



266 Grieving In Red Lipstick ¹

I turned sharply, instinct on edge. Felicia's voice echoed down the corridor, loud and panicked—her heels a staccato beat against the floor as she came into view, hair windblown, face flushed with fear. ¹

"Elliot!" she shouted again, skidding to a halt when she saw him in my arms.

I felt him startle. He quickly pushed the papers back down. Hiding it again as well as whatever he thought I was finally trusted enough to show me.

Not like a child who'd been found—but like a creature caught. His little body went rigid against me, his earlier emotions—frustration, confusion, plea—sealed behind a wall of practiced stillness.

He didn't move.

Didn't sign.

Didn't cry out.



He just... shut down.

My grip tightened slightly, protectively, and I looked down at him. His face had gone blank in that way only children who'd learned to hide too young could manage. ¹

Felicia's eyes widened when she reached us.

"Where did you find him? He wasn't in his assigned wing! I've been searching—gods, I've been searching everywhere—"

"By the holding sector," I said, voice low.

She blinked. "What?"

"He came here. Alone." I kept my voice steady.

Her face paled instantly. "No."

Elliot didn't react. He didn't even glance at her.

And I saw the guilt in Felicia's eyes, fast and sharp, before she buried it beneath a strained smile. "You shouldn't have run off like that, darling," she said, reaching for him.

He didn't reach back.

Didn't even blink.



I didn't hand him over immediately.

His little fingers were still curled in the front of my coat, not in trust—but in fear. And I realized then—

He hadn't run to find comfort.

He'd run because something in him knew... someone needed saving. 1

Even if he couldn't say it out loud.

I finally lowered him into her arms, and only then did he move—curling into her side with a practiced obedience that made something inside me twist.

Felicia kissed the top of his head. "Don't ever do that again," she whispered. "You scared me."

He didn't nod.

Didn't smile.

Just rested his head against her shoulder.

I watched them, silent.

And for the first time, I wondered...



And why Elliot had come all this way—not to her, but to the very place she hadn't wanted him near.

The place she'd sworn to shield him from.

> "Children don't lie," the flux murmured. "But adults do. Even the ones who grieve in red lipstick." 3

I didn't answer.

I had a sudden sinking feeling. I recognised that flinching. I flinched like that when I was with my father after the night the twins were born.

Felicia narrowed her eyes, still rocking Elliot absently against her shoulder. "What could he possibly be doing here? By the holding sector of all places? That's restricted—he could've been hurt."

I watched Elliot's face.

The flicker.

Barely a breath.

His eyes darted up to mine—a flash of green so vivid it almost hurt. A silent question. A plea



wrapped in fear and hope.

Please don't tell.

It wasn't Eve he was protecting anymore.

It was himself.

And I saw it.

All of it.

The fear, the restraint, the quiet desperation
that didn't belong in a child his age.

I knew that look.

I'd worn it myself.

Once.

Long ago.

"He was looking for me," I said flatly, the lie
slipping out so easily I didn't have time to regret
it. "He got turned around. Saw the guards, got
scared. That's all."

Felicia froze.

For a split second—just one—I saw her jaw
tighten. Her smile strained like over-stretched



thread. "Is that so?" she murmured, smoothing Elliot's hair back like she was trying to hide her reaction. "That doesn't sound like him. He's usually so... obedient."

My gut clenched.

Obedient.

Not safe.

Not heard.

Just... obedient.

"I'll speak with his caretakers," she added quickly, already turning him in her arms like a doll. "This can't happen again."

Elliot didn't look at her.

But his gaze returned to mine.

And this time—

His eyes brightened.

Just a fraction.

Before they dimmed again.

Hidden behind his lashes.



Buried under years of silence.

"I'll walk you both back," I said, voice low.

Felicia smiled, too sweet. "That's not necessary —"

"I insist."

Because whatever was happening behind the walls of her perfect smiles, I was done pretending not to see it. 1

And this time, I was listening.

Really listening.

Because if I ignored the boy again...

I'd be no better than the monster I kept telling myself I hadn't become. 1

> "You're too late," the flux whispered. "He already knows who's safe. And it isn't you. You lost your chance." 1

I ignored it. It was better than engaging with it especially when it was speaking in riddles.

As we walked in silence through the private wing. No words passed between us—just the



muted tap of Felicia's heels and the low hum of the lights overhead.

Elliot stayed curled against her shoulder, silent, stiff.

When we reached her door, I offered, "Mind if I help get him cleaned up? Might help settle him."

Felicia hesitated for a second, then gave a tight smile. "Of course. That would be... helpful."

She handed him over.

He didn't resist, but the second he was in my arms, his eyes flicked to the hallway.

Watching.

Waiting.

Inside the washroom, I set him down gently, crouched to his level. His little fists stayed balled near his chest, clutched tightly over the front of his overalls—right where he'd pushed the paper earlier.

I kept my voice low. "Elliot. It's just us now."

He blinked up at me, expression unreadable.



My gaze flicked down to his hand. "You don't have to speak. Just show me."

His fingers twitched over the pocket.

Then he looked at the door.

And back at me.

And slowly, he shook his head.

Not a tantrum.

Not fear.

Just... resignation.

He pressed the pocket flat, sealing the paper deeper inside, and turned slightly away from me —his shoulders hunching like he expected someone to burst in and take it from him.

I exhaled, jaw tight.

He wasn't hiding it from me.

He was hiding it from her.

"Alright," I murmured, leaning back. "Not right now."

His gaze darted to the door again.

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Still watching.

Still anticipating.

Even in silence, he was screaming.

And I heard it.

Clear as anything.

I would have to keep a personal close eye on
Elliot.

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