

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator

Chapter 51

Elissa stepped back, putting space between them as she wrenched her collar from his grip.

The staff finished setting the table and slipped away into the kitchen, leaving just her and Slate in the dining room.

She fixed him with a cold, mocking look. “What’s wrong? Planning to run off to another country and lie low again?”

“Elissa!”

Slate’s hand shot out, clamping around her throat. His jaw clenched as he spat, “You stubborn bitch. You think I’m falling for your games again?”

“If you’ve got what it takes, go ahead—strangle me,” she hissed, forcing herself not to flinch from the pain. “If not, let go. Don’t just bark like a dog.”

He let out a short, ugly laugh, eyeing her up and down. “You’ve gotten bolder these past few years. Shame I didn’t get to be your first before I left the country—Frank lucked out there.”

He released her and gave her cheek a patronizing pat. “Still, a married woman has her own appeal...”

Crack!

Elissa’s slap was sharp and precise, silencing him mid-sentence.

The sound was so crisp that a few people in the parlor looked up. But with the partition in the way, they couldn’t see what had happened.

Karol Murphy called out, “What’s going on in there?”

Slate shot Elissa a furious glare, about to lunge at her again.

He was, after all, the second son of the Murphy family. He’d never had a woman stand up to him like this—let alone humiliate him twice.

Elissa met his glare with defiance and spoke in a low voice, “Go ahead, try

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something. Oh, and did I mention? I’ve got plenty of photos of you–naked.”

She watched with satisfaction as his expression fractured, then added sweetly, “I bet your enemies would love to get their hands on those.”

“Slate? Elissa?”

Karol’s voice grew closer, footsteps approaching. “What are you two doing in here?”

Slate, fuming, forced a bright smile. “Aunt Karol, there was a bug on my head. Elissa tried to help, but she ended up hitting me instead.”

“Oh my—”

Karol’s eyes landed on the vivid handprint on his cheek. She scolded Elissa, though her tone was mild. “You really need to be more gentle. Slate just got out of the hospital, you know. If you hurt him, his grandmother will be heartbroken.”

“Out of the hospital?”

“You didn’t know?” Karol explained, “A couple of days after our last family dinner, he managed to get himself into trouble—again. Barely set foot off the plane before he was nearly killed.”

Elissa’s brows rose in surprise

Slate had always relied on the Murphy family’s power to do as he pleased—rotten to the core. But he was still a Murphy, and Rowan’s influence was at its peak.

Even a rabid dog was protected if it belonged to the right master.

Seeing nothing else amiss, Karol returned to the parlor.

Slate glared at Elissa, jaw tight. “When did you take those?”

She answered lightly, almost airily, “The night you passed out after trying to rape me.”

He'd had his eye on her for years.

When Rowan cast her aside and sent her back to the matriarch's house, no one was happier than Slate. He'd harassed her in every way

imaginable.

But whenever punishment was handed out, it was always Elissa who paid the price.

So she stopped fighting him directly, played the innocent, and strung him along for two whole years—claiming she was too young.

Her sweet, angelic face had always made lying easy.

She was eighteen at Matriarch Paige Murphy's seventieth birthday party. She wore a white dress that hugged her figure—a vision of youth in full bloom. Slate forgot himself and dragged her into an upstairs guest

room.

But as he closed the door, he suddenly collapsed.

Elissa screamed and flung the door open. Guests rushed upstairs to the

commotion.

She stood there, dress rumpled and eyes wild with fear. It was obvious to everyone what had nearly happened.

Attempted rape. What else could it be?

Matriarch Paige Murphy had always loved to boast that she doted on Elissa more than her own granddaughters.

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Chapter 52

For the sake of her own reputation, Elissa had no choice but to promise she'd send Slate overseas for six years.

Yet after the latest fiasco, every day felt even more unbearable.

Still, Elissa didn't feel cheated by the bargain.

Compared to living in constant fear of a psychopath—even having to guard herself while she slept—nothing else really mattered.

“You little-”

Slate's voice trembled with rage. Then, as if struck by a new idea, he leaned in with a wicked grin. “Don't tell me you stare at my nudes whenever you can't sleep? Frank not doing it for you?”

The disgust that washed over Elissa made her physically recoil.

She had truly underestimated Slate's shamelessness.

She shot back with a cold sneer. “Who in their right mind would be interested in an underdeveloped boy?”

With that, she turned and walked away.

Slate was a textbook bully: only brave when he sensed weakness.

The more she tried to avoid him, the more he clung to her like a parasite.

But when she stood her ground, he'd back off—at least a little. Especially after what happened six years ago; he had learned to tread carefully

around her.

Still, some men are hardwired to chase what they can't have, and Slate was no exception.

He couldn't help remembering the sting of her slap—the way her soft hand had cracked against his cheek. It made his heart race. He grabbed her wrist, leering, “So you have seen me there, huh?”

He looked like he actually enjoyed being insulted.

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A wave of goosebumps prickled across Elissa's skin. She yanked her arm, snapping, "Let go!"

"Master Rowan, you're home!"

Butler Murphy's surprised voice echoed from the sitting room.

Elissa froze in place.

"Damn, why is he back now?" Slate muttered, releasing her at once. He lowered his voice in a sharp warning, "Don't you dare tell him."

"Depends on my mood," Elissa shot back, pulling out a sanitizing wipe to scrub her wrist as she braced herself and strode toward the sitting room.

The atmosphere had shifted; the room now buzzed with more energy than when she'd arrived.

It was impossible to miss Rowan. He radiated a quiet, commanding presence. Tall and poised in a tailored black dress shirt and sharply pressed trousers, he handed his coat to the butler with effortless grace. Every gesture exuded an aristocratic detachment.

Slate hurried past Elissa, beaming as he approached Rowan. “Big brother, you’re back! If I’d known you were coming, I would’ve picked you up myself.”

“That won’t be necessary.” Rowan’s eyes—dark as ink—flicked over him, his *tone* cool and distant. “I’m a bit of a clean freak.”

“I-” Slate’s smile faltered. “It’s a new car. I just got it yesterday—no one else has even sat in it yet.”

Karol spotted Elissa and waved her over. “Cousin.”

Elissa had no choice but to join them, wrinkling her nose as the smell of cigarettes hit her.

Rowan lazily stubbed out his half-finished cigarette in the ashtray, looking at Slate as if he were an idiot. “It’s not the car. I just think you’re filthy.”

A few of the younger cousins couldn’t help but snicker.

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Slate-dirty? Everyone knew. He'd been fooling around with girls since middle school. Of course he was.

But as the family matriarch's favorite grandson, no one dared say it aloud-except Rowan.

And not only did Rowan say it, Slate still had to grin and take it. "Come on, Rowan, don't tease me. Look, you've got all the younger cousins laughing at me."

Rowan didn't bother saving face, his voice turning even colder. "Who says I'm joking?"

The laughter in the room grew louder.

Trust the eldest Murphy to put Slate in his place.

"What's so funny over there?"

A sharp, commanding voice rang out from the elevator.

Everyone went rigid. Elissa straightened instantly, joining the younger cousins in greeting, “Grandmother.”

Except for Rowan.

It was no secret he and Matriarch Paige Murphy had been at odds for years. He barely showed up for family gatherings, let alone bothered with polite greetings.

Matriarch Paige’s gaze swept over the group, her eyes finally landing, sharp as a knife, on Elissa.

“Where’s Frank? Another business ‘emergency’ today?”

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Elissa knew there was no escaping this. Her fingertips traced slow, nervous circles in her palm as she spoke in a soft, careful voice.

“Yeah, he’s been busy with work lately. But he said he’d try to come by once things settle down.”

A cold laugh cut through the room.

Matriarch Paige Murphy looked at her, her smile edged with contempt. “Busy with work, or busy with someone else?”

Elissa lowered her eyes. “Grandma...”

“If you can’t keep your husband’s heart, then just admit it.”

In front of everyone, Matriarch Paige Murphy didn’t hesitate to shame her, her words dripping with disdain. “And yet you’re online defending the other woman? Elissa, do you have any idea how awful the rumors are out there?”

She didn’t. But even Rowan—who’d made it clear he wanted nothing to do with her—had warned her that night. So they must be bad.

“People are saying the Murphy family’s been cruel to you. That’s the only reason you’re still hanging on in the Atwater household, taking whatever scraps they throw you.”

Matriarch Paige Murphy jabbed a finger at her face. “Tell me who in the Murphy family ever treated you badly? And now, because of you, we have to wear this shame?”

Elissa didn't flinch. She just stared at the marble floor, waiting for it to end.

Finally, the command came: "Get out and kneel in the yard!"

No one in the Murphy family looked surprised. The snow outside hadn't let up, but that didn't matter.

A few people glanced at Rowan, expecting him to intervene. After all, he

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had practically raised Elissa. Even if they'd fallen out in recent years, surely there was some feeling left.

But Rowan barely seemed to notice. He lounged on the sofa, idly scrolling through his phone, never once looking up—as if Elissa were a stranger.

"Grandma..."

It was Slate, always the troublemaker, who spoke up. "It's still snowing hard out there. Elissa's just a girl—she'll get sick if she stays out too long."

If her legs got messed up, he'd lose his fun, wouldn't he?

Matriarch Paige Murphy's frustration was obvious. "You still haven't learned your lesson with her, have you?"

Elissa never expected to escape the punishment. While Slate and Matriarch Paige Murphy argued, she quietly made her way to the gravel path outside, knelt down with practiced ease.

Matriarch Paige Murphy watched her through the floor-to-ceiling windows, her gaze dark. "Stubborn as ever. Just like her parents."

"Are we going to eat or what?"

Rowan spun his phone absently a hint of a smirk on his lips. "Is that what these family dinners are for now? So we can all watch your latest show of cruelty?"

He didn't have to name names; everyone knew who he meant. The living room fell silent, tension thick in the air—no one wanted to get caught in the crossfire.

Embarrassed in front of the younger generation, Matriarch Paige Murphy struggled to control her temper. “You don’t have to come at all!”

After all these years, he’d hardly ever bothered to show up. No one expected him to just appear tonight.

Rowan grinned. “If I don’t show up, how else am I supposed to learn?”

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He glanced at Ian, who stood quietly by the side, always ready to serve. “Take notes, Ian. You and Evan Murphy have a long way to go before you reach Matriarch Paige Murphy’s level.”

Everyone except Matriarch Paige Murphy had to stifle a laugh. This was why people feared Rowan: he was cold, sharp, rumored to have once thrown someone overboard in the middle of the ocean. Ruthless didn’t

begin to cover it.

Ian answered dutifully, “Yes, sir.”

Matriarch Paige Murphy's chest heaved with anger. "Rowan, have *you* no respect for your elders-

He cut her off. "So, no dinner?"

Unhurried, Rowan rose to his feet, smoothing the front of his perfectly crisp suit. "Then I'm leaving."

Without waiting for a response, he shoved his hands in his pockets and strolled out, as if her outrage were nothing.

The snow was coming down hard.

Elissa knelt beneath the streetlamp. Before long, frost gathered on her eyelashes. Her knees and shins burned with pain, but she could handle it. She'd knelt for days at a time before. If not for the years she'd spent learning traditional medicine as a child, her legs would have given out long ago.

So a little while longer was nothing.

Suddenly, her phone buzzed in her coat pocket—another call from that unknown number. She rejected it, only to see she'd missed a WhatsApp message.

With her hands stiff from the cold, she fumbled the phone and dropped it onto the stones as she tried to open the message.

“Elissa, I don’t think I’ll make it in time. I’ll have Ridge come pick you up later.”

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“Did the Murphy family give you any trouble today?”

Elissa forced a stiff smile, not even bothering to pick up her phone and

reply.

She’d known the answer the moment she called from the old manor’s

gates: Frank wasn’t coming.

Yet seeing his message still left her disappointed.

He knew—of course he knew—that if he didn't show up, the Murphys would make things hard for her.

But in the end, he still hadn't come.

A sudden gust of night wind whipped up, driving icy snow into her lungs with every breath. Even breathing hurt.

She suppressed her emotions and bent down to retrieve her phone, but before she could, a shadow fell across her. Someone moved faster than she did, snatching up the phone—and at the same time, scooping her up

around the waist.

Without warning, she found herself slung over a broad shoulder.

Her captor strode away with steady, unhurried steps—quick, but unyielding.

“Rowan!”

The voice, the *scent*, the touch—Elissa didn't even need to look to recognize him. "Put me down!"

He gave a low, humorless chuckle. "Not calling me Mr. Murphy anymore?" Elissa choked on her words. "Mr. Murphy, would you please put me

down?"

His voice was cold as steel. "Haven't done enough kneeling for them yet?"

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She had—she'd knelt long enough. But she knew Matriarch Paige Murphy would only find a way to make her pay it back twice over.

Butler Murphy hurried after, wringing his hands. "Sir, *you* can leave if you wish, but Miss Elissa can't."

Rowan didn't slow, didn't even look over. "Go back inside and ask her whose name is on Elissa's registration."

His tone was sharp, every word a warning. “And if anyone else tries to humiliate me tonight, I swear, the next one tossed into the Atlantic to feed the sharks will be Slate.”

The mention of registration jogged Elissa’s memory.

Years ago, when Rowan had taken her in, he’d added her name to his household record. When she’d married a few years back and wanted to change it, Rowan hadn’t even bothered to answer her calls—couldn’t be bothered to look for the paperwork.

Elissa wasn’t exactly the patient type. After a few rounds of arguing, the whole thing had simply been left unresolved.

He never brought it up again, and she’d nearly forgotten that, in the eyes of the law, her records were still tied to his.

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Butler Murphy went back inside and relayed Rowan’s words

word-for-word.

Slate hadn't expected to be dragged into this mess at all. Suddenly uneasy, he turned to Matriarch Paige Murphy. "Grandma, didn't Rowan say *he* didn't care what happened to Elissa anymore? So why's he-"

She cut him off with a scornful laugh. "You really think you can guess what's going *on* in Rowan's head?"

Her eyes narrowed, voice dripping with disdain. "With his status now, he can decide to protect that girl on a whim-what's so strange about that?"

Slate protested, "But shouldn't he show you some respect, at least-?"

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"Do you even know who really runs Vistapeak City now?" she snapped.

"Of course, it's still the Shaw family," Slate replied, unconcerned.

Matriarch Paige's tone turned icy. "It's Rowan's city now—*not* the Shaws'."

She wanted to see just how long Rowan could keep up this arrogant act.

But she shot Slate a warning glare. "Don't be stupid enough *to* go after that girl again. If you end up in Rowan's crosshairs, he'll make *you* pay—one way or another."

Slate grumbled, "So what am I supposed to do? She humiliated me in front of everyone—"

Matriarch Paige sneered, her face like stone. "Rowan's never been the loyal type. You think he'll protect her forever? Sooner or later, he'll drop her—just like he's done before. When that happens, you'll have your chance."

Outside, a black Bentley pulled up to the old manor's gates.

Snow was falling hard.

Rowan carried Elissa toward the car in long, decisive strides. Ian followed close behind, holding a black umbrella, though Rowan's broad shoulders were already dusted with snow.

Elissa, by contrast, was untouched.

The driver hurried out and opened the door. “Sir, Miss.”

The world spun as Rowan finally set her down, and Elissa felt as dizzy as if she’d drained a bottle of wine in one go.

She steadied herself, then nodded in greeting. “Slate.”

Rowan’s eyes narrowed ever so slightly. His voice was clipped. “Get in the

car.”

“I can call a cab myself-”

She’d barely finished the sentence when a sleek, limited edition Maybach

glided up beside them, coming to a smooth stop.

Frank stepped out, opened an umbrella, and walked over with his usual quiet composure. He nodded politely to Rowan, then turned to Elissa, his

tone as calm as ever.

“Elissa, I’m here to take you home.”

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Elissa paused, caught off guard for a moment.

She pushed down the whirlwind of questions swirling inside her, turned to Rowan, and spoke in a voice clear but distant. “I’ll head out now. And...

thank you, Mr. Murphy.”

“Miss...”

Ian started to say something, but Rowan’s icy, mocking tone cut him off. “Enough. Don’t embarrass yourself.”

Elissa's fingers unconsciously brushed over her palm, but she didn't falter as she walked away.

Only when the black Maybach had disappeared into the night did Ian mutter under his breath, "Talk about an unexpected third wheel..."

"What was that?"

Rowan's voice was cool as he stubbed out his cigarette and slid into the car, his figure seeming even more solitary against the biting winter wind.

Ian climbed into the passenger seat. "Nothing, really. Just—Miss Elissa's far too forgiving when it comes to Frank."

"Every time she sees you, it's obvious she's still angry with you."

"But why isn't she angry with Frank? He humiliated her, barely ever comes back to the family estate with her, and leaves her to face the

consequences alone..."

For some reason, the air inside the car felt noticeably heavier.

Ian shivered, goosebumps rising on the back of his neck.

Evan, at the wheel, seemed oblivious and kept chatting away. “Well, that’s because she loves him, doesn’t she? When a woman’s in love, there’s nothing she won’t forgive. She’ll keep lowering her boundaries, again and again.”

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Ian frowned. “I don’t buy it. That’s not like Elissa.”

“Believe it or not, that’s how it is.”

Evan glanced at Rowan in the rearview mirror. “Sir, what do you think-?”

“When did you get so chatty?”

Rowan’s face, all sharp lines and shadow beneath the streetlights, was cold as ice. His voice was equally frosty.

The two in front instantly fell silent.

We weren’t even saying anything that bad.

Why does he always seem angry?

The drive from Murphy Manor to Greenwood Manor was uneventful, the roads clear but slick with rain. Ridge drove with extra caution, keeping the speed down.

Inside the car, the heater hummed, filling the space with warmth and

quiet.

It was a long while before Elissa finally felt her frozen limbs begin to

thaw.

She glanced over at Frank, about to speak, when he asked, “Are you upset?”

“No,” Elissa replied honestly.

She wasn’t angry—she’d grown used to being stood up by now.

Mostly, she just felt disappointment. Yet, what surprised her was that after Frank messaged her on WhatsApp to say he couldn’t make it, he’d unexpectedly shown up anyway.

She hadn’t seen that coming. The surprise far outweighed any letdown.

Frank looked straight at her, studying the way her eyes were lowered, her expression unreadable. “Then what is it? You haven’t said a word since you got in the car.”

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You haven't spoken to me, either.

Elissa answered plainly, "I just didn't expect you to come. I was surprised, that's all."

"I figured the Murphys might punish you," Frank said, his tone as gentle and steady as ever. "I couldn't stop worrying, so I came to pick you up myself."

Elissa was momentarily stunned, almost disoriented.

If she hadn't found those photos in his study, she might have almost believed that Frank cared about her, even just a little.

When she didn't respond, Frank smiled and teased, "What? In your eyes, I'm that indifferent to whether you live or die?"

He was joking.

But that was exactly how Elissa felt.

Of course, she would never admit it. Instead, she flashed a faint smile, the dimples on her cheeks barely visible, creating an illusion of obedience.

“No, I just don’t want to keep you from your work.”

“It’s fine. The meeting was pushed to eight-thirty at the last minute.”

Frank glanced at his watch. “There’s not enough time to drive you home. Would you mind waiting in my office for a bit?”

“I can head back on my own-

“It won’t be long, alright?”

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Elissa didn’t protest further. “Alright.”

She followed Frank into the Atwater Group office building. Though it was late, the lights inside were as bright as day.

In the conference *room*, the project team was waiting for Frank, so Elissa made her way down the hall to the executive office on her own.

She hadn't slept well the night before, and as she curled up on the office

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sofa with a throw pillow, she soon drifted off.

One by one, the lights in the building went dark, until only the top floor and a few scattered offices remained aglow.

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Chapter 56

She didn't know how long she'd been asleep when the insistent buzz of her phone roused her.

The light was blinding. Shielding her eyes with one hand, she fumbled for her phone with the other and answered, her voice thick with sleep. “Hello?”

“Elissa, why aren’t you home yet?”

Tanya Foster sounded frantic.

She’d come home after working late—it was already three in the morning—only to find that Elissa still wasn’t back. Anxiety gnawed at her, the fear that something might have happened at the old house pressing in.

Rubbing her eyes, Elissa slowly adjusted to the harsh light and pushed herself up from the couch, her thoughts drifting back into focus. “I’m fine,” she said. “I was just waiting for Frank to finish a meeting at Atwater Group.”

“What kind of meeting goes until three in the morning?”

“No idea,” Elissa murmured.

It was so late that the central heating had already shut off for the night.

A shiver ran through her as she sniffled. “I’ll go check the conference room. Don’t worry—just get some sleep.”

She hung up, then wrapped herself in the down jacket she’d draped over the back of the couch.

Her legs were still numb from sleep as she stood, so she moved slowly, making her way out into the pitch-black corridor. The once brightly lit hallways and conference rooms were now deserted, not a soul in sight.

Where is everyone?

She blinked, still dazed.

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A sound echoed from the elevator bay—a young woman, probably just out of college, dropped something and hurried into the conference room. When she came out, the light spilling from the CEO’s office finally illuminated Elissa.

“Oh! You’re still here?”

The girl froze for a moment, then scrambled to explain. “Sorry, I thought everyone had left, so I turned off all the lights in the hallway.”

“Do you want me to walk you downstairs?”

Elissa asked, “The meeting’s over?”

“Yeah, just finished a little while ago.”

The girl seemed to remember something. “But Mr. Atwater got a call a little after nine and rushed out. I guess he left in a hurry and forgot to tell you.”

Elissa stood there, stunned.

Suddenly, it felt like her feet were back on solid ground.

The cake, the fact that he’d picked her up tonight—none of it felt real, more like a fleeting dream.

But leaving her stranded in the office in the middle of the night—that was real. That was exactly the sort of thing Frank would do.

It fit his style, perfectly.

He never stopped to think that she might feel hurt.

But then, no one ever cared about how she felt. She'd learned long ago to act like nothing bothered her.

It's fine.

They were divorced, after all.

She steadied herself, finally finding her voice. "You should get home—it's late. Take care."

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He'd left at nine.

It was after three in the morning now. Six hours had passed, and he hadn't given her a second thought.

Forget explaining—she was lucky if he even remembered she existed.

But that wasn't the most absurd part.

Two days later, while Elissa was at the clinic seeing patients, her phone rang. It was Edna.

"Mrs. Frank, do you have time to come by today?"

"What's going on?"

Elissa assumed the divorce papers were ready and they wanted her to pick them up.

Edna hesitated. “Hickey had a high fever a couple of nights ago, and he’s been listless with no appetite ever since. The young master asked if you could write a prescription or recommend some remedies to help him

recover.”

Elissa laughed in disbelief, walking over to the window. “You overheard my conversation with Mrs. Atwater the other day, didn’t you?”

The truth was, she had nothing to do with the Atwater family anymore—not even the slightest connection.

Edna sounded uncomfortable. “I did hear, but the young master asked me

to-

“So tell him the truth.”

“But, ma’am... you promised Mrs. Atwater,”

“I promised not to tell Frank about the divorce,” Elissa replied, her tone flat and even, “but I never agreed to look after the other woman’s child. Isn’t Marcia trained in traditional medicine too? Ask her for a remedy.”

With that, she hung up.

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Once her emotions settled, Elissa returned to her desk and looked at her patient. “Sorry for the interruption, Mrs. Garrett. Let’s continue...”

“No rush at all,” Janice replied, her eyes bright as she grabbed Elissa’s

hand, a delighted grin on her face. “Dr. Elissa, are you really single?”

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Elissa was young, with a gentle temperament and a deep sense of responsibility toward her patients.

Over the years, more than a few of her patients had tried to set her up with eligible bachelors. Eventually, she started wearing a wedding ring at all times; only then did the well-meaning aunts and uncles finally let her

1. be.

But she still remembered Mrs. Garrett—the grandmother *who* had worried herself sick over her grandson’s marriage prospects.

Elissa couldn’t help smiling in exasperation. “Mrs. Garrett, I’m getting a

divorce...”

“You should!”

Janice’s expression grew stern, her voice firm and unwavering. “You absolutely should! I heard everything on the phone just now—though I wasn’t eavesdropping, I swear. Sorry about that.”

She pressed on, “Let me tell you, darling, a cheating man is the last thing you need. If *you* stay married to him, you’ll only bring yourself more misery.”

“I know,” Elissa replied softly, feeling the warmth of Janice’s wrinkled hand resting in hers—a comfort that seemed to echo from some distant childhood memory.

With a gentle voice, she reassured the old woman, “I know, I’ve already started the paperwork.”

She deftly shifted the conversation, reaching out to check Janice’s pulse. “Feeling better these past few days?”

“Much better! The medicine you prescribed worked wonders.”

Janice waved her hand dismissively, but quickly circled back to the topic. “Listen, you’re still young. Don’t be afraid of divorce.”

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Elissa couldn’t help but tease, “Are you thinking about introducing your grandson to me?”

Janice turned serious. “How did you guess?”

Elissa laughed. “Mrs. Garrett, I’ll be twice divorced—you sure you want

that for him?”

“Absolutely sure.”

Janice looked her over approvingly and said, “It wasn’t your fault, and there’s nothing wrong with marrying again.”

She hesitated and added, “Honestly, my grandson’s no prize himself. He’s a real stick-in-the-mud—might not even be good enough for you!”

Elissa laughed out loud. “Do you need a new prescription today?”

“Of course, just three days’ worth this time. I’ll come back after that.”

With a fond smile, Janice pressed a small charm into Elissa’s hand. “I got this at Mercy Chapel this morning. Keep it with you—it’ll bring you peace and good luck.”

After Janice left, the young nurse at the door couldn't help but tease.

“Elissa, that lady isn't here for her medicine—she's here to play

matchmaker!”

Elissa smiled. “It's only natural to worry about your grandchildren.”

She did wonder, though, just how bad this grandson's personality must be, if even his own grandmother would say so out loud.

Most days, Elissa only saw patients in the mornings. Tanya Foster, who rarely had a day off, came by the clinic to wait for her after work. They'd planned to go out for lunch and do some shopping

That evening was Bradley's birthday, they also needed to pick up the gift Elissa had ordered for him.

“Wow, that's extravagant,” Tanya remarked when Elissa picked up a custom-made fountain pen from the shop. It was a masterpiece, crafted

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by a renowned artisan—impossible to buy without connections.

Elissa smiled. “Bradley gave me something pretty pricey for my birthday last year. I have to return the favor.”

“In circles like his, you really do need money just to keep up,” Tanya said with a sigh.

Elissa nodded in agreement. “Who knows how much longer my savings will last.”

But she wasn’t too worried. Carmela was probably already pulling every string she had to find a new Mrs. Frank. Once the replacement was chosen, Elissa would finally be spared from these awkward gatherings.

No more uncomfortable encounters.

Bradley’s birthday party was held at the Cloud Peak Club.

The place was packed. When Elissa entered the private lounge, she glanced around—almost everyone was a familiar face, though not to her.

They were Frank's friends, and Rowan's. Aside from Bradley, who was always kind, the rest... well, if she ever split with Frank for good, most of them wouldn't even bother to acknowledge her on the street.

"Hey, you brought your bestie!" Bradley greeted cheerfully, flashing Tanya a warm smile. "Make yourselves at home and have fun tonight."

Elissa returned his smile. "She had the day off, so I dragged her along."

The crowd in the main hall was overwhelming, so Elissa pulled Tanya into a quiet side room, seeking a bit of peace amid the festivities.

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator

"That's hilarious. I was wondering why she disappeared the moment she arrived—turns out she's just trying to avoid embarrassing herself."

"You only just realized? If she were still Rowan's sister, the Atwaters might have shown some restraint. But now that she's fallen out with Rowan,

marrying into the Atwaters is the best she can hope for—just trying to climb the social ladder. Frank wants to get back together with the woman he actually loves, so she's left out in the cold."

Elissa had just wanted to enjoy the gossip, but the more she listened, the more she realized the gossip was actually about her.

“So tell me, why hasn’t she filed for divorce yet? What’s she holding on for?”

“Money, obviously. What else? She’s just a nobody, a junior doctor with no family to speak of. She spent her whole life clinging to the Murphys, and now she’s desperate to hang on to the Atwaters for the rest of it.”

Tanya Foster’s face darkened as she overheard, and she started to get up, but Elissa stopped her.

“It’s fine. I’ll handle it.”

With that, Elissa stood and walked out.

The two women kept chattering, oblivious to Elissa approaching behind

them.

“I mean, she looks so innocent, but who knew she was such a schemer? All she wants is to leech off other people.”

“What did you expect? She’s an orphan, grew up without parents—what decent person comes from that...”

Elissa lightly tapped one of them on the shoulder and chimed in, “What are you talking about? Who’s so indecent?”

“Who else? That **Eliss-**” The woman turned and froze mid-sentence,

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staring at Elissa like a deer in headlights.

Her face flushed with guilt. She cleared her throat and tried to play it cool, glancing across the room. “We were talking about your dear sister-in-law. I mean, how can she still be hanging around your husband, acting like it’s totally normal? Shameless, really.”

She pretended to be outraged on Elissa’s behalf.

Following her gaze, Elissa spotted Frank—when had he arrived?—sitting next to Marcia.

To anyone watching, you'd think they were the married couple.

Sensing eyes on them, Frank and Marcia both looked over at Elissa's

group.

Frank seemed genuinely surprised, probably not expecting her to show up at his friend's birthday party unannounced.

Marcia, on the other hand, recovered quickly. She stood up with a bright smile, heels clicking as she crossed the room. "Elissa! When did you get

here?"

"Why not come over and join us? Why are you hiding out here?"

“We’re standing up for you, of course,” one of the women replied.

Elissa looked at the two culprits, her smile pleasant but her eyes sharp. “Is that so? Because I just heard you both calling her a homewrecker and saying she has no shame.”

Both their faces turned beet red.

“Elissa, what are you talking about? We were obviously talking about you! Not Marcia!”

“Oh really?”

“Of course!” The two women doubled down, feigning indignation. “Why would we say anything about Marcia? In matters of love, the one who isn’t loved is always the third wheel.”

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They’d never intended to offend Elissa—at least not to her face—but now that Marcia was involved, it was time to pick sides. And in their social circle, everyone knew Elissa was Frank’s wife in name only, while Marcia was the one he truly wanted.

Marcia's expression softened immediately, her confidence restored as she played the peacemaker. "Elissa, they're just joking around. There are so many people here—don't take it to heart."

Elissa's eyes crinkled as she smiled, unlocking her *phone* and pressing play. The recent recording echoed out:

"Your sister-in-law—how can she still be hanging around your husband, acting like it's totally normal? Shameless, really..."

The volume was just right—loud enough for Marcia to hear every word, but quiet enough not to disturb the rest of the party.

"Turn that off!"

Humiliated by her own words, Marcia couldn't control her temper. When Elissa didn't move, Marcia lashed out and slapped the phone out of her

hand.

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The sudden sound drew everyone's attention.

All eyes landed on the shattered phone screen, the angry red mark blooming across a pale hand, and Elissa's eyes, now suspiciously rimmed with tears.

Anyone with half a brain could tell she'd just been bullied—badly. She looked absolutely pitiful.

Frank came over, his brows furrowed, and picked up the broken phone for her. “What happened?”

Marcia wanted to blame Elissa, but now she realized she didn't even know where to begin.

Was she supposed to say Elissa had stood up for her, but she'd lashed out anyway and slapped Elissa?

In the end, all she could do was glare at the two girls nearby. “They were talking trash about me behind my back—saying some really nasty things!”

The two girls looked like they wanted to melt right into the floor and disappear.

Who could have guessed that Frank's two women would both be so damn difficult?

Especially Elissa,

She always seemed so meek and easy to push around, but the moment you crossed her, she'd bite back with a vengeance—like a rabbit with fangs.

Next time, they'd steer clear of her for sure.

Elissa took her phone back and turned to Marcia, repeating her words in that same gentle, sensible tone:

"Come on, Marcia, maybe we should just let it go. I probably overreacted, and maybe they were just joking around. It's Bradley's birthday party; let's not make a scene."

She was the one with the broken phone and the handprint stinging on her skin, yet here she was, comforting the very person who'd lashed out.

Hearing her own words thrown back at her, Marcia almost choked on her indignation. She wanted to scream but could hardly utter a sound—her anger stuck in her throat, impossible to swallow or spit out.

She was fuming, but with so many people watching, making a bigger fuss would only make her look worse.

Digging her fingernails into her palm, she managed to force a smile. "You're right. We shouldn't stoop to their level."

Frank's expression was unreadable. "Apologize."

The two girls looked as if they had just been pardoned by the governor. They bowed their heads, mumbling, "Sorry, sorry..."

Marcia immediately tried to regain her composure and act gracious. "Forget it, it's fine..."

"I meant *you*," Frank interrupted, his gaze dropping to the angry welt on Elissa's hand. "Apologize to Elissa."

Marcia's eyes nearly popped out of her head.

She looked stunned, glancing at Frank as if she couldn't believe what she'd heard. "What did you say?"

Frank frowned, moving to stand between them, as if he was worried Elissa might retaliate with some clever twist of her own.

“Elissa,” he said quietly, “Marcia has a bit of a temper. I apologize on her behalf...”

She’d been struck—and now, in front of everyone, her supposed husband was apologizing for someone else.

Everyone in the room could see where his loyalties lay.

Elissa’s clear eyes lingered on him for a moment, then a trace of irony touched her lips. “It’s fine.”

With that, she slipped her phone into her purse, took out a small velvet box, and walked over to Bradley, her smile suddenly warm and sincere. “Happy birthday, Bradley!”

“There’s an emergency at the clinic, so Tanya and I have to go.”

She took Tanya Foster by the hand and walked out.

Frank watched her figure disappear through the doorway, a strange emptiness blooming in his chest.

That last smile of hers...

Something was wrong.

It was as if she'd finally given up on him.

A sudden sense of panic made Frank take a step after her, but right then Marcia twisted her ankle and clung to his arm with a pained gasp. "Ouch-Frank, help me, will you?"

Frank paused, his eyes catching on the jade pendant that slipped from Marcia's collar as she leaned on him. For a moment, he seemed lost in thought.

Once they were seated on the couch, Marcia looked at him. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

“Worried that Elissa’s mad at you?”

Marcia kept her own feelings in check, her voice soft and soothing. “Didn’t you always say she’s so gentle and considerate? She wouldn’t be upset

over something so trivial.”

That was true.

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Frank replayed the scene in his mind. The girl hadn’t even shed a tear.

She was probably fine.

Outside, Tanya Foster quickly grabbed Elissa’s hand and examined it, worry etched across her face. “Does it hurt?”

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“Not too bad,” Elissa replied.

Tanya’s grip was much gentler than the Murphy family’s maids had ever been.

After all these years, her skin had grown thick—she could withstand pain better than most.

Still, Tanya looked uneasy. “We should stop by the pharmacy later and grab some ointment. You could’ve dodged that slap, you *know*. Why let her hit you at all—?”

“It works better if she does.”

Elissa's voice was soft, almost light.

For once, Tanya was at a loss for words.

She always thought she understood Elissa, but today left her with a strange, unsettled feeling.

She knew Elissa's core better than anyone.

Pure, kind, resilient.

Elissa was always the bright one, always the optimist, like a little sun shining in her presence.

When Tanya stayed silent, Elissa fidgeted with her hands. "Do you think I'm too calculating?"

"Are you stupid or what?"

Tanya shot her a glare, but tears slipped from her eyes anyway. She wiped them away hard, then messed up Elissa's hair with a rough affection. "I'm upset because I care about you, you idiot!"

She couldn't imagine what Elissa had gone through to become so careful about reading people.

Back then, Elissa always took care of her, knowing Tanya's home life was

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rough.

But honestly-

It was always Elissa who had it the hardest.

Elissa felt something inside her relax and smiled. "No need to worry about me. It's all in the past."

Things were a thousand times better now.

“So, what do you want to eat? My treat.”

“Hmm...” Tanya thought for a moment, then clung to Elissa’s arm. “Let’s go grocery shopping and make hot pot at home, yeah?”

“Sounds perfect.”

This winter was colder than ever.

Perfect hot pot weather.

As their white Audi pulled out of the parking lot, a sleek black Bentley glided in through the entrance.

The two cars nearly brushed past each other.

Ian frowned at the familiar license plate. “Isn’t that Miss Elissa’s friend’s car? And there’s someone in the passenger seat. The party hasn’t even started yet—did she already leave?”

“What did you say?” Rowan asked quietly, glancing up from the tablet where he was working.

Evan checked the rearview mirror and chimed in, “Ian said Miss Elissa already left. That can’t be, Frank’s car is still there. I’m sure she came with Frank today, right?”

He hesitated. Was it just his imagination, or was Rowan’s gaze suddenly much sharper?

He hadn’t said anything wrong, had he? Couples coming to events together—wasn’t that normal?

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But Rowan’s icy stare faded the moment they stepped into the private lounge and spotted Marcia sitting beside Frank.

There was a strange tension in the air.

Bradley seemed to be arguing with Frank about something, but when Rowan entered, everyone turned on the charm and pretended nothing was amiss.

“Rowan!”

“Hey, Rowan’s here!”

Rowan swept his gaze around the room, tossed his gift to Bradley, and said, “Happy birthday.”

Bradley caught it and raised an eyebrow. “Thanks, Rowan.”

Rowan seemed distracted, his mood indifferent as he found a seat and glanced at Frank and Marcia, a sly smile tugging at his lips.

“No sign of your wife tonight?”

Ouch.

He didn’t pull any punches.

The atmosphere, already strained, grew even more awkward—enough to make your skin crawl.

Especially for the two who'd been gossiping earlier; they were seriously considering making a run for it.

Marcia's mouth twitched.

What was that supposed to mean?

If Elissa was “the wife at home,” then what did that make her? The one kept on the side?

And everyone knows what that means:

A mistress. The other woman. Someone best kept in the dark.

But that jab wasn't aimed at her—it was aimed at Frank.

Someone like Rowan would never stoop to picking on a woman.

Frank, however, looked unbothered. “Elissa had something to take care of,

so she left early.”

“Oh, so she was here?” Rowan's voice was casual, almost bored.