just as Jacqueline added, "It's that young man from the Murphy family. Sounds like he wants to discuss a research project with you."

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator

Chapter 36

Elissa stiffened for a split second as she followed behind the group.

But by the time Aaron glanced back at her, concern flickering in his eyes, she had already composed herself.

Aaron held the door for the others, then stopped Elissa with a gentle hand. “If this feels awkward, I’ll ask him to leave. He doesn’t have *to* stay for dinner.”

“I’m fine, Professor,” she replied quietly.

The truth was, ever since running into him in Germany, Elissa had braced herself for moments like this. If fate could bring them together in a foreign country, then seeing him again now was hardly surprising.

He was powerful these days, cold as ever—distant enough that he’d never trouble himself to spare her feelings, certainly not for the sake of her old

mentor.

Aaron studied her calm expression, then gave her shoulder an encouraging pat. “It’s good you’re able to let this go. After all, you’re family. Maybe he has his own reasons for everything...”

“Professor,” Elissa interrupted softly, eyes lowered. “Let’s go inside.”

Over the years, Aaron was far from the first to try and comfort her with

words like these.

His own reasons... If he truly had some hidden pain, why hadn't he ever told her? Why had he simply cut her off, cast her aside like she was nothing?

In the end, Matriarch Paige Murphy had summed it up best: men like him, golden boys with the world at their feet, treat people the way one might keep a pet—fun for a while, but once the novelty wears off, they toss it aside without a second thought. Perfectly normal, really.

Aaron understood there were things she didn't want to talk about, so he just nodded. "Alright. Let's go in."

1/2

12.11

Before Elissa entered, the mood inside was light.

Cliff had met Rowan once before at the research institute, and with Jacqueline's introductions, they'd slipped easily into conversation.

“Elissa!” Cliff waved her over as she stepped inside. “This is Mr. Murphy from Murphy Group—we met him in Germany the other day, remember?”

The man stood tall and composed, dark eyes giving nothing away. The orange-gold rays of the setting sun streamed through the glass behind him, softening the innate severity of his presence, but doing nothing to diminish his air of aloof nobility.

Elissa ran her fingers lightly along her palm and greeted him in an even tone. “Good evening, Mr. Murphy.”

Cliff turned to Rowan, clearly proud as always when introducing Elissa. “This is Elissa—she was a year below me in college, but she’s brilliant.”

Almost as if worried Rowan might underestimate her, Cliff added with a smile, “Honestly, I think of her as my own little sister.”

Given Cliff was heir to Riley Pharmaceuticals, that was no small endorsement—he was, in effect, staking his reputation on her.

Rowan arched a brow, a faintly amused smile playing on his lips as he echoed, “Good evening, little sister.”

To Elissa, the words sounded more like mockery than greeting. Her voice turned frosty, drawing a firm line. “Please, Mr. Murphy, don’t joke.”

She was usually gentle by nature, rarely so cold, and Cliff immediately sensed the tension between the two. He was about to smooth things

over when Aaron cut in.

“Alright, everyone, dinner’s ready! Come taste Jacqueline’s cooking.”

He shot Rowan a pointed look. “You know, it’s been years since you’ve graced our table, young man.”

The reproach was obvious. At Rowan’s level, people either flattered or feared him; no one dared speak to him like that anymore.

12.11 R

Cliff held his breath, but Rowan only let out a quiet laugh. “I was worried if I showed up, you’d throw me out again.”

Aaron snorted. “So you do remember.”

“All right, all right, let’s eat,” Jacqueline interjected, rescuing the mood as she set dishes on the long dining table.

Elissa slipped into the kitchen to fetch bowls and silverware, setting them out carefully, then poured wine into each glass in turn.

Aaron liked to enjoy a glass or two with dinner now and then.

Elissa took her seat beside Jacqueline, and—perhaps by chance, perhaps

not—Rowan sat directly across from her.

Aaron and Jacqueline had never approved of Elissa’s marriage. She was like one of their own, and to see her mistreated by Frank had been painful. So when they heard about the divorce, they’d insisted on marking the occasion with a small celebration.

Jacqueline caught Elissa’s eye, raising her glass with a gentle smile. “Your professor tells me you’re getting divorced. I think you’re making the right choice, Elissa. I truly believe you’ll find someone worthy of you.”

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator

As she spoke, her gaze briefly flickered over Cliff.

She'd always thought these two kids were a perfect match—one sweet and obedient, the other gentle and kind. Truly a pair made in heaven.

But Elissa felt a sharp, mocking stare bearing down on her. She acted as if she hadn't noticed, lifting her head with a small smile. "Jacqueline, you've misunderstood. I already explained everything to Father Benedict on the way here."

"I have no intention of getting a divorce."

As soon as the words left her lips and she looked away, her eyes unexpectedly met a pair of deep, dark ones.

The man's gaze was probing, almost piercing in its intensity.

Yes, she absolutely refused to admit to any talk of divorce in front of him. The night Spencer passed away, maybe her nerves had finally snapped. When the phone rang, she'd blurted out her plans without thinking.

Jacqueline was stunned, then turned to scold her husband. “Something this big and you didn’t even tell me? I went and ordered a divorce cake, you know...”

He coughed, a little embarrassed. “Well, I didn’t have time to tell you

before now.”

Aaron didn’t press for details; instead, he chimed in on Elissa’s behalf. “A cake’s a cake, divorced or not. As long as the kids are happy, isn’t that

what matters?”

Jacqueline sighed, relenting. “I suppose you’re right.”

“Thank you, Jacqueline.”

Elissa raised her glass, tapping it lightly, then took a small sip.

As she set it down, the man across from her spoke in a cool, unhurried tone. “You’ve improved. Learned to hold your tongue, at least.”

She wasn’t surprised by the remark at all.

Back when she’d gotten married, Rowan had never approved.

At that time, she’d been desperate to escape the Murphy family—she hadn’t wanted to hear a word of warning. Besides, she’d genuinely believed Frank was a good choice.

So, he’d been against it, and she’d insisted. It was only fitting that, after being made a public spectacle, he’d take the opportunity to mock her.

That statement she posted online? It fooled the public, not the people around her. They all had eyes; anyone could see the resemblance between her and Marcia from the side.

“You taught me well,” Elissa shot back, sarcasm lacing her words. She wanted to get up and leave, but guilt over Jacqueline’s hard work kept her in her seat. She forced herself to stay calm.

Cliff looked surprised. “Wait—you two know each other?”

“Barely,” Elissa replied.

“If only it were that simple,” Rowan said, almost simultaneously.

The air in the room suddenly grew thick.

Rowan’s long, slender fingers tapped the base of his wine glass, his gaze casual as he looked at Cliff. A faint smile tugged at his lips. “I’m her brother.”

Elissa felt something flare in her chest—like a spark to dry tinder. She took a deep breath, struggling to keep her composure, but her eyes were already stinging with unshed tears.

She was about to say something when Aaron interjected. “Cliff, looks like you’re about done. Why don’t you take Elissa home?”

“Father, Jacqueline...”

Elissa glanced apologetically at Jacqueline.

Jacqueline patted her back gently. “It’s alright, dear. Just do as your mentor says.”

Cliff was clearly startled by Elissa and Rowan’s relationship, but he knew better than to ask questions now. He stood and nodded at Elissa. “Come on, I’ll drive you home.”

“Thank you, Cliff.”

Rowan’s eyes darkened at her words. He didn’t react, but his frown deepened, the sound of her gratitude grating on his nerves.

Once they’d left, Aaron’s pleasant demeanor vanished. He turned to Rowan, his voice frosty. “If you hadn’t brought Elissa to me all those years ago and given me such a wonderful apprentice, you wouldn’t be setting foot in this house tonight.”

“I know you must have your reasons, but have you ever thought about what Elissa’s been through? She’s just a young woman, and she’s never once been without painkillers or bruise ointment. All thanks to your Murphy family’s handiwork!”

Jacqueline quietly went upstairs, giving them space to talk.

Rowan’s hand stilled for a moment. He turned to watch the car

disappearing down the driveway, then looked away, the tension in his jaw slowly easing. When he finally spoke, his voice was cold and detached.

“Mr. Blaine, I’m here tonight to discuss business with you.”

“As for everything else, I’m not interested.”

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator

Chapter 38

The car merged into the city traffic, the bustle and blur of downtown lights slowly peeling away the darkness of night.

Elissa had barely spoken since she got in. She sat quietly, nestled against the seat, her gaze fixed on the cityscape rushing by outside the window,

not even blinking.

After more than four years of knowing her, Cliff had come to recognize her not just as sensible and mature, but as someone with an inner resilience that most people lacked. She reminded him of a wildflower thriving in rough weather—no matter the storm, she always found a way

to bloom.

But tonight felt different.

She didn't say a word, but Cliff could sense the sadness radiating from

her.

At a red light, he pressed the brake gently and broke the silence. "You okay?"

The truth was, she wasn't.

Rowan had brushed everything off so easily, like none of it had ever happened. It made Elissa feel as though she was the petty one, the one holding grudges, trapped in a past everyone else had moved on from.

She'd never been comfortable opening up about her feelings. She managed a small, practiced smile. "I'm fine."

“If anything’s wrong, you can always talk to me.”

Cliff knew where *to* draw the line and didn’t push further, but his concern lingered.
“Elissa, if *you* go head-to-head with Rowan, you’re going to get hurt.”

He meant every word.

A mess of emotions churned inside her. After a long, thoughtful pause,

1211.)

she finally replied, her voice soft. “I know.”

She couldn’t explain it—when Frank cheated, she’d kept her composure. But with Rowan, she lost control so easily.

Later that night, back home, she talked it over with Tanya Foster. Tanya didn’t even need to think.

“You know why?” Tanya swept a pile of case files off the coffee table, a knowing look on her face. “You trusted Rowan with your whole heart for nine years. With Frank, you were only ever trying to trust him, and he let you down before you could fully let go.”

“You hadn’t even had the chance to give him everything, and he already rejected it.”

She took a sip of her Americano, waggled her finger for dramatic effect, then delivered her verdict. “It’s all about emotional investment. That’s

what hurts the most.”

After her shower that night, Elissa lay in bed, Tanya’s words echoing in

her mind.

Cloud Peak Private Club.

Unlike most clubs that claimed to be exclusive, Cloud Peak’s doors didn’t open for just any rich socialite.

It was the haunt of politicians, entrepreneurs, and city elite.

At the *end* of a corridor, laughter and chatter spilled from a private suite crowded with men and women.

Inside, Bradley Wheeler frowned at Frank. “Let’s forget the past for a minute. You got in a fight over Marcia and made little Elissa clean up your mess. Are you out of your mind?”

“How is that any different from making her hand you condoms at the bedside? Didn’t she lose it with you?”

12:11 @

“Nope.”

Frank swirled the brown liquor in his glass, a crooked smile on his lips. “She just asked if I could cut things off with Marcia. She’s my sister-in-law-how am I supposed to do that?”

Bradley clicked his tongue. “Sister-in-law or something else, you all know the truth. Don’t push little Elissa too far, or one day she’ll divorce you.”

Elissa had always been gentle and understanding; only that time in the hospital had she lost her temper and smashed a bottle over Marcia’s

head.

Frank shook his head. “She won’t.”

She’d been devoted for so many years—there was no way she’d walk out without a fight, no tears, just leave him.

Bradley, who’d grown up with Frank, set his glass down hard. “Don’t take advantage of her just because she doesn’t have family backing her up. She was raised by Rowan, after all.”

A friend at the card table chimed in lazily, “She and Rowan have been at odds for years. I doubt Rowan would get involved now.”

“She and I are at odds?”

Just then, the door swung open. Rowan leaned against the frame, one hand in his pocket, eyes heavy-lidded and cool. “Did she tell you that? Or

did I?”

There was a sharp edge to his words.

The man at the table looked up, startled. He shot to his feet, cards forgotten.

“Mr. Rowan...”

212

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator

It wasn't just him.

Frank and Bradley seemed caught off guard, too.

Ever since Frank and Elissa got married, Rowan had barely spoken to them, especially after he and Elissa fell out. Still, he'd never left the WhatsApp group. Every time someone organized a get-together, the invite always went out there, but Rowan almost never showed up.

No one expected him to turn up tonight—without a word of warning.

Bradley stood, trying to smooth things over with a grin. “Rowan, what brings you out tonight?”

“Just passing through,” Rowan replied, giving him a slight nod as he straightened and walked in.

The man who’d just made a careless joke hurried after him, apologizing. “Hey, man, I was out of line. Don’t take it to heart.”

Most of the guys here relied on their family’s wealth and connections. Only Rowan and Frank had real power in their own right—especially Rowan, who had a reputation as a ruthless dealmaker, feared by both sides of the law. In Vistapeak City, no one dared cross him.

Rowan sprawled into a seat, one arm draped over the back of the leather couch. “It was just a joke. Why are you so nervous?”

“Alright, go back *to* your game,” Frank said, helping the guy out of an awkward spot. Then Frank raised his glass toward Rowan from across the room. “You *know* they’re all a little scared of you.”

“Is that so?” Rowan replied absently, swirling his drink.

Frank poured him another, playing the role of the attentive brother-in-law. “You and Elissa—have you been in touch lately?”

Rowan’s voice was casual, almost lazy. “Didn’t you all say we’re done for good?”

“That’s just talk,” Frank chuckled. “Everyone knows you used to dote on

her.”

If anyone knew about Rowan and Elissa’s history, it was Frank. Ever since their parents died, Rowan didn’t let anyone close—except Elissa, whom he’d always treated like precious family.

“What’s wrong?” Rowan looked at him, lips quirked in a half-smile. “Afraid I’ll give you trouble if you divorce her for Marcia?”

That wasn’t it, of course. But Frank just smiled back, not bothering to argue. “Would you?”

Elissa was drifting into sleep when her phone rang.

She rarely put her phone on silent—too many longtime patients had her number, and emergencies could happen anytime.

“Elissa, are you free to come pick up Frank?” Bradley’s voice was instantly familiar.

She rubbed her eyes, checking the time—2 a.m. “Bradley, why not just call

him a cab?”

She had clinic hours in the morning.

Bradley sighed, “It’s hard to get a ride out here at Cloud Peak. All the club drivers are booked.”

As he spoke, his location pin popped up on her screen.

Elissa rolled out of bed, still half-asleep. She didn’t even bother changing—just pulled on her long down coat over her pajamas and stepped into the hall.

Tanya Foster, her night-owl roommate, poked her head out from her room. “Where are you going in the middle of the night?”

“Night shift,” Elissa replied.

The Atwater family had given her a paid-off apartment and a hefty salary.

2/3

12:12

Showing up when needed was part of the deal.

She grabbed Tanya’s car keys from the tray by the door. “I’m taking your car, okay?”

“Huh? Oh, sure,” Tanya muttered, confused. Night shift? Before she could ask, Elissa was already gone, and Tanya retreated to her room and her stack of legal files.

The winter night was bone-chilling.

Elissa cranked the heat as high as it would go. When she arrived, Bradley had already called ahead to the front desk. She gave her name, and a staff member escorted her down the plush hallway.

Even at this hour, the club was bustling. The air was thick with the scent of alcohol.

“Miss, Mr. Atwater’s party is in this room,” the staffer said, opening the door for her.

Elissa stepped in automatically, offering a polite, “Thank you—”

The words caught in her throat.

The room was lit with garish, multicolored lights.

Rowan sat in the far corner, directly facing the door. Most of his

sharply-cut features were hidden in shadow, but his dark eyes found her instantly, cool and unreadable.

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator

She wondered if she'd been cursed that time in Germany.

How else to explain it? For years, she'd hardly seen him, but lately, their paths kept crossing again and again.

"Little Elissa, you made it!"

Bradley's voice was warm as he waved her over. "Come on in!"

A few of Frank's buddies greeted her too.

She pressed her thumb into her palm, steadying herself, and nodded at them one by one. "Hey, Bradley. Timothy..."

When she got to Rowan, she hesitated, lips tightening. "Mr. Murphy."

The name landed in the room like a dropped glass.

For a moment, even Bradley and the others felt their nerves prickle.

Rowan, though, didn't seem bothered. His gaze was cool and unreadable as he smiled, just a flicker at the corner of his mouth. "So I'm the only one who doesn't get to be your brother?"

She couldn't help herself; with him, she always lost her filter. "And what exactly is our relationship, anyway?"

Seven years ago, on the day he'd had her dumped back in Matriarch Paige Murphy's garden, he'd said those exact words to her. She remembered every syllable.

Looking down at her as if she were nothing, he'd mocked, "Did you really think you were my real sister? Elissa, what do you and I have to do with each other?"

Now, Elissa broke eye contact, glancing at Frank—who'd already dozed off—then looked to Bradley for help.

"Bradley, could you help me get him to the car?"

“Sure, no problem.”

1/3

12:12

The awkwardness in the room was unbearable; as soon as Bradley hefted Frank up, he seemed eager to escape.

No one knew what had gotten into Frank tonight. Usually so composed, but after just a few words with Rowan, he'd started downing whiskey like it was water.

Bradley helped him into the back seat and turned to Elissa. “You got this? Want me to follow you home, help get him inside?”

She shook her head. “It’s fine, thanks, Bradley.”

He grinned. “No need to thank me. Get home safe, all right? And hey, don’t forget my birthday this year.”

She hesitated, reluctant to get pulled deeper into Frank’s social circle. “We’ll see...”

“What do you mean, we’ll see? You came to Timothy’s birthday last month but you’re skipping mine?”

“All right, I’ll be there,” she agreed at last.

Of all Frank’s friends, Bradley had always treated her well. He’d stood up for her before—she remembered that.

Seeing her agree, Bradley just reminded her to drive safe, then headed

off.

Elissa was just about to close the back door when Frank suddenly grabbed her wrist and mumbled under his breath, “Don’t you dare...”

She frowned. “Don’t dare what?”

Did he know about the divorce?

But before she could ask again, he'd already drifted back to sleep.

She nudged him deeper into the seat, closed the door, then walked around to the driver's side. As she was about to get in, the sleek black Bentley next to her suddenly swung its door wide open.

There was a sharp, metallic thud as her car door was pinned in place,

2/3

12:12

unable to budge.

Startled, she looked up to see Rowan leaning against his car, one long-fingered hand braced on the door, making sure she couldn't move hers an inch. His voice was low and mocking: "So you're really planning to wear this badge of humiliation for the rest of your life?"

Anger flared in her chest. "What, am I embarrassing the Murphy family again?"

He glanced down at her, his tone almost pitying for once. “He doesn’t care about you.”

She flashed a careless smile. “I know. But as long as he comes home once in a while, that’s enough for me.”

She sounded like someone hopelessly lovesick.

The veins on the back of Rowan’s hand stood out white against his skin. “You really love him that much?”

“Yes,” she replied, voice bright and defiant. “So much I can’t even help myself.”

His eyes turned icy, the corners of his mouth twisting in a cold smile. “Pathetic.”

She lifted her chin, meeting his gaze. “Is this news to you, Mr. Murphy? I begged you once, remember? I asked you who he really cared about.”

“And you never answered me back then.”

“So what’s the point of all this sarcasm now?”

