

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator

Since the whole point was to avoid Cliff, this had to be a personal matter.

Elissa's expression darkened; the politeness vanished from her voice. "Mr. Murphy, I don't recall there being anything between us that needs a private conversation."

Rowan gave her a sidelong look, his gaze and posture both cool and detached. "Bradley asked me to return something to you on his behalf. Don't want it?"

Elissa fell silent, then turned to Cliff. "Cliff, you should head out first."

Cliff hesitated, uneasy, but considering the two of them were supposed to be siblings, he figured Rowan wouldn't do anything out of line. He

e gave Elissa a reassuring nod and left.

The moment Cliff was gone, Elissa held out her hand to Rowan. "Well? What is it?"

Rowan didn't even bother to look at her. He slid one hand into his pocket and simply strode toward the exit.

Elissa racked her brain, but couldn't think of anything she'd left with Bradley. With no other choice, she followed Rowan outside.

Somehow, Rowan managed to find her car right away. He stopped in front of it, tugged at the door handle. When nothing happened, he finally looked up at her.

Elissa took a slow, steadying breath. "You need to give something back, and it has to be in the car?"

"My car's taking Cliff home. Aren't you going to give me a ride?"

Not my idea, she thought, but she remembered how, just a few days ago at the Murphy house, Rowan had helped her out. With a resigned sigh, she unlocked the doors.

Rowan settled into the passenger seat with practiced ease and handed

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her a small charm, his voice low and unreadable. "You really think this is going to win Frank back?"

Elissa instantly recognized the peace charm Mrs. Garrett had given her. She took it, stuffed it into her bag, and shot Rowan a frosty look. “That’s none of your business.”

She didn’t bother with any further conversation. “Where am I dropping you off?”

Rowan didn’t seem the least bit ruffled. “Juniper Road.”

“Juniper Road?” Elissa blinked in surprise.

Rowan glanced over, eyebrow raised. “I live on Juniper Road. Is that a problem?”

“No, it’s fine...” she muttered, just surprised at the coincidence.

The rest of the drive passed in silence.

When they finally reached Juniper Road, Elissa broke the quiet. “Which building?”

No response. She turned her head and found Rowan had already drifted off, long lashes resting against his cheek, sharp features softened in sleep.

“Ro-” She started to call his name, but stopped herself, lost in thought. Instead, she pulled out her phone and unblocked Ian’s number.

She sent him a quick message, asking for the exact address.

Ian’s reply came almost instantly, so eager he sounded like he might leap. from his seat:
[Miss, it’s Rivercross Residence.]

Rivercross Residence.

It was practically next door to her place—a private estate everyone in Vistapeak City had heard rumors about. The lakeside road leading up to it had been bought out entirely for privacy. No one really knew which big shot actually lived there.

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Apparently, it was Rowan.

Thanks to Ian, who no doubt had given security a heads-up, the gate arm lifted as soon as her car approached.

She drove slowly down the lakeside road. It was deep winter, and a thin layer of ice glazed the water on both sides. Just looking at it made her

shiver.

Yet strangely, for reasons she couldn't explain, she felt at ease.

"We here?" Rowan's voice startled her—a low, husky rumble, softer than usual, stripped of its typical frost.

Night had fallen; the car was cloaked in quiet.

It felt just like the old days, when he'd patiently pick her up from her evening lessons, night after night. Back then, it was her who always fell asleep in the passenger seat.

Rowan never woke her. He'd just carry her inside, letting her sleep right through till morning.

The car jolted, tires slipping a bit on a patch of ice, pulling Elissa out of her thoughts. She pressed her lips together. “Yeah, we’re here.”

Rowan didn’t seem to notice her distraction. “Heard from Mr. Blaine you’re joining the project?”

“Yeah.” Elissa parked in front of the main building and turned to look at him, her delicate features tinged with uncertainty. “Is that... okay?”

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Rowan’s lips curled into a half-smirk. “So if I say no, you’ll just give up on joining?”

Elissa couldn’t quite read him, but she needed this project and didn’t want to cross him. “It’s your project, Rowan. Of course I’ll respect your

decision.”

Ever since she married Frank, she and Rowan had grown so distant, they were practically strangers.

A beat of silence hung in the air before Rowan let out a soft, mocking laugh. His eyes had gone cold and sharp. “Then don’t bother coming.”

With that, he pushed open the car door, swung his long legs out, and walked away.

Elissa sat there, stunned. She couldn't even pinpoint what she'd said wrong—he'd flipped from civil to hostile in a second.

Fine. If he doesn't want me, then I won't go!

But the sting of rejection lingered. That night, unable to shake it off, she dreamed she was desperately pleading with Rowan. "Rowan, if you don't let me join, I'll never speak to you again!"

He arched a brow, eyes glinting with mischief. "What did you just call me?"

"I'm sorry, big brother!"

Elissa jolted awake, heart pounding as she stared at the dark ceiling.

It took her a long moment to steady her breath.

She and Rowan were nothing to each other now. There was no going back to the reckless squabbles of their childhood.

She switched on the lamp and padded into the living room, rummaging through her bag for the peace charm. Back in her bedroom, as she slid it beneath her pillow, she paused.

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Something about this peace charm seemed... different from the one

before.

When Elissa returned to work at the clinic, Marcia had suddenly become the envy of all the women there.

Even in the cafeteria, Marcia was surrounded by a gaggle of young

women. When Elissa passed by with her lunch tray, one of them

cheerfully patted the empty seat beside her. "Elissa, come sit with us!"

“Thanks.” Elissa accepted, sitting quietly and eating her lunch, content to stay out of their chatter.

Marcia, ever the gracious one, set a box of glistening cherries on the table, smiling warmly. “These just came in from overseas this morning. Who wants to go wash them so we can share?”

“Wow, thanks!”

The girls’ eyes widened at the sight of the plump, golden fruit. “Marcia, you must be loaded!”

“Seriously, how did you land such a generous, high-flying boyfriend?”

Pressed by their eager questions, Marcia blushed. “Oh, we’ve known each other since we were kids. And, well—it wasn’t me chasing after him...”

“No way!” The girls giggled, both jealous and curious. “So you’re childhood sweethearts, and he was the one who made the first move?”

“Ugh, that’s like a fairytale–rich girl and golden boy, totally made for each other. We can’t compete...”

“So, Marcia, when are you two getting married? Some of us single girls. could use a little good luck!”

Marcia laughed, a secretive glint in her eye. “Soon, hopefully. There are just a few things to sort out. When the wedding’s set, you’re all invited.”

“Can’t wait!” the girls chimed in.

“Dr. Drummond,” Marcia turned to Elissa, her smile bright, “you have to promise you’ll come too.”

Elissa dabbed her mouth with a napkin and gave Marcia a cool, sidelong. glance. “You know, lunchtime really is the best time for daydreaming.”

With that, she rose, tray in hand, and left without another word.

Marcia hadn’t expected her to be so shameless–she’d practically spelled everything out, and Elissa was still clinging to her Mrs. Frank title!

And she'd even dared to mock her in front of everyone.

Marcia took a deep breath, forcing down her irritation, when one of the girls tried to comfort her. "Don't take it to heart, Marcia. Elissa just got divorced—she probably isn't in the mood for this kind of talk."—

Marcia's eyes widened. "Divorced?"

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"Yes, that's right."

The girl only knew about it after overhearing Elissa and Janice talking the other day. She lowered her voice, "But Elissa probably doesn't want too many people finding out. I just happened to hear it by accident."

"Don't tell anyone else, okay?"

"Don't worry. We won't."

Marcia patted her shoulder, eager to leave. "I'm full. You guys take your

time.”

She strode out of the dining hall, eyes dancing with delight. Without hesitation, she pulled out her phone and dialed Frank.

“Frank! I just heard something, and I wasn’t sure if I should tell you, but I don’t think I should keep it from you...”

Frank was still in the meeting, his voice calm. “What is it?”

“It’s about Elissa and Cliff. Their relationship might really be more than it

seems.”

Frank frowned, about to respond, when Marcia hurried on, “I heard from someone at the clinic that Elissa said herself—she’s already divorced.”

“Everyone knows about it now. I was shocked when I heard.”

Frank shot up from his seat and strode out of the conference room. “What did you say?”

“Frank...” Marcia’s voice was tentative, careful. “She might’ve been cheating on you.”

Unbeknownst to Frank, Elissa—the supposed cheater—was on her way to Atwater Manor.

Early that morning, Carmela had called, asking her to come over. She said that even though they’d agreed verbally before, it would be best to have

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something in writing.

Elissa had no objections. She’d already received the house and the money; signing a contract was the least she could do.

After finishing her meal, she returned to her clinic, grabbed her bag, and

headed out.

At this hour, Atwater Manor was quiet as ever.

Old Mrs. Atwater was taking her usual afternoon nap—she was a light sleeper—so the housekeepers moved about softly, careful not to make any noise.

When Elissa arrived, the butler led her straight to the tea room.

Because of the last time, when Elissa had driven a hard bargain, Carmela was noticeably colder. She slid the prepared agreement across the table.

“Sign it.”

Elissa’s slender fingers flipped open the first page. She didn’t bother with small talk, instead asking directly, “When will the divorce papers be ready?”

“You’re in that much of a hurry?” Carmela stared at her, as if seeing her for the first time. “Has being married into the Atwater family been such a burden? Elissa, tell me honestly—after all these years, have we ever treated you unfairly?”

The words struck Elissa as oddly familiar.

It took her a moment to remember: the last time she'd visited the Murphy family, Matriarch Paige Murphy had said nearly the same thing.

Everyone seemed to think they could demand an answer from her with such confidence.

But what about her? Had she ever wronged anyone?

She didn't want to get dragged into another endless debate over her own worth.

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Elissa lowered her gaze, her voice emotionless. "Ms. Carmela, the delay in the divorce doesn't really affect me."

"But it will make it harder for you to find Frank a new wife. What decent family would let their daughter get involved with a married man?"

That, at least, struck a chord with Carmela.

Her expression softened a little. “Don’t worry, I want those papers finalized even more than you do. At the latest, everything will be ready by the time of Grandmother’s eightieth birthday.”

That was soon—just four days away.

Elissa didn’t press further. She rested her finger on a particular clause in the agreement. “If you don’t change this, I can’t sign.”

The clause stated that Elissa was not to tell Frank about the divorce until Carmela allowed it.

So far, so reasonable.

But the second half read: If Frank found out about the divorce in advance, it would be considered a breach of contract, and Elissa would owe a

five-million-dollar penalty.

Before Carmela could erupt, Elissa spoke, calm and composed:

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“I can only promise not to bring this up with Frank myself. But if he figures. it out, or hears it from someone else, that’s out of my hands.”

“If you don’t say it, and I don’t say it, how else would he ever find out?”

Carmela’s resistance was clear. “Elissa, the Atwater family’s money doesn’t just grow on-”

She didn’t get to finish. Elissa’s phone rang abruptly.

Frank’s name lit up the screen.

She answered, and Frank’s voice came through at once. “Elissa, why is someone spreading rumors about us getting divorced?”

Elissa made no effort to avoid Carmela’s gaze; both of them heard him

loud and clear.

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Carmela shot her a warning glare, silently forbidding her from telling the truth.

Elissa pressed her lips together, her tone measured and utterly unruffled. “Who’s saying that? How could I possibly get divorced on my own?”

“Where are you?”

“I’m at the old house, having tea with Mom,” Elissa replied, sounding perfectly dutiful.

Hearing this, Frank seemed to relax a bit. He checked the time and said, “I’ll come pick you up **once** I’m finished here.”

“Alright.”

Elissa agreed without hesitation. When she hung up, she looked at Carmela. “See? I didn’t say a word.”

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Carmela took a deep breath and told the butler to fetch the family lawyer.

She wanted the contract amended on the spot.

Once the papers were signed, the familiar voice of Old Mrs. Atwater drifted in from the sitting room.

Carmela turned to Elissa with a final instruction. “Grandma’s blood

pressure has been unstable. I haven’t told her about the divorce, so don’t you let it slip either.”

Elissa nodded, then went to keep the old lady company over tea.

The old woman was fond of her, taking her hand and chattering on and

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After a while, Elissa instinctively checked her pulse, then couldn't help but offer a gentle reminder. "Grandma, you have underlying health issues. You really need to watch your diet—please, no rich **or** greasy foods."

"Oh, you're just like Claire, always nagging me!" Old Mrs. Atwater pretended to be annoyed, wielding her status as matriarch with mock severity:

"Grandma..."

Suddenly, footsteps echoed from the hallway. Frank walked in, his tone warm. "Elissa's just worried about you."

He cut a striking figure—tall, elegant in a charcoal suit, handsome features set in a refined expression.

For a moment, Elissa felt disoriented. She found it impossible to reconcile this Frank with the man who had been entangled with her sister-in-law. The contrast was too stark.

Old Mrs. Atwater, tired of their fussing, quickly shooed them away.

Outside Atwater Manor, Elissa's expression grew distant.

She had no desire to return to Greenwood Manor Unlocking her car, she was still searching for an excuse to slip away when Frank opened the passenger door.

“Elissa, can we talk?”

His voice was as gentle as ever as he slid into the seat.

Elissa had a pretty good idea where this was heading. She tilted her head, her expression docile and reserved. “Talk about what?”

“Elissa, sometimes you really should be more careful about how close you get with other men.”

...Excuse me?”

“People have been gossiping about you and Cliff at the clinic.”

Elissa blinked, caught off guard.

She’d expected this to be about the divorce, but she hadn’t anticipated Cliff’s name coming up.

She and Cliff hadn't spent much time together outside work. Before her recent trip to Germany, they'd hardly interacted privately at all.

And the clinic wasn't exactly a hotbed of gossip.

Oh—wait. Marcia was working at the clinic now.

Frank looked at her almost like she was a child, his tone heavy with meaning. “Elissa, you're a married woman. As my wife, I don't ask much. of you.”

“I just want you to avoid unnecessary rumors, alright?”

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Elissa couldn't help but laugh at how self-assured he looked.

How had she never noticed before how much of a double standard Frank

could have?

Still, with only four days left before the divorce would be finalized, she didn't bother arguing. She slipped into the polite, insincere tone she always used with the Murphys, her expression earnest but her words. hollow.

"Don't overthink it. There's nothing going on between me and Cliff."

Classic line for dealing with a cheating ex, she thought—she'd finally mastered it.

Frank's gaze softened. He ruffled her hair like she was a little kid. "Of course I believe you," he said gently.

He'd always soothed her like this, for years. Back when she and Rowan used to fight, and none of Rowan's friends dared take her side, only Frank. would step in and speak up for her.

Elissa started the car, still searching for a good excuse to get away, when her phone suddenly rang.

Cliff's name flashed on the screen.

Frank's eyes darted to her. Elissa, with nothing to hide, answered the call and switched it to the car's Bluetooth.

Cliff's voice filled the car, reaching both of them at once.

"Elissa, dinner at the usual spot. Can you make it by seven?"

"I'll be there," she said, relieved for the easy out.

Cliff chuckled, picking up on her quick response. "Plus-ones are welcome. If Tanya Foster's free, bring her along."

Elissa wasn't sure when Tanya would be off work tonight, so she was

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about to ask when Frank spoke up, his voice cool and deliberate. "Mr. Riley, I'll be joining Elissa tonight."

Cliff had met Frank before, and there was no mistaking his voice. All that remained in Cliff's tone was polite civility. "Of course, you're more than welcome."

When the call ended, Elissa glanced at Frank. "You're really coming?"

"Why wouldn't I?"

He frowned slightly. "Worried your old college buddy might feel awkward seeing me there?"

Men know men, after all. Frank hadn't missed the look Cliff had given. Elissa in the parking lot last time—a look that was anything but friendly.

Elissa pretended not to notice his pointed remark, her smile smooth and unbothered. "I'm just worried you'll be uncomfortable."

"I'll be fine."

Frank clearly wasn't giving it much thought.

Elissa dropped the subject and drove straight to the restaurant.

By the time they arrived, Cliff and the others were already gathered in a private room.

As Elissa pushed open the door, the atmosphere inside immediately tensed.

It wasn't because of her, but because of Frank—standing at her side, posture just a bit too possessive, as if making a claim.

Marcia was caught completely off guard.

She'd called Frank earlier to ask if he was free tonight. The man who'd told her he was busy was now standing right here.

Frank paused at the doorway, frowning at Elissa. “You didn’t say this was a work dinner with your clinic colleagues.”

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“If there’s nothing going on between me and Cliff, then of course the

dinner includes all my coworkers,” Elissa replied, her face perfectly calm. She’d warned him.

A girl with a slow reaction finally piped up, “Elissa, you know Marcia’s boyfriend?”

“No.”

Elissa didn’t miss the flash of irritation in Marcia’s eyes. Her voice was steady, neither loud nor soft. “He’s-”

“They know each other, sure. Elissa’s the younger sister of Frank’s friend,” Marcia cut in quickly, crossing the room with a bright smile and slipping her arm through Frank’s. “Isn’t that right, Frank?”

Frank stiffened, not saying anything, but subtly distancing himself from

Elissa.

The others nodded, as if everything suddenly made sense.

Cliff, sitting at the head of the table, waved her over. “Elissa, come sit—I saved you a spot.”

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“Alright.”

Elissa nodded, taking her seat. Only then did she notice the deep red marks she’d pressed into her palm.

Someone nearby, curiosity getting the better of them, asked, “Elissa, how come we’ve never met your ex-husband?”

A brief silence followed.

Elissa lowered her gaze, her voice light and even. “Oh, him? He cheated

on me.’

She ignored the sharp, searching look that landed on her, and added, each word clear and steady, “He cheated a long time ago.”

Emotionally, at first.

That’s cheating, too.

“Wait, what?!”

The older doctors at the clinic never cared much for these dinners. Every time, it the younger crowd—at that age when injustice feels

was in

personal.

Especially the new nurses, the ones who always envied Marcia's easy charm. They instantly launched into a tirade, cursing out the ex-husband they'd never even met, and the woman who'd come between them, as if the two were villains from a soap opera.

The whole scene was peppered with colorful language.

Marcia, already furious/struggled to keep her temper in check. "Elissa, honestly, you're only telling your side of the story. Who knows why your husband really cheated-"

Before Elissa could reply, someone else cut Marcia off, indignant: "Oh, just stop defending people like that. A cheater's a cheater, no matter what!"

By the end of dinner, Elissa felt positively refreshed-body and soul.

Frank, on the other hand, looked as if he were chewing glass. Born with a silver spoon, inheritor of the massive Atwater Group, he'd never been insulted like this before. And yet, he couldn't say a word in defense.

She'd warned him: he wouldn't like it.

He just hadn't believed her.

As the meal wound down, Elissa excused herself to the restroom.

"Elissa's so talented—who'd have thought she'd get tripped up by marriage?"

"Eh, it happens. She'll find someone better, just wait and see."

'Better? Can anyone beat Marcia's catch? She's with the CEO of Atwater Group, for crying out loud!"

"You clearly don't read the business news. The Murphy family's son—that's the real powerhouse."

"Please, what good is that? People like us could never reach that high..."

Elissa waited until the voices outside faded before she opened the door.

The Murphy family's son-

Anyone in Vistapeak City would know who that meant.

She hadn't expected, though, that after washing her hands and stepping out, she'd come face to face with him.

He was leaning against the wall right beside the ladies' room-black silk shirt, cigarette smoldering between **his** fingers, watching her with a lazy, half-lidded gaze.

"Elissa, what, did you spend the last few years training to be a ninja behind my back?"

He never had anything nice to say. Elissa knew that by now.

She also guessed why he was here-he must have seen Frank and Marcia

together again.

Drying her hands, she didn't bother meeting his eyes. "Whatever I trained for, Rowan, it's none of your business."

She tossed the paper towel in the trash and started to walk past him.

His voice was cool, almost amused. "Is my reputation none of my business, either?"

They'd fallen out a long time ago—but most people didn't know that. Like Frank, everyone just assumed they were having a sibling spat. Sooner or later, the misunderstanding would clear up, and Elissa would go back to being the precious little sister Rowan always protected.

Elissa understood the dance well enough. "You could just tell everyone we haven't been on speaking terms for years."

So simple. So final.

But Rowan didn't even pause. "Too much trouble."

Elissa turned, meeting his eyes. "So what exactly do you want from me?"

He didn't hesitate. "Divorce him."

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Those four words coming from him didn't surprise Elissa in the slightest.

Back when she'd decided to marry Frank, Rowan had tried every way to stop her, just like this.

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But Rowan had always lived in his own rarefied world, blissfully that for someone like her, marrying Frank had already been the best she could hope for.

He never understood that divorce, for her, wasn't something light and breezy.

If Frank ever wanted to end things and she refused, he had a thousand ways—legal, underhanded, or just plain ruthless—to make it happen. She might wake **up** one day and find the divorce papers already signed and stamped, without ever knowing what hit her.

But for her?

As long as the Atwaters wouldn't relent and Frank didn't agree, she'd be trapped in the Atwater family for the rest of her life, wasting away one day at a time.

During those years with the Murphys, Elissa had learned one lesson better than any other: ordinary people are utterly powerless in the face of real power.

She had no interest in explaining herself. Instead, she just gave a faint smile, a charming dimple flickering at the corner of her lips. "But... I just. can't bear to leave him."

There she was again, playing the hopeless romantic.

Rowan's face darkened instantly, his voice squeezed out between clenched teeth. "Elissa, did I ever mistreat you before?"

He didn't even wait for her reply. He stubbed out his cigarette, turned on his heel, and stalked off, tension in every step, anger still practically radiating from his back.

-Driving people away.

Over the years, this had become the simplest form of communication between her and Rowan.

Cliff appeared, looking around. "I thought you'd already left."

"Has everyone gone?" she asked.

"They have." He hesitated for a second, then added, "Frank and the others.

too."

She nodded, taking her bag from him. "Alright, let's go."

Cliff had been drinking, so Elissa offered to drive him home.

Just as they were nearing his place, Cliff seemed to remember something. "Oh right, about that Murphy Group project—we're supposed to have a kickoff meeting tomorrow and prep a bit."

At the mention of this, Elissa's grip on the steering wheel tightened.

“Murphy Group probably forgot to tell you, but I’m not supposed to be on

to tell you, but I’m not that project anymore,” she said quietly.

Besides, after today, Rowan probably wanted nothing more than for her to disappear.

Cliff frowned. “That can’t be right. The team list came over just this evening from Murphy Group, and your name’s on it.“.

Elissa blinked in surprise.

Of course–Murphy Group had dozens of big projects. Rowan couldn’t possibly oversee every single one himself. Maybe he didn’t even care whether **she** was involved.

Relief washed over **her**. “That’s great news.”

Cliff grinned. “And actually, you’re heading up the Traditional Herbology Unit.”

“Why?” Elissa blurted out, caught off guard.

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By all rights, that role should have gone to Cliff.

Luckily, Cliff didn’t mind. “Murphy Group’s decision. But honestly, you’re a better fit than me. You’ve always had a knack for drug development.”

That best-selling herbal remedy at the clinic? Elissa had developed it, though they’d put Cliff’s name on it to avoid drawing the Murphy family’s

attention.

Meanwhile, Marcia was still stewing over what had happened earlier, the frustration lodged in her chest, suffocating and impossible to swallow.

On the drive back to Greenwood Manor, she glanced at the silent man beside her and said, “See? I told you, Elissa isn’t nearly as naïve as you

think.”

Frank said nothing. The alcohol throbbed behind his temples, a dull ache. He had to admit, Elissa had gone too far today. He was willing to indulge her in almost anything, but as Mrs. Frank Atwater, the one thing she needed to understand was how to maintain appearances.

“When she gets home tonight, I’ll have a word with her.”

“Oh, and Frank-” Marcia’s annoyance faded as soon as she got the answer she wanted. “I heard from a colleague that Elissa and Cliff are joining a new drug research project. Can you pull some strings and get me in too?”

“Of course,” Frank agreed easily. “You’ve always had talent—if it’s just to participate, I can talk to the Rileys about it.”

Marcia scooted closer, wrapping her arms around his. “Do you really think I have talent? At the clinic, everyone only praises Elissa...”

“She’s just been at this longer than you,” Frank replied, matter-of-fact. He remembered their old mentor always complimenting Marcia. “If we’re talking pure talent and ability, you’re definitely the better one.”

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“What about Elissa? Is she just... average?”

Frank honestly hadn't given that much thought.

Even after years of marriage, his encounters with Elissa were few and far between—let alone any overlap at work.

He only knew she'd worked diligently at the clinic for three or four years, never making much of a splash.

Most of the staff praised her, but Frank suspected it was just because she'd gone to school with Cliff.

Thinking back to what had happened at the restaurant, Frank didn't bother waiting for Elissa to come home. He called her directly.

She picked up quickly. “What's up?”

Her tone was so cool and even that Frank was caught off guard.

“Don’t you think you owe me an explanation for what happened at the restaurant today?”.

“An explanation for what, exactly?”

Elissa let out a soft, almost icy laugh. “Do you mean for announcing to everyone that my own husband is cheating on me, or is it something else. you wanted me to clarify?”

She genuinely couldn’t believe Frank had the nerve to call and question

her about this.

Frank frowned, a nagging sense creeping in that something about her had. changed.

The last couple of times she’d lost her temper, he’d just chalked it up to her being upset, nothing more.

“I told you before, there’s nothing going on between Marcia and me. Do

you really have to drive her away to be satisfied?”

“Yes.”

Elissa shed her usual gentle persona, her words suddenly sharp and clear. “I do. So, is she leaving or not?”

She’d held this in for a long time.

At first, she’d thought she could just let it go—as long as she got a divorce, nothing else mattered.

What she hadn’t expected was for Frank to turn around and demand an explanation from her, as if she were the one in the wrong.

She genuinely didn’t know what she’d done to deserve this.

“Don’t even think about it!”

It was the first time she'd ever stood up to him. Frank barely recognized her, anger rising in his chest, but remembering how young she was, he forced himself to stay calm and try reasoning with her.

"Elissa, she's different to me."

But Elissa just scoffed. "Different how? Is it the whole 'brother-in-law and sister-in-law' thing—does that make it extra exciting?"

"Shut up! Are you insane?!"

Frank was stunned she'd say something like that, the veins at his temples standing out as he ground his teeth. "If you're so unhappy in this family, then let's just get a divorce!"

The words shot out before he could stop them, and for a brief moment, Frank's mind went blank.

But before he could say anything else, it was too late.

On the other end of the line, Elissa was silent for just a moment before hanging up.

Frank pushed open the window, about to take a deep breath, when Hickey.

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came barreling up and banged on the study door.

“Uncle Frank! Mom’s washing fruit. Come downstairs, we’re having a fruit.

snack!”

Frank opened the door and ruffled the boy’s hair. “Go on down, I’ll be there. after I wash my hands.”

“Okay!”

Hickey nodded dutifully and darted down the stairs.

He loved living here now. That mean lady hadn't shown up in ages—what a relief!

After washing his hands, Frank turned off the faucet and noticed a jade pendant left beside the sink. His expression softened.

Earlier, Elissa had asked him what was different.

Maybe it was this.

He ran his thumb over the smooth surface of the pendant, his gaze filled. with emotions he couldn't name.

As he traced the pendant, he noticed something and leaned in for at closer look. Inside, carved into the jade, were two small letters.

-N.

“Hey, my house is on Grand View Road! Promise you'll come find little Nine and play sometime!”

Funny—he hadn’t called Marcia by her childhood nickname in years.

Just then, Marcia appeared at the door with a plate of fruit, giving him a playful look. “I thought maybe you drank too much and weren’t feeling well.”

At dinner, his colleagues had kept the drinks flowing once they learned who he was.

She noticed the jade pendant in his hand and tipped her chin up. “I took it

off before my shower and forgot to put it back on. Help me with it, will you?”

“Of course.”

Frank stepped in front of her, bent down slightly, and fastened the pendant around her neck. His voice was low and rough. “Little Nine, I’m glad I found you...”

Marcia looked at him, puzzled, and interrupted almost instinctively, “Little Nine? What are you talking about?”

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator

Besides Elissa, were there other women around him?

Frank's tall frame stiffened for a split second. His ingrained wariness made him pause, eyes dimming as he replied, voice steady as ever, "Did you forget your childhood nickname?"

"Huh?"

Marcia hesitated, panic flickering in her eyes before she forced herself to stay calm. "Of course not. It's just... No one's called me that in so long, I didn't realize you meant me."

"Really?"

"Of course."

or eve

Her heart pounded, welling up with tears. "After my parents died, who else would ever call me that? Frank, it's been twenty years... It's

normal if I forgot, isn't it?"

In a blink, tears spilled down her cheeks. "Are you really doubting me over this?"

"Of course not. Don't overthink it."

Frank let go of his suspicion and gently wiped her tears. His expression softened. "It's getting late. Go tuck Hickey in for bed."

Seeing his usual calm, Marcia finally relaxed. "What about you?"

"I've got some work to finish up. I'll turn in soon."

Frank slipped the jade pendant into the pocket of his slacks. "The clasp. broke earlier—I'll have Bernard take it to the jeweler tomorrow. I'll return it once it's fixed."

Taking the fruit plate Marcia handed him, he left for his study.

Almost as soon as the door clicked shut, he dialed a number.

All traces of warmth vanished from Frank's face, his voice cold and

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composed. "Bernard, I need you to take a team to Cresthaven. I want you to look into Marcia's background—everything, leave nothing **out**."

"Understood."

Bernard hesitated. "Why check again after all these years? Did something

seem off?"

Frank replied, "I'm not sure. Just look into it."

He could only hope he was overthinking things.

Frank's last words, spoken over the phone, didn't escape Tanya Foster, who was sitting nearby.

She frowned, genuinely surprised that someone like Frank—always so courteous and upstanding—could be so brazenly unfaithful.

Then, turning to Elissa, she asked, "Why not just agree and get it over with?"

"It'd be too much trouble," Elissa replied, setting her phone aside and curling up on the sofa. "I went to see the Atwater family at noon. His mother said the divorce papers should be finalized within four days at

the latest."

"There's no need to go through him anymore."

She had no desire to complicate things further.

This was fine.

The next day, Elissa met up with Cliff at the clinic first, and together they headed to Murphy Group.

She'd passed by this place countless times over the years, never once. setting foot inside—she'd even gone out of her way to avoid it.

If it hadn't been for that chance encounter in Germany, she might have hoped to never see Rowan again in this lifetime.

"Elissa?"

Cliff's voice pulled her back as she stepped out of the car, lost in thought. He smiled, "What's on your mind?"

Elissa gathered herself and shook her head. "Nothing. I just never imagined I'd get to be part of a project this big."

Cancer drug research.

The government's top-priority medical initiative for the next three years.

If it succeeded, maybe...

Maybe she could finally be free.

By the time they arrived, the rest of the research team was already waiting in the conference room.

Scientists didn't bother with small talk. Real communication happened in the lab. With the project just kicking off, there wasn't much to say—just a round of introductions before someone led Elissa and Cliff to the lab.

The Traditional Herbology Unit included Elissa, Cliff, and three men in their late thirties or early forties.

“Unbelievable,” one muttered in the corner. “Almost forty and here I am, playing assistant to some kid in her twenties.”

“Hey, you resent it?”

“Of course I do. Don't you?”

“I do too.”

They went back and forth, making sure Elissa overheard. “But what can you do? She probably has connections. These days, it’s easier for women. to climb the ladder than men.”

Cliff’s face darkened, and he moved as if to confront them.

Elissa stopped him with a gentle touch, unfazed. “Cliff, the only thing. that’ll shut them up is what I develop myself.”

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator

Lulla

Chapter **80**

The more you try to explain yourself, the guiltier you look in other people’s eyes.

She'd already reviewed the backgrounds of those two men on her way. over. Elissa was confident she could keep them in line.

Instead of doing anything else, Elissa walked straight to the medicine. cabinet and began inspecting the supplies one by one.

"Do we really need all these different medicines?" Cliff asked.

"No," Elissa replied. "The pharmacy's stock was checked by our mentor right from the beginning, and our suppliers have always followed those standards. The meds here won't be a problem."

"But with Murphy Group's inventory, we need to check everything ourselves."

Color, texture, age—even whether an herb was wild or cultivated—could affect its potency.

In this respect, developing traditional remedies was far more. complicated than working with pharmaceuticals.

Cliff looked a little sheepish. "All these years, and I've never gotten into

that habit.”

“That’s understandable—you’re the boss,” Elissa teased, flashing him at playful smile.
“Even if you don’t keep an eye on the details, someone else will.”

Cliff chuckled, looking at her warmly. “Then you’d better keep a close. watch on the clinic for me.”

“Don’t worry.”

As she spoke, Elissa lifted a root to her nose and inhaled its scent.

Watching her handle the grunt work of the purchasing team, the two men grew even more dismissive. Bored, they slouched in their chairs and

started playing games on their phones.

Elissa ignored them completely, focusing on her task.

When she’d finished checking the medicine, she and Cliff started

discussing research plans..

Cliff found himself momentarily distracted by the way she lit up when she was focused, nearly losing track of the conversation.

Dusk had already set in when someone finally knocked on the lab door, prompting Elissa to pause her work.

Standing at the door was a poised, elegant woman in a silk blouse and pencil skirt. Her smile was warm and professional. “Everyone, to celebrate the official launch of our project team, Mr. Murphy has reserved a private room at Virtue Hall for dinner.”

The project leader blinked in surprise, then quickly agreed. “Of course. Thank you, Secretary Lynn—please thank Mr. Murphy for us.”

Lorraine Lynn’s smile deepened. “Mr. Murphy will be attending in person. You can thank him yourself.”

“For real?”

Someone couldn’t hide their shock.

Out of all the company's projects, Rowan only paid attention to a select

few.

It was almost unheard of for him to actually show up and mingle with the staff.

Lorraine laughed. "Guess."

With that, she walked straight over to Elissa, hand extended and lips curved in a friendly smile. "Ms. Drummond, I'm Lorraine-Mr. Murphy's secretary."

Elissa paused, surprised that Lorraine would make a point of greeting her, but she shook her hand with easy confidence. "Thank you, Secretary

Lynn. I'm sure we'll be needing your help around Murphy Group."

"My pleasure."

Lorraine withdrew her hand, her smile unwavering. “Shall we add each. other on WhatsApp?”

“Sure.”

Elissa wasn’t sure what Lorraine’s intentions were, but it would be convenient. “Want me to scan your code?”

After Lorraine left, the two men who’d mocked Elissa earlier started giving her odd looks.

They figured she must have connections.

But they hadn’t expected her connections to run this deep.

Even Lorraine was being so polite—who knew who she had backing her

up?

Elissa didn’t care what they thought. Before heading to dinner, she and Cliff settled on a few preliminary prescriptions.

At the restaurant, she stopped by the restroom before heading to the private room.

Pushing open the door, she froze.

Most people had assumed Lorraine was joking earlier—Rowan was always busy and never attended small project team dinners.

But there he was.

Rowan sat casually at the table, his features sharply defined, his presence commanding. Even just sitting there, he radiated an intimidating authority.

Hearing the door open, he looked her way, eyes narrowing slightly. His tone was relaxed—almost amused. “Ms. Drummond, are you just going to stand there? Are you afraid of me?”