

## A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator

The entire private dining room fell so quiet you could hear a pin drop.

Elissa was rarely ever embarrassed, but this was work, and Rowan was her biggest client.

She reminded herself to keep things strictly professional.

After a moment to collect herself, she composed her expression and said, “You’re joking, Mr. Murphy.”

With that, she stepped inside and closed the door behind her.

She’d barely taken two steps before noticing that the only open seat left was right next to Rowan, on his left. All the other extra chairs had been cleared away by the staff.

Feeling a bit awkward, she glanced up and caught Rowan watching her with leisurely interest, his long fingers tapping idly on the table. “See?

You’re still afraid of me.”

Elissa had to resist the urge to turn around and walk out. Gathering her composure, she made her way over. “Mr. Murphy, if people at Murphy Group are all so afraid of you, I’m guessing your reputation isn’t exactly stellar.”

Rowan didn’t seem bothered. “You’re right. Ask anyone here—who isn’t

afraid of me?”

He looked at her, a hint of a smile playing at his lips. “Except you. Only

you aren’t.”

The rest of the table sat in stunned silence, no one daring to guess what

he really meant.

Some of them were probably thinking that being noticed by the big boss wasn’t

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blessing.

The meal felt suffocating, tension hanging in the air.

Thankfully, the door opened at just the right moment, and the waiters

came in carrying plates of food.

The project lead, Zachary Jones, was no fool. He couldn't quite figure out what was going on between Elissa and Rowan, but it was obvious there was some kind of connection.

Zachary raised his glass to Elissa. "Ms. Drummond, we're counting on your team in Traditional Medicine for this project. Let me make a toast **to**

you."

"This is my job," Elissa replied, lifting her own wine glass and clinking it lightly with his. "Looking forward to working together."

Without any hesitation, she drank the wine in one go.

Unfortunately, her tolerance was terrible. After just a few more glasses, her fair cheeks were flushed a deep rosy red.

Still, she held her liquor decently. Even tipsy, she simply propped her chin in her hands and stayed quietly in her seat.

She thought she was still in control, able to keep up with the work talk, but before long, everyone started to blur before her eyes.

Her mind felt light and fuzzy, her head heavy.

Zachary was surprised. “Ms. Drummond, you really can’t hold your wine, can you?”

“She doesn’t usually drink. This wine is stronger than it seems,” Cliff said, glancing at the bottle.

He set down the wine and offered, “It’s getting late anyway. I’ll take her

home.”

Elissa heard voices around her, but everything was hazy. She vaguely felt someone supporting her, guiding her outside..

She’d come with Cliff tonight, so she’d allowed herself to drink, knowing she had a friend around.

With more men than women at the table, there was no avoiding the

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drinks. She didn’t mind doing this favor for Zachary—after all, it would make the collaboration smoother down the line.

She just hadn’t expected the aftereffects of the wine to be so strong.

Cliff was just helping her out of the restaurant when a sleek black Bentley pulled up to the curb.

The window rolled down. Rowan was sitting in the back seat, his gaze flicking to where Cliff's hand rested on Elissa's shoulder. His tone was calm and businesslike:

"Mr. Riley, I believe Zachary Jones needs to discuss a few more technical details with you before you go."

Cliff frowned. "But Elissa's had too much to drink. I should get her home.

first."

"It's fine," Rowan replied, pushing open the car door and easily lifting Elissa by the waist. His voice was cool and even, as if he were simply doing a good deed for the day. "I was just leaving. I'll take her."

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Cliff hesitated, worry etched across his face. "Mr. Murphy..."

"It's Mr. Riley," Rowan corrected him coolly, his expression unreadable. "Are you afraid I'll take her off to some remote mountain cabin and never bring her back?"

Cliff choked on his words, thrown off by Rowan's candor. He remembered what the professor had told him once—about Rowan and Elissa, about everything that happened back then.

Before that incident, Rowan had always been a good brother.

Thinking of this, Cliff finally relented. "I'll leave her in your care, Mr. Murphy."

Rowan nodded, then bent down and effortlessly swept Elissa up into his arms, carrying her to the car. The sudden sensation of being lifted jolted her into brief awareness. Disoriented, she scrambled upright on the leather seat, her vision hazy.

"Cliff..." she murmured, voice thick with confusion.

The car slid smoothly onto the road, streetlights flickering past as their glow filtered through the trees, casting shifting shadows across Rowan's chiseled features—making him look even colder, more distant.

"You and Cliff seem pretty close, don't you?"

Rowan's voice was so familiar, it soothed the tremor in Elissa's chest and made her lower her guard. She slumped against the headrest, answering without pretense, "Yeah, I guess so."

“Cliff... he’s always been good to me.”

Rowan watched her, eyes lingering on the delicate curve of her cheek. His tone softened, coaxing, “And Rowan? He wasn’t good to little Nine?”

“Rowan?” The old nickname sounded strange on his lips—it had been

years since anyone had used it. The alcohol had loosened something in

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her, and Elissa mumbled, her nose tingling, fighting back tears even in her

drunken state.

She tried to smile, but it came out crooked. “He... didn’t want me

anymore.”

Even drunk, she remembered how, seven years ago, he'd sent her back to her grandmother's house without a word. The memory was too deeply rooted to forget.

He'd been the first person she'd ever trusted outside her own parents. To her, he was family, her salvation. To him, she'd been nothing.

"He didn't," Rowan said quietly, his expression shadowed. He started to say more, but Elissa's eyes were already drifting shut again.

He caught himself and asked quickly, "You're still living at Greenwood Manor, aren't you?"

"That's old news. I moved." Her words were soft, unguarded. She leaned in and whispered, "Juniper Road... Vistapeak Gardens, Building 2, twenty-first floor."

The car shuddered gently over a speed bump, and her head lolled, threatening to tip forward—until a large hand caught her just in time.

She sighed in relief, eyes fluttering closed again.

Rowan's hand cradled her cheek. For a moment, he started to pull away, to let her rest against his shoulder instead. But something made him. stop; he left his hand where it was.

Ian turned the car toward Juniper Road, sounding almost cheerful. "Sir, I had no idea Miss Elissa lived so close to us."

Rowan's reply was icy. And that's something to be happy about?"

Ian clammed up, but he could have sworn he'd seen a hint of a smile on Rowan's face in the rearview mirror. Maybe he'd imagined it.

At the entrance to the underground garage, the lights were blinding. Elissa shielded her eyes, and when she finally blinked them open again,

the car had already rolled to a stop in front of her building.

She blinked hard, taking in her surroundings. As she realized she was home, her muddled thoughts slowly began to clear. Disjointed snatches of conversation crashed through her mind, memories she couldn't quite piece together.

That voice...

Her body tensed. She turned her head and saw the sharp line of a man's jaw, the strong bridge of his nose, and those fathomless dark eyes.

"If you loved him so much," Rowan said, his voice low, "why are you and Frank living apart?"

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Her humiliating little secret had been laid bare in front of him once again. No matter how Elissa listened to it, that sentence dripped with mockery.

She shot back without thinking, her words sharp as knives. "Who said I'm living apart from him? Mr. Murphy, you're single, so I'm **sure** you wouldn't understand."

"Sometimes, a change of scenery is just what a marriage needs—keeps things interesting."

"Oh, really?"

Rowan glanced at her bristling defensiveness, lips curling into an icy half-smile. His voice was as cold as ever. "Does every couple spice up their marriage by bringing a best friend along?"

The alcohol still clouded Elissa's mind. She was a beat too slow to catch on. "What?"

"Tanya Foster just called," Rowan answered smoothly, as if he was used to cleaning up her confusion. "She wanted to know why you hadn't come home yet."

Elissa pressed her palms together, realizing there was no point pretending anymore.

She dropped the act. "Fine. We're separated."

"*My* marriage is exactly what the rumors say it is—a complete disaster."

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She stared at him, her eyes rimmed red from the alcohol "This is got for ignoring your warnings all those years ago. Are you happy now?"

With that, she snatched up her purse and practically fled the room.

Three years ago, she'd made up her mind to marry Frank.

For nearly four years before that, the man who now stood before her

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hadn't said a single word to her in private. Then, out of the **blue**, he'd shown up, dragged her into his car, and with a stone-cold face said, "I don't approve of you marrying Frank."

Back then, Elissa had been even angrier with him than she was now.

Even a dog would have grown attached after nine years.

But not him. Not even a little.

Elissa remembered it vividly: one sweltering summer day, the temperature soaring above a hundred degrees, she'd knelt outside until she nearly passed out. The man, who had already taken over the vast Murphy Group, walked past her without a flicker of emotion.

He just turned to a maid and said, "Has she upset Matriarch Paige Murphy again? Keep an eye on her. Make sure she doesn't die."

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Then he walked away without looking back.

After that, the next time he appeared in her life, it was only to interfere in her marriage.

There was no way Elissa would take that lying down. She wouldn't listen to a single word. Before either of them could say much, the air between them had already grown tense enough to snap.

In the end, she'd jumped out of the car to escape.

Their relationship hadn't just failed to improve; the rift between them had only grown deeper.

People whispered behind her back, saying Elissa didn't know how to appreciate kindness.

But Elissa couldn't afford to gamble. She refused to be someone's stray, abandoned on a whim,

Rowan didn't look away until her silhouette disappeared around the corner.

He could still feel the softness of her skin lingering on his fingertips.

The air inside the car grew heavier.

Ian let out a sigh. "Sir, you know Miss Elissa never responds well to force. If you'd just talk to her, she'd have forgiven you ages ago..."

"I owe her?"

Rowan slipped the old wooden rosary off his wrist, fixing Ian with a gaze. through the rearview mirror that was sharp as shattered glass. "You think I should humble myself for her forgiveness?"

"...No, sir. You don't owe her."

But I do, Ian thought, biting his tongue. Why did I have to open my big mouth?

He knew his boss too well. Even if Rowan were dug up from his grave five hundred years from now, he'd still be stubborn as hell.

Actually, scratch that.

By then, he'd be hard in every way—the bones would probably rattle when you knocked on them.

The moment Elissa opened her front door, Tanya Foster shot out from behind her desk, sliding dramatically across the floor on her knees.

She truly hadn't expected Rowan to answer the phone..

If she'd known, she would never have blurted out so much.

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"I'm sorry, okay?!"

Elissa still felt a little lightheaded, but she played along with Tanya's theatrics. "Hm, make me some honey water, and I'll forgive you."

"Coming right up!"

Tanya Foster, ever the eager sidekick, dropped Elissa's bag on the entryway table and hustled back with a mug of honey water **in** no time.

She beamed hopefully. "So... am I really forgiven?"

"You're forgiven," Elissa said, nodding with a small smile.

She'd never thought her little secret would last long anyway. Sure, being exposed in the car had been embarrassing, but now that she was upstairs, she felt strangely relieved, as if a weight had been lifted.

Let Rowan laugh if he wanted. Let him act all high and mighty. She was done trying to fight it.

Seeing Elissa looking mostly normal, Tanya pounced while the mood was right. "So tell me, why was Rowan the one answering your phone earlier?" Elissa didn't even blink. "Because he doesn't know the meaning of boundaries, that's why."

It was just like him—always doing whatever he pleased, never one to play by the rules.

Elissa filled Tanya in on the dinner that night, but Tanya still sensed something off. After a moment, she said, “Cliff could’ve driven you home, but Mr. Murphy insisted on doing it himself.”

“You think... maybe he’s trying to make amends?”

Elissa frowned. “Have you ever seen anyone try to make amends like that?”

“But if he really is, would you ever give him another chance?”

“Not a chance,” Elissa replied without missing a beat, taking a sip of honey water. “People only get one shot at real trust.”

Just one—one chance to be believed in, wholeheartedly.

Getting back together? As far as she was concerned, that was just a fantasy.

Once trust is shattered, no matter how hard you try to piece it back. together, suspicion and distance always seep in.

It's true for every relationship.

Even if things look fine on the surface, deep down she'd always be waiting for the next time she'd be abandoned.

The next day, Elissa went to the clinic as usual.

With the holidays approaching, the number of patients had started to

dwindle.

It was a deep-rooted tradition: nobody wanted to be taking medicine. during the holidays—bad luck, supposedly. Unless it was a matter of life. and death, most people would wait until after the New Year to come back. for a checkup.

But her office was anything but quiet.

She'd barely reached the waiting area when she heard two nurses. pleading in soft voices.

“Sweetie, this is the doctor’s office, you can’t play here.”

“Come on, let’s go outside–wait, no, don’t touch that!”

“I want to!” came the triumphant cry of a little brat. “I want to break. this–she bullied my mom, so I’m going to break her stuff!”

When Elissa appeared, a nurse hurried over, looking apologetic.

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“Elissa, Marcia brought her kid today. He’s a handful–we just can’t keep

him under control.”

She could have left him at home with the nanny, but no–she had to bring

him to the clinic.

Elissa had dealt with Hickey's antics before. "It's fine. Not your fault."

With that, she strode into her office.

It wasn't nearly as chaotic as she'd feared.

The moment she entered, Hickey flinched, but then straightened his neck and blurted out, "Wicked woman! Why are you always stealing my uncle from my mom?!"

The room fell dead silent.

The others glanced at Elissa, eyes wide with shock.

And remembering the other day, when Elissa and Frank had shown up at the private room together...

Maybe you never really know after all.

Dr. Drummond—was she the other woman?

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Elissa didn't seem to notice anything else; she only stared coldly at the set of silver needles in his hand. "Give them back," she said, her voice icy. Her teacher had been the sole heir to the ancient Eighteen Needles technique—a secret tradition passed down to only one apprentice per generation.

At thirteen, Elissa had been chosen by Aaron to be the next successor.

Even Cliff had never been allowed near it.

Those silver needles were a gift from her teacher when she first began to learn the art. To Elissa, they meant far more than anyone else could

understand.

"No way! I'm going to drive you mad!" Hickey, delighted to see her angry, yanked the needles from their case and flung them onto the floor. He jumped down and began stomping on them, wild with glee.

Without a word, Elissa grabbed him by the collar, her expression steely as she dragged him out of the office. Pinching his chubby cheeks between her fingers, her eyes darkened.

“If you ever set foot in my office again, I’ll stick every one of those. needles into your head,” she threatened quietly.

“Turn you into a prickly little hedgehog. Want to test me?”

Hickey’s whole body trembled. He screwed up his face and began. bawling. “I–I don’t believe you! You’re lying–let me go! I want my mom!”

Elissa let him go, and he sprinted off, howling for his mother as tears streamed down his cheeks.

She watched him go, shaking her head. For someone so timid, he sure had a talent for making trouble.

Did Marcia even care about him as much as she claimed? Either way, it wasn’t Elissa’s problem. He wasn’t her child, and she felt no obligation to

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worry.

Even though there weren't as many patients as before, Elissa didn't leave her chair for the entire morning. It was nearly one o'clock before she saw.

her last patient.

Skipping the cafeteria, she tidied up, planning to head over to Murphy Group instead. Cliff had already gone over there earlier that morning.

After washing her hands, she stepped out of the restroom and was about to grab her bag from the office when a piercing scream echoed from the emergency staircase. Something heavy tumbled and clattered down the steps.

Without thinking, Elissa's instincts as a doctor took over. She bolted through the door.

The automatic lights flickered on, revealing the scene on the stairs.

Hickey—just that morning, the same kid who'd been taunting her—now lay crumpled at the bottom of the steps, blood streaming from his head.

For a split second, Elissa froze. Then she rushed down to check his pulse and breathing.

Two nurses burst **in**, drawn by the noise. Both stopped short in shock.

Elissa glanced at them, her voice calm and commanding. “Don’t just stand there. Get something to stop the bleeding, and bring me the silver

needles.”

“Right!” The two **nurses** snapped into action, darting off and returning moments later with everything she needed.

Elissa took the silver needles, her hands moving fast as she applied emergency acupuncture, rattling off instructions as she worked. “Stop. gawking and help me stop the bleeding!”

The nurses fumbled but eventually got themselves together and pitched

1. in.

Not that she could blame them. At the Traditional Medicine Center, it was

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rare to deal with so much blood.

“Elissa!” Marcia’s shrill voice rang out as she rushed in, her face twisted in panic. She shoved Elissa hard, sending her sprawling to the ground. “He’s just a child! How could you hurt him like this just because he was a little naughty?!”

Elissa hit the floor hard, her elbow throbbing as she looked up at Marcia, her gaze calm and unyielding. “When I got here, he was already like this. I heard the noise and came in to help.”

“Liar!” Marcia broke down completely, collapsing next to Hickey and clutching him to her chest. Tears streamed down her face as she screamed, “Elissa, I never imagined you could be so cruel! How can someone like you even call herself a doctor?”

“We’ll let the police sort this out.”

Elissa had no patience for Marcia’s hysteria. She turned to a nurse. “Call the police.”

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The nurse's gaze was tinged with uncertainty, but she agreed. nonetheless.

Someone tried to reason with Marcia. "Maybe you should let Elissa take a look at your son first-"

"Would you?" Marcia's eyes blazed with anger. "She's the one who hurt my boy. Who knows what she'd do if we let her touch him again, even under the guise of treatment..."

Elissa's voice was cold. "Call an ambulance."

With that, she turned and walked away, her expression like ice.

She grabbed her bag from her office and, as she passed the nurse's station, overheard a group of nurses whispering.

"Do you really think Elissa could have done that to that bratty kid?"

“Who knows? The thought gives me goosebumps. If she did, I wouldn’t feel safe working with her anymore...”

“And remember the other night at the restaurant? Elissa came in with Mr. Atwater. Plus, with what that kid/said this morning, maybe Elissa really is the other woman.”

“No way!” Elfreda, who had always been closest to Elissa, couldn’t take it anymore. “Elissa isn’t like that. Can you stop gossiping behind her back?” “If you’re so sure, why don’t you ask Elissa yourself?”

Someone snickered. “Go ahead. You’re her best friend.”

Elfreda bit her tongue and stormed off, unable to stand another second of

1. it.

She rounded the corner and nearly collided with Elissa herself.

Elissa gave her a gentle pat on the shoulder. “I’ve got to go. Something

came up.”

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“Elissa,” Elfreda called after her. “You’re just going to let them talk like that about you?”

Elissa pressed her lips together. “The police will figure out what really happened. As for the rest—they can say whatever they want. I’m not wasting my energy trying to prove myself.”

She had never believed in defending herself against baseless rumors. The more you explained, the more exhausting it became. Her time and energy were limited, and she refused to spend them on petty talk.

When she arrived at Murphy Group, Cliff had just received his takeout order, and Elissa managed to snag a quick bite for lunch.

Cliff had heard about the trouble at the clinic. “What happened?”

“It wasn’t me.”

“... Who said it was?” Cliff broke apart a pair of disposable chopsticks and handed them to her. “I know what kind of person you are.”

“What I want to know is: can you tell if the kid fell by accident or if someone pushed him?”

“It was probably the latter.” Elissa picked at her food, her voice calm. “If he’d fallen on his own, the injuries wouldn’t have been that severe.”

Injuries from an outside force always looked different from an accidental

fall.

“Alright.” Cliff nodded, thoughtful. “Don’t dwell on it. Leave it to the police.” “Yeah.” Elissa was never one to let things like this weigh her down.

A clear conscience fears no accusation.

If Marcia wanted to **pin** this on her, she’d need real evidence.

But before the police could reach a conclusion, Frank showed up, ready to make trouble on behalf of Marcia and her son.

She worked late in the lab, not leaving until hunger gnawed at her. By

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then, the entire research floor was still aglow—late hours were notorious in the R&D department.

At ten o'clock, the building was still humming with life. Elissa took the elevator straight down to the parking garage. As the doors slid open, she saw Frank waiting, his expression dark as thunder.

“Come with me. We’re going to the hospital.” Without waiting for a response, he grabbed her arm and started walking..

His grip was tight, right on the spot she’d injured that morning. The pain. made her gasp involuntarily.

Frank didn’t even glance at her in concern. Instead, he shot her a cold, fleeting look. “Hurts, doesn’t it? If you’re so sensitive, how could you hurt Hickey like that?”

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For a split second, Elissa was caught off guard. Instinctively, she blurted, “It wasn’t me.”

“I don’t care if it was or wasn’t—you’re going to apologize to Marcia!” Frank’s tone left no room for argument.

”

Ignoring the pain searing through her elbow where he gripped her, Elissa dug her heels in and refused to budge, no matter how much he tried to drag her away. “I told you, I didn’t do it. Why should I apologize?”

Frank paused, looking down at her from above. “Elissa, if this were before, I would have trusted you without a second thought. But now—I can’t read you at all.”

He had noticed the changes in her, day after day. When she’d struck Marcia so hard she’d needed stitches, he’d told himself Elissa had just lost her temper—anyone could be impulsive in the heat of the moment. Lately, she’d been gone from dawn till dusk, always at the clinic, never home, never caring about family matters. Even when Edna had asked her for a recipe for the kids, she’d flat-out refused. Frank had tried to reason—she was still young, she needed time to grow up.

Then there was that scene at thé restaurant just days ago, where she'd put both him and Marcia in an impossible position, and then turned around and mocked them, sharp-tongued as ever. He'd let it slide.

But all these things added up. She was nothing like the sweet, thoughtful girl he remembered.

How was he supposed to trust her now?

Elissa's lips twitched in a half-smile. When she looked up, her eyes were perfectly calm. "Then believe what you want."

As if his trust were some precious thing she was supposed to care about. It wasn't *up* to Frank to

judge her innocence—wasn't that what the police.

were for?

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“What did you say?” Frank stared at her, disbelief and disappointment settling over his handsome features.

He couldn’t understand how she’d changed so much.

He’d thought this all through before confronting her—he’d expected her to feel wronged, maybe even cry. Anything but this cold indifference.

Did she not care about his words—or about him at all?

Elissa blinked. “I said, believe what you want.”

“Frank.” She met his gaze head-on, her voice steady and cool as ice. “Don’t look at me with that disappointed expression, as if I’ve done you some terrible wrong.”

Frank’s brow knit together, his face a mask of disbelief. Slowly, his grip on her arm loosened, and in that moment, it seemed as if every shred of

feeling between them simply vanished.

His voice sounded strange, almost unfamiliar. “Elissa, when did you become like this?”

“I’ve always been this way.” Mindless obedience and meekness had never

been her true nature.

She’d reached her limit. If it meant laying everything bare, so be it. “Frank, I’m grateful to you. These past three years, you gave me the freedom to focus on my work, and you kept the Murphy family from meddling in my life. But that doesn’t mean I have to accept every accusation you throw at

me.”

Frank’s eyes sharpened, piercing her like knives as the truth clicked into place. “So you’ve been using me all along? Using the Atwater family?”

The thought that every smile, every moment of tenderness had been calculated—that even their marriage was part of her plan—made his insides twist.

If it was all an act, then every emotion, every joy and sorrow she’d shown him... had that all been fake too?

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Rage and something else—something tight and suffocating—welled up into

his chest. He couldn't even name what he was feeling anymore. All he knew was that nothing between them was real.

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He felt so estranged from himself, it was as if he'd lost all control.

Frank stared at Elissa, unblinking, his thoughts darkening—if she confessed, maybe he really would strangle her.

But Elissa only lowered her gaze and shot back, "Aren't you the same?"

It was all just mutual exploitation.

No one here was any better than the other.

Frank grabbed her chin hard, forcing her to meet his eyes. "I'll ask you again. Think carefully before you answer."

“This marriage—have you only ever used me?”

Pain shot through her jaw, so sharp she could almost hear the bone threaten to crack. Elissa’s eyes reddened, her self-control slipping away inch by inch. She spat her answer without hesitation. “Yes! That’s right—I

have!”

“Frank, you’re the one who betrayed this marriage. What gives you the right to question me like you’re the victim?”

At last, she’d said what she’d been holding in for so long.

There was a time she’d wanted to entrust her whole future to this man.

She’d tried to win his favor, imagined a lifetime of being the docile Mrs.

Frank.

She had really wanted that.

Frank's grip tightened, and it took every ounce of his upbringing not to give in to his rage and hurt her.

"I've explained myself to you again and again. Short of spelling it out—I will never replace my wife. You will always be Mrs. Frank."

"Elissa, why can't you understand that?"

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His tone, full of patronizing mercy, nearly made her laugh.

Frank saw her fall silent and assumed she regretted her outburst. His voice softened and he let go of her chin—he'd never liked pushing people.

this way.

“We can pretend none of this ever happened. And since Marcia wants in on the Murphy Group project, and you’re the team leader, you can surely take on a new member. Show some goodwill and go apologize to her and her son at the hospital.”

Elissa hadn’t expected this—so this was what he’d been angling for.

Her composure returned. She spoke coolly, all business. “Marcia simply isn’t qualified for this project, not by seniority or ability.”

She’d trained for fifteen years at the side of the most respected physician. in traditional medicine, inheriting his full expertise, then spent another three years practicing and developing new drugs.

Cliff had completed his undergraduate and doctoral degrees, then founded the Serenity Medical Center himself.

The other three team members were either MDs or had significant research experience abroad.

And Marcia? What did she have?

“Marcia is a top graduate from Vistapeak University,” Frank argued, frowning. “She’s even your senior. You only have a bachelor’s degree, so what makes you so high and mighty?”

Elissa didn’t bother arguing. “If you’re unhappy with my decision, go ahead and call the **cops.**”

“Elissa!” Frank snapped, exasperated by her stubbornness. “Don’t make me regret my decision back then!”

“What decision?” Elissa’s voice dropped to a whisper, her eyes clouding. “Marrying me?”

He was the first to regret it—she hadn’t even gotten there yet.

As silence stretched between them, Elissa’s lips curled in a bitter smile.

“Then go ahead and regret it.”

With that, she turned on her heel and strode out of the elevator.

She hadn’t expected to almost run straight into Rowan, standing just a few paces away.

It was obvious he'd overheard at least part of their exchange.

Elissa's cheeks burned with embarrassment and irritation. "Mr. Murphy, do you always eavesdrop like this?"

He didn't seem bothered in the least. One hand tucked in his trouser pocket, he looked her up and down, his height giving him an easy air of confidence. His voice was calm, almost teasing. "Depends on who's

worth listening to."

"And you—do you have any regrets?"

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"I don't regret it."

Elissa answered without hesitation.

She'd already asked herself this question before, so her response was ready.

If it hadn't been for this marriage—if Matriarch Paige Murphy hadn't needed to keep the Atwater family in mind—she would've ended up a broken mess, her wings clipped long ago.

Even the Traditional Medicine Center wouldn't have kept her on for long if the Murphy family found out about her.

Truth be told, neither the Atwater family nor even Frank ever truly treated her badly.

She'd once hoped Frank would be a good husband, but he hadn't been. Still, it wasn't anything that shattered her world.

For three years, she'd considered herself content.

Rowan let out a soft, mocking laugh. "You loved him that much?"

His tone was laced with sarcasm, but his dark eyes pinned her, as if determined to see through every last one of her defenses.

Elissa's lips curled into a smile. "I did."

She tilted her head, gazing up at him with eyes as clear as spring water. With a teasing smile, she asked, “Mr. Murphy, you seem awfully invested in this. **Been** single so long you can’t stand to see a friend loved by someone else?”

Frank and Rowan had once been good friends—a lifetime ago, it felt like.

Rowan’s **expression** froze for a split second, then he shrugged it off, replying airily, “Who said I was single?”

This time, Elissa was the one caught off guard.

She blinked in surprise, an unspoken emotion flickering through her eyes. before she could catch hold of it.

She almost faltered, but after a moment, she managed a polite smile. “Well, congratulations.”

“Don’t forget to send me an invitation when you get married.”

She climbed into her car, but the whole conversation left her feeling

unsettled.

After turning it over in her mind, she finally figured it out.

It was jealousy, plain and simple.

Like a younger sister watching her brother get a girlfriend—suddenly, the person she was closest to belonged to someone else. At first, it stings a little. That’s normal, isn’t it?

Even though she and Rowan had fallen out, they’d shared so many years. of their lives, always relying on each other. Now that their bond had faded and he’d found someone truly close, it was only natural she’d feel a twinge of something.

It was normal, right?

Right.

Satisfied with her own logic, Elissa shook her head hard, banishing the messy thoughts, and drove home.

The next morning, a phone call from the police woke her.

Because of Hickey's injury, Elissa—now a prime suspect—had to go down to the station for questioning.

"We've been to the hospital. The doctors said whoever brought the victim. in performed **first** aid immediately," said the female detective taking her statement, her tone calm and professional. "I heard that was you?"

"It was," Elissa replied with a nod.

"What's your relationship to Hickey?"

09:51

"He's my husband's nephew."

"And his mother, Marcia? Any history between you two? Any grudges?"

“Imaginary romantic rival?” Elissa’s voice was flat. “She thinks I want to steal my own husband from her.”

The detective paused, pen hovering above the paper as she tried to make sense of it. “You mean... she’s having an affair with your husband?”

“You’ve got it right.” Elissa nodded.

The detective, falling back on habit, mused, “If that’s the case, you’d have

a motive.”

Elissa blinked, thrown by the logic. “That’s not quite right.”

Her voice grew serious as she tried to untangle the web for the detective. “She sees me as a rival, but I don’t see her that way. Whatever’s going on between them, I don’t care. It doesn’t matter to me.”

“If my husband wants a divorce, I’ll sign the papers without a second thought.”

“You will not.”

The door to the interview room banged open. Frank strode in, his tone brooking no argument and his face thunderous.

He'd heard she'd been summoned by the police and had come straight from his meeting.

09:51 1

## A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator

He hadn't expected to hear just those two lines.

"Mr. Atwater, you're here."

The female officer glanced at him and offered a practiced reassurance. "Honestly, whether this is serious or not, it's really a family matter. If you can resolve it privately, that would be best."

Watching her indifferent expression, Frank felt a surge of frustration catch in his chest. "Let the police handle it," he replied curtly.

Elissa's long lashes trembled, but her delicate features betrayed no

emotion.

It was just as she'd said—she truly didn't care about him anymore.

Frank frowned, baffled. How had she forgotten even how to show a little weakness?

He even found himself thinking, even if she was the one at fault, if she'd just play along, just for old times' sake... he wouldn't press charges or make things difficult for her.

But Frank's face hardened. "Even if it was just a moment of recklessness, mistakes have consequences."

With that, he turned on his heel and strode away.

The officers continued their routine questioning, running through the details of what had happened before finally allowing Elissa to leave.

Stepping out of the precinct into the dead of winter, Elissa was immediately engulfed by the biting cold.

A familiar Maybach idled at the curb by the entrance.

As she walked past, the window lowered, revealing Frank's flawless, now-icy face. He was rarely this cold. "Grandmother's birthday dinner is tomorrow. I'll pick you up and we'll go to the family estate together."

00-51

Now Elissa understood why he'd come at all.

It was for Marcia—again. No matter how badly things had soured between them, for Marcia's sake, he was willing to seek her out.

He needed to play the loving husband at the Atwater estate, keep up

appearances.

Only this time, Elissa wasn't willing to play along. "I'm busy tomorrow."

She had to get the Murphy Group project on track as soon as possible.

Without the Atwater family behind her, completing this project was the only way to make the Murphy family think twice before pushing her

around.

She refused to return to her old life—trapped, helpless, with no freedom.

Frank's lips curled in a mocking smile. "Not even going to pretend anymore?"

Elissa opened her mouth to reply, but her phone buzzed with two WhatsApp notifications.

It was Frank's mother, Carmela.

One message read: [The divorce papers are finalized. Remember to come to Grandmother's birthday dinner tomorrow.]

The other was a photo.

A photo of the divorce certificate.

When Elissa saw her own name on it, a wave of relief washed over her. She couldn't help the smile that tugged at her lips, dimples flickering at the corners. Looking back at her soon-to-be ex-husband, her tone softened considerably.

"I'm free tomorrow, after all."

Frank was caught off guard. Her smile was so vivid, so alive, that for a moment he lost his composure. "What did you say?"

09:51

"I said, I can go with you to the birthday dinner tomorrow."

Her voice was light, almost cheerful.

Frank frowned again. Ever since she'd checked her phone, her mood had shifted completely.

It was the kind of smile he'd seen on TV dramas—a woman glowing after a text from someone she liked.

His gaze sharpened. “Who just messaged you?”

“That’s my personal business.”

Of course Elissa wouldn’t confess, not even to this.

Frank’s discomfort grew. Not even Marcia could affect his emotions this easily or this often.

Maybe it was just that no man could stand being cuckolded by his own

wife.

He narrowed his eyes at her and warned, “Elissa, you can act out all your want. But cheating during our marriage-*that* crosses a line.”

“Okay,” Elissa replied quietly, her tone gentle and agreeable, just like she used to be. “I understand.”

They weren’t even married anymore.

Seeing her lowered gaze and submissive demeanor, Frank’s anger melted away as quickly as it had come. He spoke more gently, “Get ready for tomorrow. I’ll pick you up and we’ll go to the estate together.”

“All right.”