

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator

Yeah.”

Bradley chuckled, trying to smooth things over as he gestured toward the ornate box on the table. “She’s been swamped at work—just dropped off her gift and had to leave early.”

Rowan’s gaze lingered on the box, his dark eyes betraying nothing, but something flickered beneath the surface.

Just like that, the earlier scene faded into the background, the whole mess brushed aside without much fuss.

Everyone relaxed for the rest of the night, drinking and laughing until they were thoroughly satisfied.

Since Bradley was the man of the hour, he managed to hold onto enough sobriety to see his guests out.

“Be honest with me—what was that about today?”

After escorting the second-to-last group to the door, Bradley returned to the private room to find Rowan lounging there, those jet-black eyes

regarding him with cool detachment.

His voice was icy. “Well?”

Bradley, unsteady on his feet, flopped down beside him, head swimming. “Rowan, come on. It’s nothing more than a couple of jealous girls causing

drama.”

He hesitated, then leaned in, his tone turning sincere. “But listen—if you still care about little Elissa at all, if you still see her as your kid sister, you should tell her to get out of that marriage. She deserves better. This whole thing—it’s pointless.”

Rowan gave a short, humorless laugh, his voice edged with mockery. “She’s hell-bent on chasing after Frank. There’s no stopping her.”

For a moment, Bradley’s bloodshot eyes grew clear.

“Did it ever occur to you,” he said quietly, “that maybe she never really had a choice?”

Elissa’s situation in the Murphy family wasn’t exactly a secret among their inner circle. Outsiders might be fooled, but those who spent any real time with them knew Elissa never truly belonged.

Take that scandal online, for example. Matriarch Paige Murphy always claimed to dote on Elissa, but when it came down to it, the Murphys never said a word in her defense. Not even a hint of support.

If she were really their precious granddaughter, with all the Murphy family’s influence, wouldn’t they have raised hell with the Atwaters? But the Murphys did nothing—didn’t even bother to make a statement.

Bradley tried to remember exactly how Rowan had answered him then...

The next morning, as he stared up at his bedroom ceiling, fragments of the night slowly came back to him until he managed to piece together most of it.

Rowan had seemed calm, almost indifferent, though Bradley

remembered the faintest tremor as Rowan set down his glass. Still, his voice was as cold and steady as ever, tinged with a trace of scorn.

“She had choices, you know. She just doesn’t know her own worth.”

Bradley frowned, uneasy. He had the nagging feeling that things between Rowan and Elissa weren’t as simple as a falling out. There was more—some knot neither of them could untangle.

But whatever it was, it wasn’t his problem to solve.

He shuffled downstairs in his slippers to open the rest of his birthday presents.

Elissa’s gift was supposed to be a custom fountain pen—the one he’d spent months trying and failing to get. She always was thoughtful like that. She deserved the favoritism he’d shown her.

But after unwrapping everything, there was no sign of the pen.

He turned to the housekeeper. “That blue box I brought home. yesterday—where is it?”

The housekeeper thought for a moment, then shook her head. “I haven’t seen any blue box, sir.”

“That’s impossible.” Bradley jumped to his feet, grabbing his car keys and ready to drive over to Cloud Peak. He must have left it in the private

room.

Just then, the driver came in from the back garden and, hearing the commotion, hurried to stop him. “Sir, did you forget? Mr. Murphy took the box with him last night.”

“He took it?”

“Yeah. He asked you about it, but you didn’t answer. Mr. Murphy said your silence meant you agreed.”

Bradley was speechless. “Agreed” was a stretch—he’d been too drunk to know his own name.

Scratching his messy hair, Bradley knew there was no way he'd dare ask Rowan to give it back.

Still, as he trudged upstairs, he paused, reconsidered, and finally picked up his phone to call Rowan.

"Hey, Rowan. That box from last night—there's a peace charm inside that Elissa left behind. Make sure you give it back to her, okay?"

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ou're too busy, I can return it myself."

At the top floor of Murphy Group's headquarters, Rowan rolled the so-called "Peace Charm" between his fingers, his sharp, chiseled face

clouded with irritation.

Peace Charm, my ass.

This was from Mercy Chapel, and everyone knew those were always Love

Charms.

“I’ll return it,” Rowan said flatly.

“Alright,” Bradley breathed a sigh of relief.

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lan, who’d overheard the entire exchange, stared in disbelief as his boss calmly opened his wallet and tucked the charm away with meticulous

care.

Wait, what? Wasn’t he supposed to return it to Miss Elissa?

Before Ian could voice his shock, Evan knocked and entered, holding up another nearly identical Love Charm.

“Sir, your grandmother just had this delivered. She went to the chapel yesterday morning and swears it works wonders. She insists you keep it on you at all times.”

Rowan pinched the bridge of his nose. “Did she say anything else?”

Right then, his phone rang.

Janice’s cheerful voice rang out, “You got the Love Charm, right? I’m telling you, no wonder everyone wants one—these things really work! I’d barely left the chapel when I heard that doctor girl is getting divorced.”

“She’s single now! Don’t you dare judge her just because she’s divorced-” “Grandma.” Rowan cut her off without a second thought, his tone cool and

final, “That’s not the issue.”

“I’m just not interested in divorced women.”

—

Elissa didn’t realize the charm Mrs. Garrett had given her was missing

until the next day.

She even made a special trip to the clinic, hoping she’d left it in her office. Cliff happened to be passing by and glanced inside, surprised *to see* her rummaging under her desk. “Elissa? Aren’t you off today?”

Elissa straightened up, brushing dust from her hands. “Yeah, I lost something, just wanted to check if it was here.”

Cliff chuckled at the sight. “Any luck?”

“Nope.” She sighed, standing up. “Guess I must’ve dropped it somewhere else.”

Maybe she'd absentmindedly tossed it in her bag yesterday and lost it while grabbing something outside.

"What was it? Anything important?"

"Not really." Elissa smiled, looking up at him. "Weren't you supposed to give a lecture at Vistapeak University today? Why are you back so soon?" "A new hire just started. Dad wanted me to handle the onboarding myself."

She nodded—she wasn't surprised.

"Well, I won't keep you, then," she said.

Cliff hesitated. "Are you busy? Want to come meet the new girl? I figure you'll get along better than I would."

"Sure," Elissa agreed. After all, they'd be colleagues soon. No harm in getting acquainted.

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They headed downstairs together, but Elissa's friendly expression faded as soon as she saw who the newcomer was.

Marcia didn't seem surprised in the slightest, greeting her with a bright smile. "Elissa! What a coincidence."

"You two know each other?" Cliff asked, glancing between them.

Elissa nodded. "We do." She forced a thin smile. "Frank really went to great lengths for you."

When things didn't work out with her old mentor, he'd turned to the Rileys for help.

"Tell me about it," Marcia said, eager to regain some dignity after

yesterday's fiasco. "Elissa, looks like we'll be working together—hope we get along."

Elissa's eyes were cold. "Let's not get ahead of ourselves. Nothing's official yet."

Sensing the tension, Cliff quickly pulled Elissa aside into a nearby office and closed the door behind them.

"Are you and Frank getting divorced because of her?"

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"Yeah."

Elissa didn't bother to hide anything. Her expression was calm, almost indifferent. "But you don't need to go against your family over this."

Cliff's first business venture had been bankrolled by the Riley family.

Most of the time, the Rileys didn't interfere with the clinic's affairs. Every so often, they'd send someone over—it was nothing unusual.

"I could talk to them—"

“Cliff,”

Elissa gave a slight, knowing smile. “From what I know about Frank, he isn’t the type who likes to owe people favors. I’d guess he’s already worked out some kind of business deal with your family.”

Cliff’s expression darkened. “I’m sorry. They mentioned something to me before, but I didn’t put two and two together.”

“It’s not your fault.”

Elissa understood. “Frank’s the kind of person who, if you turn him down, will just find another way.”

Frank and Rowan, when it came right down to it, were cut from the same

cloth.

Neither would give up until they got what they wanted.

The only difference was, Frank worked with subtlety and charm, while Rowan went straight for the jugular.

When Elissa opened the door again, Marcia was waiting just outside, calm and composed.

Just as Elissa had said.

Frank had already made sure every detail was taken care of for her, so Marcia hadn't a thing to worry about,

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She extended her hand to Elissa, a smug smile on her lips. "So, is it safe to say you'll be looking out for me now?"

"Of course."

Elissa's expression didn't change. "Here at the clinic, I'm your senior. At home, I'm the woman of the house. Whether it's business or personal, looking out for you is simply my responsibility. No need for thanks."

With that, she ignored the way Marcia's face flushed a furious shade of crimson and walked away, unbothered.

Just after stepping out of the clinic, while waiting for her ride, a thought crossed her mind.

-She should buy a car.

After divorcing Frank, she'd taken two houses, but not a single car.

Relying on rideshares all the time wasn't a real solution.

That evening, when she got home, Tanya Foster listened to her idea and immediately agreed. "Absolutely. When do you want to go?"

"Tomorrow."

Elissa had always been this way

Once she'd made up her mind, she saw no reason to put things off.

The divorce had been the same.

The next morning, Elissa handled her appointments at the clinic, then headed alone to the dealership in the afternoon.

She spotted it almost instantly—a fire-red, limited edition 911 parked in the showroom, its lines/sleek and stunning.

The passenger door stood open, and an extravagant cascade of pale pink roses spilled gracefully onto the floor, each bloom delicate and fresh.

“We only got one of these in all of Vistapeak City this half year,” the sales associate explained, noticing her interest. “Before it even arrived, a

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generous client paid extra to reserve it for his wife. He should be coming by to pick it up later.”

“Very romantic,” Elissa said.

The truth was, she was just looking. That car was far beyond her budget.

Sure, the two houses she’d gotten in the divorce were worth plenty, but cash on hand was another story.

She’d always preferred the security of a solid bank balance.

After wandering the showroom for a while, she settled on a Panamera that was available for immediate delivery.

“Great choice!”

The sales associate rarely saw clients so decisive, but for wealthy folks, this was just how things went.

He did his best to keep a straight face, suppressing his grin, as he led Elissa to make the payment and pick up the car.

He even offered to arrange a “new car ceremony,” but Elissa waved him off. “No need. I can drive it away now, right?”

“Of course! My colleague already brought it around to the front for you. Let me take you there.”

His enthusiasm was boundless.

Clients like this—generous, decisive, and undemanding—were a dream

come true.

Elissa took the keys, a small, involuntary smile curving her lips. “Thank

you,”

It was the first major purchase she’d made since the divorce.

It felt significant in a way she couldn't quite put into words.

As if she was rewarding herself for having the courage to start over.

She was grateful she hadn't dragged things out, grateful she hadn't let

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herself get trapped in a miserable marriage.

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Elissa pulled open the car door, just about to climb in, when Marcia's voice drifted over from the front of the lot. "Elissa, what are you doing here?"

"Don't tell me you found out Frank was giving me a car and decided to follow us?"

Elissa frowned and glanced over her shoulder.

She wasn't alone—Frank was right beside her.

Dressed in a slate gray three-piece suit, he looked every bit the calm, elegant gentleman. Yet when he looked at her, there was something probing in his gaze. “What brings you here?”

Elissa rarely lost her temper, but moments like this could test the patience of a saint.

She should've checked her horoscope before leaving the house; who knew picking up a car could make her look like some obsessed stalker?

She rapped her slender knuckles against the hood. “I'm here to pick up my car. Isn't that obvious?”

“Tired of the ones you have at home?”

Frank's tone slipped back into its usual gentle warmth. “Why didn't you tell me what kind you wanted? I could have had Bernard drop it off at your place.”

Bernard was his assistant.

Over the past three years, most of the luxury handbags and jewelry in her closet had shown up on her birthdays or anniversaries, delivered—most likely even chosen—by Bernard.

In many ways, Bernárd felt more like her husband than Frank ever did.

Because Frank was Marcia's husband.

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“Mr. Atwater, you're here!”

The sales director bustled out from the showroom, beaming obsequiously at Marcia. “Mrs. Atwater, your car is inside. We've set up the handover ceremony just the way Mr. Atwater requested. I'm sure you'll love it!”

Mrs. Atwater.

Elissa calmly looked away and turned to get in her car.

“Elissa-”

Frank strode forward and caught her car door, not letting her leave. “They’re the ones who have the wrong idea about Marcia and me. Don’t take it to heart.”

Sometimes Elissa just couldn’t figure Frank out.

How could someone be so thoroughly two-faced?

Or maybe that was just a man’s nature.

He was the one who couldn’t let go of Marcia, the one always by her side, and yet he never wanted to admit it in front of Elissa.

Did Frank see her as anything more than obedient and naïve? Maybe that’s why he always thought she was so easy to fool.

“Frank,” Elissa said, surprisingly calm, her voice cool and even. “You don’t owe me an explanation. If anything, you should be explaining to them.”

She lifted her chin, eyes landing on the group of salespeople eavesdropping nearby.

“They’re the ones misunderstanding your relationship with Marcia. Not me.”

“Elissa...”

Frank’s gaze stayed soft, coaxing. “If I try to explain now, they’ll just gossip about Marcia. Let’s just drop it, alright?”

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“Alright,” Elissa replied, feeling suddenly weary. She pulled at the door he was still gripping. “Can you let go now? Go on, accompany Marcia for her big moment. Don’t keep her waiting.”

That limited-edition sports car in the showroom, the one surrounded by a thousand red roses, had finally found its rightful owner.

She could guess how much effort Frank had put into arranging Marcia's special handover ceremony.

Frank's eyes lingered on her face, as if searching for a hint of genuine emotion behind her smile. "So... I'll go, then?"

"Go ahead," she said, her expression as serene and gentle as ever.

After all, they were already divorced.

Why should it matter to her where he went or who he was with?

Oddly enough, for all her calm words and tranquil expression, something felt off to Frank.

He'd always wanted her to be obedient.

But now, faced with her complete indifference, her willingness to let him go without a trace of feeling, he wondered if that was really what he wanted after all.

His chest felt heavy, as if a soaked sponge pressed against his heart. On impulse, he tightened his hold on her door. "Forget it. I'll skip the

ceremony. I'll take you home first."

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It wasn't just Marcia who was stunned.

Elissa, too, was caught off guard.

She looked up, forcing herself to stay calm as she spoke. "*You* either explain things to them properly, or you go with Marcia to pick up the car.

But make a choice."

She could accept his infidelity. She could even help clear things up for

them.

But being left in the dark—she wouldn't accept that.

If he just walked away with her like this, everyone else would assume

Marcia was Mrs. Atwater.

And what would that make her? Clearly, the “other woman” who ruined someone else's marriage.

Frank pressed his lips into a thin line. “Elissa, listen-”

“Mr. Atwater, I have things to take care of. I'll be going now.”

Elissa could see his hesitation and made the decision for him.

Her voice was steady, not too loud nor too soft, just enough for everyone nearby to hear clearly.

By calling him “Mr. Atwater,” she drew a clear line between them.

The sales director, ever the smooth operator, smiled at Frank and said, “Oh, Mr. Atwater, so this lady’s a friend of yours! If you’d let me know, I’d have offered *you* a better deal.”

“...Right.”

The moment Frank replied, Elissa shut the car door and drove off without looking back.

Marcia slipped her arm through Frank’s and beamed. “For a second there,

I thought you’d forgotten we were supposed to take a stroll through,

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Cresthaven after picking up the car.”

Only now did Frank tear his gaze away from the direction Elissa had disappeared.

“I didn’t forget.”

But his voice sounded much colder.

Marcia noticed and jostled his arm playfully. “That’s where we first met, you know. Why are you so distracted?”

At an intersection, Elissa eased her foot onto the brake as the light turned red. Just then, a WhatsApp message from Frank popped up.

She didn’t even bother opening it. Instead, she answered the incoming

call.

“Professor.”

Aaron’s deep, warm voice came through. “Elissa, I wanted to ask your opinion about something.”

She was puzzled. “Of course, go ahead.”

“Do *you* remember last time your brother... Rowan came by the house?”

Aaron spoke a bit too quickly and was nudged by Jacqueline beside him. He cleared his throat and continued, “He’s got a cancer drug research project in the works, and he needs a team with expertise in traditional medicine.”

“I was going to have Cliff and his team handle it and not trouble you, but Jacqueline thinks we should ask if you’re interested.”

The light turned green.

Elissa pressed gently on the gas and answered without hesitation, “Professor, I’d like to be involved.”

She’d chosen medicine to save lives, after all.

There were more patients than she could ever see in a clinic, no matter

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how many hours she worked.

And these were cancer patients...

Murphy Group owned the most advanced labs in the country, staffed with top minds in the field.

Working with them—for the sake of the cause—Elissa had *no* reason to hesitate.

On a personal level, she wasn't about to let her private life interfere with something so important.

Aaron sounded surprised. "You don't want to think it over? If you join the project, you'll have to go to Murphy Group often, and that means you'll probably run into Rowan..."

"I've thought it through, Professor."

Elissa cut in with a smile, reassuring him instead. “You don’t have to worry. Murphy Group is huge. It’s not like I’ll run into Rowan every single time I’m there.”

Aaron chuckled. “That’s true. It’s a fantastic project, and if you’re sure, I’m glad.”

He couldn’t help but start planning ahead for her. “Once this drug is developed, your reputation will be impossible to hide. By then, even Matriarch Paige Murphy won’t be able to stand in your way.”

As a *core* member of the cancer drug development team, Elissa would have real influence.

After this, even Matriarch Paige Murphy would have to think twice before trying to make trouble for her.

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Elissa didn’t overthink it. “That’ll only matter if the research actually

succeeds.”

“With your talent, I have no doubt it will.”

No one understood her abilities better than Aaron did.

He hung up the phone, looking at his wife with a touch of amazement. “I never would’ve guessed—you know that girl better than I do.”

Jacqueline grinned. “Of course. Elissa might turn down almost any project, but when it comes to something that could save lives, she never hesitates.”

—

Cresthaven was less than two hundred kilometers from Vistapeak City. Frank had a shareholders’ meeting the next morning, so he and Marcia didn’t stay the night. Instead, the two of them drove back to Vistapeak City in the dark.

Even at this late hour, the city’s roads glimmered with endless streams of

cars.

Frank's limited edition red Porsche 911 roared down the avenue and, when it stopped at a traffic light, drew a flurry of cellphone cameras from passing pedestrians.

Marcia's sense of vanity was thoroughly satisfied.

"Frank, I had a wonderful time today. Thank you...." She tilted her head, glancing at the passenger seat, only to find Frank staring off into space.

It took him two or three seconds to snap out of it and look her way. "Sorry, what did you say?"

"You're distracted again!" Marcia pouted, though anxiety was already creeping into her chest.

Yes, Frank had kept his promise and accompanied her back to

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Cresthaven that afternoon. But the whole time, he kept glancing at his phone, restless and preoccupied, drifting off into his own thoughts.

Frank rubbed his brow, exhaustion etched into his features. “It’s late. I’m just tired, that’s all.”

“Tired? Or is your mind somewhere else...”

-With that wretched Elissa.

Marcia choked on the rest of her words. She knew Frank would never

admit it. Instead, he’d only keep reminding himself to face his feelings

for Elissa.

But no matter how much she tried, the mood in the car plummeted.

When they finally pulled up to Greenwood Manor, Frank didn’t even wait for her. He marched straight inside and up the stairs, each step betraying his impatience. It was as if he was desperate to confirm something.

He paused outside the master bedroom, knocked lightly. When no answer came, he twisted the handle and slipped inside.

The room was dark, the lights off, shadows pooling in every corner.

Frank moved quietly, sitting on the edge of the bed. “Little Elissa, today...”

His words trailed off as he realized, by the pale wash of moonlight, that the bed was perfectly made-untouched, not a single crease.

Elissa hadn’t come home.

A wave of panic washed over him. He flicked on the lights and scanned

the room.

Her skincare bottles were still lined up neatly on the vanity. The walk-in closet looked untouched-her things were all there.

But... something felt off.

His gaze drifted to the large bookshelf that spanned one wall. Only a few lonely books remained; his brow furrowed. Wasn't this shelf packed full before?

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Marcia hurried in after him, feigning innocence. "What's wrong, Frank? Elissa isn't home at this hour?"

He nodded. "Yeah."

She must be upset.

She hadn't even replied to his messages, let alone *come* home.

Seeing that he didn't ask any more questions, Marcia breathed a quiet sigh of relief.

That woman... Not only had she moved out, she'd been afraid Frank wouldn't notice, so she cleared out the whole closet.

Thankfully, Marcia had planned ahead, filling the empty closet and bedroom with some of her own clothes.

She was just starting to relax, thinking she had fooled him, when Frank suddenly frowned and strode out of the room.

She hurried after him. "What's wrong?"

"I need to check something."

Frank's expression was grim, his steps growing faster and faster. He couldn't rest until he knew for sure.

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Edna was still deep in a dream when a sharp, insistent knocking at her door jolted her awake.

She hurried to open it, and the sight of Frank's grim face instantly set her nerves on edge. "Sir, is something wrong?"

Frank's gaze was piercing. "When was the last time Mrs. Atwater came home?"

Standing to the side, Marcia clenched her manicured fingers so tightly into her palm that her knuckles whitened.

That woman had finally moved out.

Marcia had only just begun to relish her days as lady of the house, and the last thing she wanted was to see Elissa's shadow darken the doorway again.

"Mrs. Atwater? She comes home every night..." Edna feigned confusion but recovered quickly. "Oh—wait. Not tonight. Mrs. Atwater's

mother-in-law's eightieth birthday is coming up. Mrs. Atwater was called back to the family estate to help with arrangements."

Marcia's eyes flashed with surprise, a dozen questions swirling in her

mind.

Why was Edna covering for Elissa's absence as well? Did she, too, think that Marcia was better suited to run the household?

The thought made Marcia's lips curl into a satisfied smirk. She turned to Frank. "Come on, it's just one night. Do you really have to be so suspicious about Elissa?"

Frank ignored her, his gaze still fixed on Edna. "What about the books in her study? Why are there only a few left on her shelves?"

Edna froze for a split second.

But she forced herself to sound confident. "There were only ever a few,

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sir. Perhaps you're misremembering?"

"Is that so?"

Frank wasn't sure anymore. Since their marriage, he and Elissa had been little more than distant roommates, each using busy schedules as an excuse to sleep in separate rooms.

He'd barely spent any time in the master bedroom, much less noticed how many books she kept there.

Marcia stifled a yawn. "Edna is always meticulous. If she says so, why won't you believe her?"

Frank hesitated, then nodded. Edna had served the Atwater family for decades; she would never side with Elissa against him. And besides, Elissa would never move out without a word. All those girlfriends his friends had—whenever they were upset, there'd be tears, sulking,

demands to be coaxed back.

Still, he remembered the look on Elissa's face at the dealership that afternoon. She hadn't been happy.

Maybe he ought to make it up to her.

The next day, Serenity Wellness Clinic.

Elissa pulled into the parking lot. The moment she stepped out, a flashy red Porsche 911 screeched into the space next to her, commanding

everyone's attention.

Several coworkers stopped in their tracks, gawking.

"Oh my god, how much do you think that car costs..."

"I don't know, but I do know it's not something any of us could ever hope to afford, no matter how hard we worked."

"Just goes to show what being born lucky can get you."

Elissa didn't say a word. She calmly averted her gaze and strode toward the clinic.

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"Elissa."

Behind her, Marcia hopped out of the Porsche and hurried to catch up. “Guess we’re colleagues now. No need to act so high and mighty, right?”

A few coworkers nearby stared in disbelief.

Since when did people like them get to work with someone this rich?

Elissa lifted her gaze, regarding Marcia coolly. “Are *you* looking for another round of public humiliation?”

Marcia’s words caught in her throat.

She still remembered, all too well, the cutting things Elissa had said at the clinic the other day—something about the ‘real wife’ and the ‘other

woman.’

Afraid Elissa might embarrass her again in front of everyone, Marcia quickly backed down. There’d be time to get even later. She refused to believe she wouldn’t find a way to put that woman in her place.

As Marcia fell silent, Elissa turned on her heel and strode into the clinic.

She'd scheduled a full day's worth of appointments and wouldn't be off until evening. Hanging up her wool coat in the office, she changed into her white coat and began calling in patients.

Her patients loved her—she was never late, and often started early.

At lunchtime,, *too* lazy to venture to the cafeteria, she was mulling over

what to order for takeout when someone knocked at her office door.

Elissa looked up instinctively to see Cliff stepping in, a thermos in hand. He closed the door behind him, his concerned eyes searching her face.

“You alright? I heard Marcia gave you a hard time this morning.”

Elissa offered a wry smile. “Are you sure that's the version you heard?”

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Seeing she was in a decent mood, Cliff couldn't help but laugh. "Word is, it's rare to see Dr. Drummond not put on a friendly face, so everyone's wondering if there's some drama between you and Marcia."

Elissa didn't reply, just eyed what he was holding. "Is that for me?"

"Yeah."

Cliff set the insulated container on the table in front of her. "Braised chicken, roasted eggplant, and tangy sautéed cabbage. Jacqueline made sure I brought these just for you."

The moment Elissa lifted the lid, a delicious aroma wafted out. She immediately grabbed a piece of eggplant. "You stopped by Professor's house?"

"Yep. Had a chat with him about the Murphy Group project."

Cliff took the seat across from her. "How's it taste?"

"It's fantastic, as always."

Elissa grinned. “Did you eat already?”

“L”

Cliff hesitated, his gentle gaze lingering on her face, a smile tugging at his lips. “Not yet.”

“Then eat with me.”

Elissa pulled a disposable fork from her drawer and handed it to him, then asked, “So, what’s up with the Murphy Group project? When does it

start?”

“Let’s eat first,” Cliff checked his watch. “Project talk can wait until you’re off work tonight.”

“Oh, by the way–Marcia... Mr. Garcia’s taken her on as his apprentice.”

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Elissa's hand paused mid-bite, but she didn't look surprised.

When it came to Marcia, Frank always made sure every angle was covered.

At this clinic, aside from the Professor, the other cornerstone was William Garcia.

Elissa nodded. "Having William look after her is a good thing. At least there won't be any major mistakes."

Just before her shift ended, Elissa had finished an acupuncture session when her phone buzzed in her pocket.

A message from Frank: [Elissa, I'll pick you up after work.]

Her brow furrowed slightly—she wanted to say no.

She was still searching for a good excuse when a nurse suddenly called out, “Dr. Drummond! A patient just fainted!”

Elissa’s nerves tightened. She shoved her phone back into her pocket and rushed over.

She pressed her fingers to the patient’s wrist, quickly studying his complexion. “Get me a lancet, now!”

A nurse hurried over with the needle.

Elissa took it and, with steady hands, pricked the patient’s fingertips, drawing a few drops of blood.

Moments later, someone in the crowd called out excitedly, “He’s awake! He’s coming to!”

“Bring the stretcher over—don’t let him move on his own yet.”

Elissa kept her hands steady, instructing a nurse to hold the patient still. “You nearly had a stroke. Don’t try to move.”

A few patients in the crowd looked at her with admiration. “Dr. Elissa’s skills are legendary...”

12-18

“Tell me about it!” one of her regulars chimed in proudly. “She’s the reason my ten-year illness finally got sorted!”

Across the room, Marcia’s eyes flashed with envy.

Why?

Back in college, she’d been the prodigy, the one the professor always praised.

So why was the clinic’s rising star now Elissa—someone even younger

than her?

Before leaving the exam room, Elissa gave firm instructions. “Take your medicine twice a day, and remember your daily acupuncture sessions. Don’t get careless—your condition could turn serious if you do.”

“Of course, thank you, Dr. Drummond.”

The patient was sincerely grateful.

Elissa changed out of her scrubs and headed for the clinic entrance. As she spotted the familiar Maybach parked out front, she realized she still hadn’t replied to Frank’s message.

Before she could react, the man had already stepped out and was walking toward her.

Scenes like this weren’t new. Sometimes after family dinners, Frank would swing by to pick her up so they could head home together.

The only difference? He never used to get out of the car—just waited for

her inside.

Still, Elissa had always looked forward to it.

She used to be the kind of wife who hoped for a little romance from her

husband.

“Frank!”

Behind her, Marcia suddenly darted past, hurrying over to the man and stopping right in front of him. She put on her sweetest voice. “You’re so

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thoughtful, coming to pick me up after work!”

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A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator

Chapter 69

She hadn't planned for Frank to pick her up after work.

Yet standing here now, looking at this scene, she couldn't help but feel a twinge of irony.

Frank gently disentangled himself from the woman in his arms, about to say something, when a few sharp-eyed colleagues broke into teasing laughter.

"Marcia, is this your boyfriend?"

All day at work, Marcia had been casually showing off, dropping hints about her incredible boyfriend—tall, handsome, gentle, and loaded.

That fancy sports car parked outside this morning? A gift from her boyfriend.

And now, seeing him in person, no one could say she'd exaggerated. He really was the complete package.

Actually, he was even a cut above the usual rich, good-looking

types—there was a refinement about him, an easy grace that set him apart.

Marcia tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, a little embarrassed, and smiled at Frank. “Frank, these are my colleagues.”

Frank’s brow was furrowed. When he glanced up again, Elissa was already walking away.

He didn’t reply, and everyone just assumed he was the reserved type.

Besides, with that much money and status, who wouldn’t be a little aloof?

As soon as Marcia and Frank drove off, the group of women erupted with

envy.

“My God, what kind of luck does Marcia have? It’s enough that her boyfriend’s rich, but he’s also that handsome? And on top of all that, he comes to pick her up after work like some kind of prince?”

12:18

“Seriously... I’d give up ten years of my life for a boyfriend like that.”

“I’ll trade twelve years!”

“Oh, so it’s a competition now?”

After all, life’s about quality, not quantity!

To live even a single day in that world—driving a limited-edition sports car to work—would be worth it.

Elissa had just started her car when the passenger door opened.

Cliff raised an eyebrow. “Want to grab dinner?”

She gathered herself, remembering they needed to discuss the Murphy Group project, and smiled. “Where to?”

He sent the location to her phone. “There’s a new place nearby. It’s supposed to be good.”

“Sounds great.”

Elissa set the GPS and drove off.

In the rearview mirror, the black Maybach still hadn’t moved.

The clinic’s parking lot required a loop before reaching the exit, so Frank had a clear view as Cliff hopped into Elissa’s car with practiced ease.

Through the windshield, he saw her smiling—warm, animated, so alive.

So, she didn’t just save that smile for him.

Marcia caught the flash of irritation in Frank's eyes and seized the moment, her tone light and bright. "That's Cliff—the future heir to Riley Pharmaceuticals. This clinic actually belongs to his family."

"Elissa and Cliff are really close. They hang out together all the time after

work..."

Frank felt something wild and uneasy churning inside him. Irritated, he muttered, "He's just her college mentor. Of course they'd be close."

12:18

"Well, who knows? I heard he stopped by her office around lunchtime. today. They were alone for ages."

Marcia lowered her voice. "Elissa's still so young, you know? She's never really settled on anything. It wouldn't be weird if she bounced from one guy to another..."

"Enough!" Frank's tone snapped cold.

“I know her better than you do. Elissa’s always been straightforward. She wanted to marry me from the start—she wouldn’t just change her mind, let alone leave me so easily.”

Cliff had a real knack for food, and the restaurants he picked were rarely disappointing.

Tonight’s spot was quiet and inviting.

Knowing her tastes, Cliff had already ordered their meal on the way over.

Since their dinner was a last-minute idea, there were no private rooms left, so the waiter showed them to a cozy booth.

As Elissa enjoyed a meal that actually suited her palate, she didn’t forget the reason they’d met up. “Cliff, when does Murphy Group need us to join the project?”

“Pretty soon,” Cliff said, using the serving fork to put some

sweet-and-sour ribs on her plate. “No exact date yet, but with projects like this, the schedule’s never really up to us. We just have to be ready to jump in whenever they call.”

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator

Chapter 70

“We’ll probably have to visit the Murphy Group a lot in the coming weeks...”

Cliff trailed off, glancing hesitantly at Elissa to gauge her reaction.

The Murphy Group owned two office towers, with both the labs and the research institute housed inside. While the odds of running into Rowan

weren’t high, it wasn’t impossible either.

Elissa gave a resigned little smile. “Why do you sound just like our advisor?”

She set her fork down and spoke with careful seriousness. “Cliff, don’t worry. I know how to keep things separate—I won’t let personal business get in the way of our work.”

Up on the second floor of the restaurant, the door to a private dining room stood open. A tall man leaned against the railing outside, his long fingers drumming idly as he stared down at the pair below.

The girl who always kept her distance from him now sat there, perfectly well-behaved, saying who-knows-what to another man.

“Rowan, what are you staring at? You’ve been out here all evening.”

A man about Rowan’s age stepped out to join him, following his gaze downstairs before letting out a low whistle. “Oh, I see. Checking up on your sister, huh?”

“...Get lost,” Rowan shot back, glancing over with a smirk as he shoved his hands into his pockets and started down the stairs. “You handle the rest of the meeting. I’m heading out.”

“Sure. I’ll tell them you had an urgent call,” Rex Wilkinson replied, shaking his head with a look of mock regret at the man sitting across from Elissa.

Brave, he thought. Real brave,

He'd fall for anyone.

12.10

Elissa had just managed to reassure Cliff when she saw Rowan approaching, his expression shadowed and unreadable.

She froze for a moment—she hadn't expected to run into him here. Instinctively, she started to turn away, pretending she hadn't noticed.

Too late. Rowan was already at their table.

Cliff stood up with a smile. "Mr. Murphy! What a coincidence. Are you here for dinner too?"

Rowan nodded slightly. "Yes."

Yes? Cliff hesitated, unsure what to make of that.

Trying to be polite, he offered, "Are you meeting someone? You're welcome to join us if—"

“Sure,” Rowan cut in before he’d finished, then glanced at Elissa. “Move over a bit, little sister?”

Elissa bit her tongue—she’d just promised Cliff she’d keep personal and professional matters separate...

She took a steadying breath, reminding herself Rowan was just another big-shot client, and shifted over to make room.

Even seated, Rowan’s height and presence were impossible to ignore. Elissa caught the faint, familiar scent of his cologne—dark and

woody—lingering in the air.

Cliff seemed a little surprised, but quickly regained his composure. Experienced as he was with business dinners, he simply gestured to a server. “Mr. Murphy, would *you* like to order anything else?”

Rowan glanced over the table: pan-seared tofu, sautéed celery and leeks, sweet-and-sour ribs, braised fish....

He set the menu aside with an indifferent air. “No, this is fine. I happen to like these dishes too.”

Too.

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The word landed strangely in Elissa’s ears.

After nine years, her tastes had become uncannily similar to Rowan’s.

The rest of the meal felt like walking on eggshells. Elissa could hardly swallow a bite.

When she finished the last sip of coconut water, Cliff gave a polite smile. “Sorry the arrangements were so rushed today. Next time, I’ll treat you properly, Mr. Murphy.”

“Today was fine,” Rowan replied, his tone cool and distant—the voice of someone used to being in charge.

Whatever. Elissa just wanted the dinner to be over.

She got up along with Cliff. “Cliff, let me walk you out.”

“My driver’s parked outside—he can drop you off,” Rowan interjected, his lips curling in a faint, unreadable smile. “I need to talk to my sister about something.”

Sister, sister. Was he out of his mind?

Every time Cliff was around, he’d call her his “little sister” without fail.