

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator

Elissa could more or less guess why Frank wanted her back at the old estate, but Carmela's intentions were less clear.

That uncertainty vanished the moment she arrived and saw Carmela surrounded by several daughters from affluent families. It all made

sense now.

On the surface, tonight was a birthday celebration for the family matriarch. In reality, it was Frank's matchmaking party.

Carmela was taking the opportunity to get back at her for daring to ask for so much last time, making it clear that Frank could easily find someone better now that he was free of her. This marriage, after all, had always been a stretch for Elissa.

"Frank, you're here."

As Elissa and Frank entered together, Carmela's gaze flicked to the hand Elissa had resting on her son's arm. Her eyes briefly flashed with displeasure, though her tone remained as warm as ever. "Elissa, your grandmother has been asking for you since you arrived. You should go. see her first."

“All right.”

Elissa had *no* desire to linger and play third wheel. She nodded sensibly.

Frank said, “I’ll go with you.”

“Frank, you can go later.”

Carmela stopped him, her voice as composed as always. “The Carson and Bryant girls have both come by to wish your grandmother a happy. birthday. Why don’t you take them to the tea room for some refreshments, so they’re not left unattended?”

Frank frowned but couldn’t embarrass his mother in front of everyone.

“Understood.”

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Elissa hadn't wanted to come tonight, but she would still offer her genuine birthday wishes to the old lady.

She searched the main hall and learned the matriarch was upstairs in the parlor, catching up with old friends. Deciding to get something to eat first, she made her way to the buffet.

Just as she reached for a plate, a hand snaked around her from behind, squeezing her waist as if no one else were there.

Elissa's skin prickled with alarm. She spun around, and when she saw who it was, her face darkened. She lowered her voice. "Slate, are you out of your mind? Do you even know where you are?"

Atwater Manor.

Her in-laws' home, at least in name.

Slate wore a careless smirk, glancing toward the tea room before curling his lips knowingly. "Don't think I haven't figured out what the Atwater family is up to. They're clearly ready to replace you."

Elissa was surprised. For someone as dense as Slate, he was surprisingly

perceptive.

Carmela was clearly determined to humiliate her tonight. If Frank took a liking to any of the girls here, Carmela would likely announce the divorce. before the evening was over.

Elissa's hand tightened into a fist just as Slate leaned in close, his smile. turning insolent. "At a time like this, even if I took you right here, the Atwater family wouldn't dare cross the Murphy family for your sake."

His eyes narrowed. "You believe me?"

A chill ran down Elissa's spine.

She did believe him.

The room was full of politicians and business elites. The Atwaters would never offend the Murphys for her. In fact, they'd probably do everything possible to cover up any scandal, just to save face.

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If Slate wanted to use her, what could she do? Backed by the Murphy name, he could get away with anything, while she—she wouldn't even have to do anything wrong. As long as Slate acted despicably enough, she'd be completely ruined.

For the first time, Slate saw fear flicker across her face. Grabbing her wrist, he pulled her out of the hall.

“Slate, let go!”

Elissa didn't dare struggle too much, afraid to draw attention.

“Try moving again and see what happens.”

Slate yanked her into the backyard, shoving her against a brick wall. He grinned, predatory. “Elissa, you know I've wanted you for a long time.”

His gaze swept over her hungrily. Having Rowan, his older cousin, overshadow him was one thing, but as the Murphy family's second son, he'd seen and had plenty of beautiful women. During his years abroad, he'd had his fair share of wild flings.

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The so-called “innocent campus queen” types weren’t exactly rare, but compared to Elissa, none of them quite measured up.

Tonight, she wore a deep green cocktail dress—simple cut, nothing flashy. Among the crowd of trust fund princesses, her outfit barely registered, almost plain.

But her figure—and that face—were simply impossible to ignore.

He ran his tongue along his teeth, a slow, deliberate motion. “Bet it feels amazing to run my hands along your waist and hips.”

“Go ahead, then.”

Elissa suddenly seemed to relax, leaning loosely against the wall, her lips curling in a slight, teasing smile. “What do you think, if Rowan finds out—will he take your left hand, or your right?”

Slate’s fear of Rowan was almost instinctive, bred into his bones.

The moment Rowan’s name was mentioned, he flinched, just a little.

Then, trying to recover his bravado, he drawled, “What, you think I’m an idiot? Ever since that family dinner, you and Rowan haven’t had any private contact, have you?”

So he really did know everything.

Then again, of course he did. Even if he wasn’t exactly a star in the Murphy family, he still had his sources.

Elissa’s fingertips curled into her palm, but her smile didn’t waver. “If I hadn’t, how do you think I got a spot on the Murphy Group’s research project?”

Slate had heard vague rumors about that cancer research initiative.

But he’d been played by Elissa before—he wasn’t about to swallow her story so easily. “Probably just a coincidence. The company has so many projects, Rowan can’t micromanage every single one. It’s normal for a few

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to slip through the cracks.”

“But I’m a nobody—totally unremarkable.” Elissa’s tone was open, almost inviting the insult. “If it wasn’t for his word, how else could I have gotten

in?”

That gave Slate pause.

Elissa’s only real achievement in life was that miracle year she managed to get into Vistapeak University. Since then, she’d faded into obscurity, drifting through a job at a local holistic clinic.

With her degree and her resume, there was no way she should’ve landed a spot on a high-profile project like that.

Slate eyed her skeptically. “You and Rowan are still in touch?”

“Of course.”

Elissa nodded. “Just a couple days ago, after a team dinner, Rowan was the one who drove me home.”

She looked completely at ease, not the least bit flustered.

It was the truth, after all. Even if Slate was crazy enough to check the security footage, she had nothing to worry about.

“You” Slate gritted his teeth, jabbing a finger at her in warning. “You just wait. If I find out you lied to me again, I swear I’ll make your life hell.”

He stormed off, furious—he’d almost had her in the palm of his hand, and now she’d slipped right through his fingers. Even his gait was angry, every step radiating frustration.

But Rowan... Rowan was his Achilles’ heel.

“Mr. Slate-”

He’d barely re-entered the main hall when a woman called out to him, striding over with two glasses of wine.

She was pretty, maybe halfway to Elissa’s level.

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But her taste was questionable. From head to toe, she was trying so hard to look elegant and refined that it circled back to tacky.

Slate wasn't into that at all. His expression turned impatient. "What is it?"

"It's business, actually."

Marcia had no idea what was running through his mind. She smiled, offering him one of the glasses. "Mr. Slate, how about we talk partnership?"

Slate narrowed his eyes, recalling who she was, his tone dripping with disdain. "You're... Frank's sister-in-law, right? The one with the little secret on the side?"

Frank's sister-in-law. Which meant she was Elissa's sister-in-law, too.

Now that piqued his interest. "So, what kind of partnership are we talking about?"

Marcia glanced toward the back garden, her smile bright and unhurried as she met Slate's eyes. "The kind where we both stand to win."

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Frank finally finished entertaining those girls and felt himself gradually returning to normal.

As he stepped out of the lounge, he spotted Carmela walking straight toward him. "So, what do you think of today's girls?"

"What do I think?"

He played dumb, even though he knew exactly what she meant.

Carmela put on a stern face. "Don't act clueless. You're my son—I know perfectly well how sharp you are.",

Frank had half a mind to brush her off. He didn't want to upset his mother, but now that she'd confronted him so directly, he saw no reason to keep dodging the issue. "Mom, I'd really appreciate it if you stayed out of my personal life."

His tone was cool, maybe even a little distant.

But Carmela had always doted on her youngest son; she didn't take offense. Instead, she spoke with gentle insistence. "If you don't want me involved, then tell me what exactly do you plan to do?"

Frank's expression grew guarded.

The truth was, he hadn't planned for anything. Just as he'd told Elissa before, the only woman he'd ever consider marrying was her.

Sure, the girl had been acting out lately—maybe a bit too much—but, honestly, it was his fault. A little jealousy and drama from a young woman was hardly out of the ordinary.

His silence made Carmela jump to the worst conclusion. Her brows knitted as she spoke sharply. "Don't tell me you're thinking of letting Marcia join the Atwater family again? Two brothers marrying the same woman—do you realize how people would laugh at us?"

The very thought kept her up at night.

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Frank's gaze was steady and cold. "What are you talking about? I already have a wife—how could I possibly marry someone else?"

Carmela was taken aback but remained skeptical. "You've never once considered divorcing Elissa for Marcia?"

"Absolutely not."

Frank nodded, forcing himself to be patient. "Mom, trust me I know exactly what I'm doing."

He added, "Don't ever set up something like this again. And please, don't go behind my back to talk to Elissa, either."

"But—"

Carmela hesitated, looking uncomfortable. Still, she gave a reluctant nod.

"Fine. I understand."

Frank immediately sensed something off. "Is there something you're not telling me?"

“No.”

Carmela denied it flatly.

But inside, she had already made up her mind: the Atwater family needed a new Mrs. Frank. Ever since that outrageous demand, she'd lost all respect for Elissa. A woman so greedy could never help her son—if anything, she'd only hold him back.

Meanwhile, Elissa only allowed herself to relax once Slate had walked away. She leaned heavily against the wall, finally letting out a shaky breath.

As the tension drained from her, she realized her palms were so tightly clenched that her nails had broken the skin.

Every time she saw Slate, those ugly memories surged back like a recurring nightmare.

She couldn't stop herself from trembling with fear.

It took her a long time to recover; by the time she straightened up, she was chilled to the bone. She smoothed her dress—which, thankfully, was still perfectly in place—and forced herself to return to the party.

She hadn't forgotten why she was here tonight.

Carmela seemed to expect her. As soon as Elissa stepped back inside, a maid approached and quietly led her to the study on the second floor.

Carmela was already there, pouring tea as she glanced up. "Where did you go? Your legs look like they're frozen."

"It was stuffy in the hall," Elissa replied coolly. "I stepped out back for some air."

Carmela set a teacup in front of her. "Try this. The tea estate just sent over a new batch."

"It smells wonderful," Elissa said. Rowan loved tea, and growing up with him, she'd sampled the best since she was little. She took a sip and got straight to the point. "Mrs. Atwater, where's the divorce certificate?"

Now that everything was out in the open, Elissa had no patience for small

talk.

Carmela's hand paused as she set down her own cup. "I was going to give it to you today. But on second thought, I think it's safer to wait."

"What *does* that mean?" Elissa frowned, confused.

Wasn't everything she'd done today supposed to make a clean break between her and the Atwater family?

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"Why are you backing out now?"

Carmela smiled, her tone light but her eyes watchful. “What if, after I hand you the divorce papers, you suddenly decide *not to* keep the whole thing quiet? What am I supposed to do then?”

Elissa reminded her, “We signed an agreement, remember?”

“Agreements like that—well, they only bind honest people.”

The implication was clear: Carmela was calling Elissa dishonest, but Elissa didn’t rise to the bait. “So when can I get them?”

Carmela’s voice turned airy. “When Frank’s ready to get remarried...”

“That’s not going to happen,” Elissa said flatly, fixing her with a look. “I only agreed to keep things quiet for a while, until you found someone suitable for him. Whether Frank’s willing or not—that’s too unpredictable. I’m not going to waste my time waiting.”

“Come on, the divorce is already finalized. Does it really matter to you when it gets announced, or when you actually get the papers?”

“It *does*,” Elissa replied, her voice firm. Every day the secret lasted, she was, *on paper*, still Mrs. Frank Atwater. She had to keep up appearances for Frank’s sake, playing the dutiful wife. But after everything that had happened lately, all she wanted was to draw a clear boundary as soon as possible.

Carmela hadn't expected her precious son to be seen as little more than baggage Elissa couldn't wait to unload. She clenched her jaw, barely containing her anger. "One month," she said tightly. "After Valentine's Day, alright?"

She emphasized the point. With the holiday season, she'd have plenty of opportunities to introduce Frank to other eligible women—one of whom, she hoped, might finally catch his eye.

Elissa lowered her gaze, hesitated for a moment, then nodded. "Alright."

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But she needed to check something first.

Stepping out of the study, she pulled up the photo of the divorce

certificate Carmela had sent her the day before and forwarded it to Tanya Foster.

[Tanya, can you verify if this divorce certificate is real?]

[Holy crap?! You have the certificate already?]

Tanya replied instantly. [You think it might be fake?]

[Ninety percent sure it's real,] Elissa wrote. But she wasn't about to let that last ten percent ruin everything.

Upstairs, the entire Atwater family had gathered on the second floor to celebrate Old Mrs. Atwater's birthday. Even Marcia was there, standing

off to one side.

As Elissa approached, she heard the old lady call out, "Elissa, there you are! Where did you run off to? I've been waiting for you."

“I was just chatting with Mom for a bit,” Elissa replied sweetly. She handed over the carefully wrapped gift she’d prepared that morning, her smile bright and courteous. “Happy birthday, Grandma. Wishing you health and a long, happy life.”

“Oh, what a good girl!” the old lady beamed, patting Elissa’s hand warmly. “Go sit next to Frank.”

There just happened to be an empty seat beside him. Elissa kept her eyes down and walked over, but before she could sit, Marcia spoke up.

“Grandma, Hickey’s been begging to come home for your birthday, but he got hurt a few days ago. He’s still in the hospital and couldn’t make it.”

“Hickey’s hurt?” The old woman’s face grew serious. “What happened?”

After all, Hickey was the only child left by her eldest grandson, and while the Atwaters could be cold when angry, now that tempers had cooled, concern came flooding back.

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Frank immediately glanced at Marcia, eyes warning her to stop talking.

The old lady might usually be gentle, but she ran a tight ship. If this story got out, Elissa would take the fall.

Marcia hesitated, as if she wanted to speak but thought better of it. “Maybe you should ask Elissa...”

The old lady frowned. “Ask Elissa? What’s this got to do with her?”

“Grandma...please, don’t make me say it.” Marcia looked wounded, as if caught between fear and indignation.

The old woman slammed her hand on the table. “When did you become so spineless? I want the truth—out with it!”

Marcia finally relented, her face painted with reluctant helplessness. “Elissa pushed Hickey down the stairs. He’s been in the hospital for days, and the cut on his head still hasn’t healed.”

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Elissa had no patience left for Marcia's endless accusations. She looked straight at her grandmother. "Grandma, the police have already been called. They're still investigating."

"Don't you try to twist the truth!"

Marcia's righteous indignation was almost theatrical, her tone fiercely protective, as if she were shielding her own child. "Hickey was hurt, and you were the only one there. Who else could it be? It's been days, and you haven't even bothered to check on him at the hospital. If that's not a guilty conscience, what is?"

Elissa could hardly believe Marcia would stoop to such twisted logic.

Her grandmother's sharp gaze landed on Elissa, voice cold and stern. "Elissa, is what your sister-in-law said true?"

"It is, but I'm not-"

"That's enough!" her grandmother cut her off, her tone icy. "No matter how much you and your sister-in-law quarrel, the child is innocent in all this. There are guests here today, so you can spend the night in the chapel and think about what you've done."

The Atwater family's chapel was both a shrine to their ancestors and a place for upholding family discipline. Tucked away in a lonely corner of the garden, it was quiet and secluded. In winter, it was freezing; in summer, stiflingly hot.

It wasn't as harsh as the Murphy family's punishment of kneeling on gravel, but a night in the unheated chapel in the dead of winter would almost certainly leave her with a fever.

Elissa lifted her eyes, glancing at Frank. He remained unmoved, his expression unreadable. She gave a wry twist of her lips.

"Grandma, I know, I was the only one there, but I was just—"

She was about to defend herself when a sudden commotion from the

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staircase drew everyone's attention.

The Atwater family turned to look, and Elissa realized—Rowan had

arrived.

Wherever Rowan Murphy went, he was always surrounded by admirers. Tonight was no exception; a small crowd of society's elite clustered around him, eager for his attention.

He seemed to be in unusually good spirits, not brushing people off with his typical aloof indifference, but responding to them with a light, easy

manner.

Perhaps it was because tonight, he had brought a date.

Lorraine stood at his side, her hand resting elegantly on Rowan's arm. Her evening gown was perfectly tailored, accentuating every graceful curve.

So, she's his girlfriend now... Lorraine.

Gentle and poised, Elissa thought, they matched well.

She shifted her gaze away, keeping her expression calm, just as Old Mrs. Atwater called out with a laugh, “Well, I didn’t expect to see you here in person tonight.”

“If I didn’t show up, and my sister was being falsely accused, who else would speak for her?” Rowan replied with a lazy smile, half joking, half

serious.

The room fell silent at his words.

Since their falling out, this was the first time Rowan had publicly acknowledged Elissa as his sister. In the past, people had tried to prod him about their relationship, but he’d never given a straight answer.

Only Elissa, eyes downcast, seemed unaffected. She stared quietly at the floorboards, giving no sign she’d heard a thing.

She’d long since given up trying to guess what Rowan was thinking. Now, surrounded by the Atwaters and with the Slates watching from the sidelines, she knew better than to make a scene in front of all these

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people.

Old Mrs. Atwater tried to catch Elissa's eye, silently urging her to smooth things over. Elissa didn't even glance her way, so the old woman shot a sharp look at Marcia instead.

Marcia clenched her fists, her expression awkward as she tried to save face. "Mr. Murphy, I was only speaking out of turn. I didn't mean to accuse Elissa—she is my sister-in-law, after all."

"Ms. Carson," Lorraine's soft smile carried a subtle warning, "if you *know* you're only guessing, maybe keep it to yourself next time. Otherwise, if Elissa is wronged, I'm sure Mr. Murphy, as her brother, won't *take* kindly

to it."

"Let's not get carried away," Frank said smoothly, his words both conciliatory and evasive. "Marcia just spoke without thinking. Of course, the Atwater family would never let Elissa be mistreated."

"That's certainly for the best," Lorraine replied, clearly speaking on Rowan's behalf. Then she turned to Old Mrs. Atwater, presenting her a birthday gift with a warm smile. "Mrs. Atwater, wishing you a long life filled with happiness."

“Thank you, dear,” the old woman replied, beaming. She turned to Rowan, her eyes twinkling. “It’s rare to see you with a young lady by your side. Should we be expecting good news soon?”

Lorraine blushed, saying nothing, waiting for Rowan to answer.

Since he’d walked in, Elissa hadn’t looked up once. She felt present in the

room, but at the same time utterly out of place.

Frank’s words, for all their surface neutrality, made it clear he was taking Marcia’s side. The spot that used to belong to her, by Rowan’s side, was now filled by someone else.

She didn’t know where to rest her gaze, or even how to hold herself. No matter how she looked at it, she was the one who simply didn’t belong.

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Elissa was still feeling out of place when Lorraine suddenly appeared in front of her, reaching out and grabbing her hand with easy familiarity. “You remember me, right?”

Elissa nodded. “Of course.”

Rowan’s assistant.

Most people would have found it surprising—Rowan always seemed so distant, the type to draw a hard line between business and personal life, hardly the sort to get involved with a subordinate.

But Elissa knew better. Rowan did whatever he pleased.

When he wanted to indulge someone, he didn’t care about boundaries. He’d keep them close as an employee, or, if it suited him, he’d willingly

work under them instead.

He had this uncanny ability to spoil someone rotten—until, out of nowhere, he'd let them crash and burn.

And then...

He'd walk away without a second thought.

Lorraine was all warmth. "I'd heard Mr. Murphy had a sister, but I never imagined it was you."

"Yeah..."

Elissa fumbled for words. "I didn't expect it either."

Her voice came out soft, and Lorraine leaned in, smiling. "Sorry, what did you say?"

"Oh, nothing."

It was clear Lorraine genuinely wanted to get along.

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Back when Rowan still cared about her, Elissa had never been short of girls eager to cozy up. Being Rowan's sister made her the shortcut for anyone wanting to get close to him.

But now, her relationship with Rowan was worse than that of casual

acquaintances.

There was no reason for Lorraine to bother.

Sensing Elissa's distance, Lorraine just smiled and let it go.

As the birthday dinner wound down, Elissa tried to slip away, but Carmela caught her, insisting she help see the guests out.

By the time everyone had left, that familiar Maybach had already vanished.

The butler looked uncomfortable as he explained, “Mrs. Spencer had an allergic reaction to something she ate. Mr. Frank took her to the hospital.” “I see.”

Elissa declined the butler’s offer to call her a car, preferring to leave on

her own.

It was easier to call a taxi now than make up some excuse halfway and double back to Juniper Road.

“Elissa?”

She’d just left the gated neighborhood and reached the main road to hail a cab when a Bentley pulled up beside her. The rear window slid down. Lorraine peered out, frowning. “You’re heading home by yourself at this hour? Where’s Mr. Atwater?”

Elissa turned, catching a glimpse of Lorraine—and Rowan, seated beside her.

He had his eyes closed, feigning a nap, his features sharp and cold in profile, as if Lorraine's words barely registered.

"He had something urgent to take care of," Elissa said.

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"Then hop in, we'll give you a ride."

Elissa shook her head. "No, it's fine, I already called—"

"Come on, it's not safe for you to be out alone at night. Your brother would be worried."

Before she could protest, Lorraine had already stepped out, opened the passenger door, and gently nudged her inside.

Evan was behind the wheel.

Rowan and Lorraine shared the backseat.

Elissa sat up front.

Something about the seating arrangement felt off—almost like she was the kid in a family of three.

Before she could dwell on it, Lorraine beamed at her. “I’m three years older than you, so is it alright if I call you Elissa, like your brother does? I hope you don’t mind.”

Elissa hesitated.

Lorraine took it as reluctance and quickly added, “Sorry, I can call you something else if-”

“It’s fine. Call me whatever you like.”

Rowan, though—he’d never call her that.

Lorraine relaxed, glancing at Rowan, who hadn't even bothered to open his eyes.

She couldn't help thinking how alike the siblings were. Not that their personalities were identical, but both were quiet-reserved in a way that was hard to pin down, yet unmistakably similar.

The rest of the ride passed in silence.

Elissa felt every second crawl by, even her breathing felt out of sync.

She kept replaying the moment Lorraine had swept her into the car,

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wondering why she hadn't reacted faster.

When the towers of Vistapeak Gardens finally came into view, she nearly wanted to beg Evan to hit the gas.

Just as the thought crossed her mind, a sea of red brake lights flared up ahead—traffic jam. At this hour.

Out of the blue, Rowan's voice sounded from the back seat, low and smooth with a hint of lazy irony. "Was the wine poisoned at tonight's party?"

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Elissa's brow furrowed in confusion, her mind momentarily blank.

Instinctively, she assumed Rowan was talking about Marcia's allergy. "It wasn't poison. Marcia just had an allergic reaction—"

"That's not what I meant."

Rowan cut her off with a careless drawl. "I'm asking why you've suddenly turned mute."

Elissa blinked, only just realizing he was mocking her for being cold toward his girlfriend.

Lorraine, oblivious to the endless complications of the Atwater family, tried to smooth things over with a gentle smile. "I suppose Mr. Atwater was just in a hurry to get Ms. Carson to the hospital?"

"...Yes."

No sooner had Elissa answered than she heard the faintest scoff cut through the air. Rowan's tone was flat, yet his words stung: "All bark, no bite."

"Mr. Murphy,"

Suddenly, a surge of anger and humiliation welled up inside Elissa. She fought *to* keep her voice steady, each word crisp and clear. "I'm not like you. I can't just say a few words and make anyone pay the price."

What she hated most was how he always stood above it all, judging, criticizing, as if nothing and no one could touch him.

But what could she do?

She wasn't Rowan. If he so much as tapped his foot, the entire city would tremble.

And who was she, really...?

If the Murphy family or the Atwaters wanted her gone, she'd be crushed in

an instant.

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She was trying to break free from the Atwaters without letting the Murphys chain her down. Even managing to get the divorce at all had taken every ounce of her effort and cunning.

But in his eyes, none of that mattered. He saw her struggle as pathetic, even laughable.

The tension in the car was thick enough to choke on.

Lorraine tried to defend Rowan, her voice tentative. "Elissa, *your* brother's

life hasn't been as easy as you think. Over the years, he's-

Rowan's voice cut through, icy and commanding. "Let her speak."

"I'm done."

"That's why I said—you only know how to lash out at your own."

Rowan's tone was as condescending as ever. "It was Frank who hurt you. Why are you taking it out on me?"

"Or do you just think the whole world owes you something?"

Elissa couldn't even remember the last time she'd cried.

But the moment he said that, tears threatened to spill over without

warning.

She turned away, took a deep breath to push the tremor out of her voice, and forced a smile. “It’s always everyone else who owes Mr. Murphy. When would Mr. Murphy ever owe me anything?”

With that, she shoved the car door open and stepped out, disappearing into the rush of traffic without a backward glance.

Lorraine jumped, startled, and made to follow. Rowan’s voice snapped like a whip. “Let her go

“But, Mr. Murphy...”

Lorraine hesitated, glancing after Elissa. “I think... she was crying.”

She was certain she saw Rowan freeze for a moment, stunned.

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Chapter

When Elissa finally made it home, she felt chilled to the bone, inside and

out.

Only then did she remember the last time she'd cried.

It was when her brother, who'd always cherished her, suddenly—without explanation—had her sent back to their grandmother's house. And after that, Rowan himself was moving out of the old family home.

It was clear. He didn't want her anymore.

But she couldn't believe it. Before Rowan left, she'd run to him, grabbing his arm and begging, "Brother, if I did something wrong, just tell me..."

"Please don't leave me, okay?"

"I'm begging you..."

She was sobbing, tears streaming down her face, her eyes wide and pleading—like a broken porcelain doll, completely lost.

In the past, just the sight of her teary eyes would have Rowan bending over backward to comfort her.

But that time, he only looked at her from above, cold and distant, his

voice like ice.

“You think just because I was bored enough to keep you around for a few years, you’re really my sister?”

“Elissa, do you have no pride at all? All this just to cling to me?”

Elissa’s tears had dried in an instant.

And after that night, she never cried again.

—

She paid *no* mind to the gossip swirling around the clinic, but it only grew worse as the days went by.

The next morning, just as she was grabbing her bag to leave, her phone rang. Cliff's voice came through the line.

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Chapter **9/**

“Elissa, maybe you should take a few days off at home. Or, if you’d rather, come by the Murphy Group research center and focus on the projects there.”

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“What’s wrong?”

“It’s about Marcia’s son, and your relationship with Frank...” Cliff hesitated, clearly worried for her. “People are saying some nasty things right now. I’m afraid if you show up, it’ll just put you in a bad mood. Why not take a break and come back when things have settled down?”

Elissa hadn’t expected this to be the reason. She left the apartment as usual, pressing the elevator button. “Cliff, if I don’t show up, it’ll just make me look guilty.”

“Besides, I already let everyone know I’d be available for appointments today. If I don’t go, are you going to see my patients for me?”

“Well, that’s the thing-” Cliff sounded overwhelmed. “Your patients... they all have these complicated conditions. I can’t guarantee I’d be any help...”

“Exactly. I can’t just let my patients down, can I?”

Elissa smiled. “If people want to talk, that’s their problem, not mine. I haven’t done anything wrong. You know what they say—if your conscience is clear, you have nothing to fear.”

Hearing her laugh, Cliff sounded a bit relieved. “Is that really how you feel?”

“How else could I feel?” Elissa replied, exasperated but calm.

She'd learned a long time ago not to let other people's mistakes weigh her down. If she let every punishment from Matriarch Paige Murphy break her, she'd never have survived this long.

If one person accused her, that was their problem. If a crowd joined in, well, that just meant they were all crazy together.

She hung up, just about to step out the door, when Tanya Foster burst out of the bedroom. "Okay—one good news, one bad news. Which do you want first?"

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"Good news," Elissa answered without hesitation.

"The divorce papers are real!" Tanya grinned, but her expression quickly sobered. "Bad news is, you can't get a replacement copy. I asked

around—looks like your ex-mother-in-law pulled some strings at City

Hall.”

“As long as the divorce is official, that’s all that matters.”

The bad news didn’t surprise Elissa. So long as she was legally single, that was good enough for her. The rest would sort itself out. Carmela Atwater probably wouldn’t cause too much trouble—she’d just want Elissa to cooperate until Frank got remarried. Then all the loose ends would be tied up.

“But you really should get the papers in hand as soon as possible,” Tanya fretted. “Otherwise, if the Atwater family changes their mind and pulls a few tricks, it wouldn’t be impossible for your divorce to magically turn back into a marriage.”

Elissa licked her lips. “I’d love to, but Carmela’s not going to hand them over without a fight.”

“Why not try leveraging Rowan’s influence?” Tanya suggested,

remembering how close Elissa had been with Rowan lately. “He’s the only one in Vistapeak City who can really put the Atwaters in their place. If he steps in, it’ll be a piece of cake...”

“I’ll think about it,” Elissa said. If she asked Rowan for help, who knew how much he’d mock her for it. She could practically hear his lazy drawl already: ‘Didn’t you used to be madly in love? Now you’re jumping through hoops for a divorce?’

She eyed Tanya’s dark circles and changed the subject. “Pulled another all-nighter?”

“Yeah.” Tanya looked pitiful. “You have to hurry up and get rich, so you can support me. If I keep going like this, I’m going to work myself into an early grave.”

Elissa laughed. “I could support you right now, you know.”

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She had more than enough saved up for the both of them *to* live

comfortably for life—as long as Tanya didn’t start gambling or getting into trouble.

Hearing that, Tanya's eyes brightened. "Now that's motivation. I think I can hang in there a little longer!"

With a smile, Elissa told her to have some breakfast before heading to bed, then grabbed her keys and drove to the clinic.

She hadn't even made it through the door before she heard a commotion

inside.

A female patient had her hands clamped around the arm of a young nurse, refusing to let go. "What nonsense were you spouting just now? Where are your manners, girl?"

"Auntie, I wasn't saying anything that wasn't already being talked about!" the nurse protested in a small voice. "Everyone in the clinic's heard about it. I'm not the only one, so why are you picking on me?"

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator

"So just because everyone says it, that makes it true?"

The woman's voice grew louder as she turned to the waiting area. "You all tell me this nurse claims Dr. Elissa hurt someone on purpose and even got involved in someone else's relationship. Does anyone here buy that?"

"No way!"

"Of course not! That's impossible!"

Everyone in the room knew about Elissa's reputation—her compassion and integrity were above reproach. With a doctor like her, there was no way her character would be anything less.

The young nurse, flustered and backed into a corner, blurted out, "Well, it's not up to any of you to decide what's possible or not! The kid's already in the hospital, isn't she—"

"Elissa!"

Suddenly, someone called out from the front desk.

The young nurse instantly fell silent, her face flushing as she looked

toward the entrance.

Elissa's expression was calm and unbothered. Without a hint of anger, she walked over, her pace steady. "Starting tomorrow, you'll be assigned to another doctor's clinic. When you've decided where you want to transfer, let me know, and I'll speak to HR."

Then she glanced at the other nurses at the desk. "If any of you want to transfer as well, tell me now."

"No, not at all..."

"We don't want to! We want to stay!"

Everyone knew Elissa's clinic was always the first to fill up—being

assigned to her meant better pay, better hours. No one in their right mind would want to leave.

Elissa didn't say anything more. She simply turned and walked over to the woman who'd spoken up earlier.

The patient, a woman in her late forties, looked a little sheepish now, her earlier outrage gone. "Don't listen to their nonsense, Elissa. We'd never believe those rumors for a second."

Elissa couldn't help but laugh. "Thank you."

She grew serious again. "At your last checkup, do you remember what I told you?"

The woman shifted guiltily. "You said... to keep a positive mindset."

"Exactly. Next time, don't let idle gossip get you all worked up. A good mood does wonders for your health."

With that gentle admonition, Elissa slipped away to her office, changed into her white coat, and began calling in her patients.

Halfway through, the young nurse who'd caused the commotion slipped in, pleading for Elissa to let her stay,

Other clinics might be less stressful, but the pay didn't come close.

But Elissa, though a good doctor, never claimed to be a saint. She didn't even *look* up. Her answer was a quiet but firm no.

By the time she finished writing a prescription for her last patient, it was nearly one in the afternoon.

"Elissa, the security footage is back online!"

She was just stretching her neck and shoulders when Cliff burst in.

"That was fast," Elissa said, surprised.

The day Hickey was hurt, every security camera by the fire exit mysteriously malfunctioned, leaving the police with no leads.

Cliff set a takeout bag in front of her. "You haven't eaten, right? New Thai place just opened nearby. Give it a try."

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“Thanks.” Elissa didn’t stand on ceremony. She opened the bag and started eating, asking, “Have you checked the footage?”

Cliff raised an eyebrow. “Can you guess how Hickey got hurt?”

Instead of answering, he shot the question back at her, a note of disdain in his eyes—not for Elissa, but for the whole ugly business with Hickey.

Elissa swallowed a bite of curry shrimp. “Was it Marcia?”

Cliff stared at her in surprise. “How did you know?”

Elissa shrugged. “Just a hunch.”

“But... even a wild animal wouldn’t turn on its own cub...” Cliff struggled to

accept it.

Elissa took a sip of soup and looked at him. “Cliff, people aren’t always better than animals when it comes to loyalty.”

Sometimes, she thought, human nature could be uglier than anything in

the wild.

Cliff looked at her anew, respect shining in his gaze. She’d seen the world for what it was, and yet she’d held onto her decency and kindness—a rare thing, he thought.

He continued, “The footage clearly shows you only ran into the fire exit after you heard someone calling for help.”

A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator

“This proves Elissa went in there to save someone.”

He continued, “There’s no need to say much more. Marcia and Hickey entered the emergency stairwell together, then Hickey let out a scream, and Marcia ran out through another floor’s stairs.”

“She took the elevator back up to the third floor, thinking if she destroyed the surveillance footage, she could pin everything on you.”

“Well, look how that turned out. She’s reaping what she sowed.”

“Not necessarily.”

Elissa smiled, feeling comfortable after eating her fill. While clearing the table, she said calmly, “With Frank involved, I doubt she’ll face any real consequences.”

Originally, thanks to Marcia’s insistence, the case was already moving toward a lawsuit.

Whoever was responsible for the injury would have to pay the price.

Cliff frowned, struggling to understand how someone could be so blinded by love. “You mean...”

Elissa said, “I’ll call the police and have them come copy the surveillance footage.”

At the very least, she needed to clear her own name before dealing with anything else.

-

The police responded to the call almost immediately, sending two officers *to* Serenity Wellness Clinic.

The case itself wasn't particularly serious, but with the Atwater family's name attached, it was still a bit of a hot potato. The sooner it could be resolved, the better.

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One of the officers was the same woman who had taken Elissa's

statement last time.

When she and her partner arrived at Serenity Wellness, they got out of the car together and headed straight for the reception desk.

She flashed her badge and asked politely, "Hello, I'm from the Vistapeak Police Department. Could you tell me what floor Mrs. Atwater is on?"

She made sure to be as courteous as her supervisor had instructed.

After all, in Vistapeak City, the last people you want *to* offend are the Murphys and the Atwaters.

“Mrs. Atwater?”

The nurse at the front desk blinked in confusion. “Which Mrs. Atwater do

you mean?”

The policewoman clarified, “Mr. Frank Atwater’s wife.”

“Huh?”

The nurse froze for a moment, then realization dawned.

So Marcia really had married into the Atwater family! And she'd been so low-key about it, always telling them she and Frank were just dating.

She quickly brightened and replied, "She's on the third floor, at Dr. William Garcia's office. I'll take you there."

"Thank you."

After the policewoman thanked her, the group headed up to the third floor.

Marcia was napping, and answered the door still groggy. The front desk nurse teased, "Marcia, the police are here to see Mrs. Atwater!"

The moment Marcia heard the title, she snapped awake.

She forced a smile, assuming the officers would give her some face, considering Frank always treated her differently. "Is there something I

can help you with?”

“Sorry.”

Without missing a beat, the policewoman turned to the nurse and corrected her, “I’m looking for Mrs. Atwater, not Ms. Carson. Are you sure you have the right person?”

“Ms. Carson... isn’t she Mrs. Atwater?”

The nurse’s brain was practically short-circuiting. She looked lost. “Didn’t you just say you were looking for Mr. Atwater’s wife?”

Mr. Atwater and Marcia!

That was right, wasn’t it?

The policewoman nodded. “Yes, we’re looking for Mr. Atwater’s wife. But the Mrs. Atwater we have registered isn’t Ms. Carson.”

If it wasn't Marcia, then who?

Before the nurse could process this, Elissa's voice came from the hallway, "You must be the officers here to copy the security footage?"

The policewoman smiled at her. "Yes, Mrs. Atwater."

"???"

The nurse was stunned.

A few doctors and nurses passing by on their way to start their shifts also stopped, equally bewildered.

What was going on?

If Elissa was Mr. Atwater's wife, then... what about Marcia?