

## A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator

Lorraine had no idea what that even meant.

But the tension in the elevator was suddenly so thick you could practically

see it.

Elissa caught the flicker of discomfort on Frank's face and almost wanted to laugh, but when she glanced up, she found Rowan staring straight at

her.

'Ms. Drummond, is your project not busy? No overtime for you tonight?'

He wasn't just targeting her—he was firing shots at everyone.

Every word oozed with that classic corporate overlord attitude.

If Rowan had his way, everyone would be working themselves to the bone, night and day.

Elissa's smile faded. She answered, businesslike, "I can finish the rest at home."

'Oh?" Rowan nodded, feigning deep thought. "You're in love, but you still have the energy to work after hours?"

Elissa rarely felt awkward, but right now, she wished she could just vanish into the elevator shaft.

Everyone probably thought she'd been desperate to marry Frank because she was head-over-heels in love.

Frank, oblivious to her discomfort, actually looked pleased and chuckled, "Don't tease her. She's got thin skin."

As soon as he finished, the elevator came to a smooth stop at the basement level.

They all stepped out. Just then, the neighboring elevator opened and a department director burst out, panting, and rushed up to Rowan. “Mr.

19.07

Murphy, I have an urgent contract that needs your signature.”

Rowan’s expression turned serious. He took the document and reached into his suit pocket for a fountain pen, signing his name with practiced

ease.

Elissa knew his handwriting well—strong, bold strokes.

He’d even helped her practice once, and a bit of his style had crept into

her own.

She was about to look away when her eyes caught on the pen. She hesitated. “Mr. Murphy, why do you have that fountain pen?”

It was the birthday gift she’d given Bradley.

A custom design—one of a kind. There shouldn’t be another like it.

‘He gave it to me,” Rowan replied, arching an eyebrow, utterly unfazed as he capped the pen and slid it back into his pocket. “He kept insisting it suited me. So you’re the one who gave it to him?”

Elissa had nothing to say to that.

But she couldn’t stop thinking about the tiny superhero icon she’d had engraved on the cap. However she tried to picture it, she couldn’t understand why Bradley thought it fit Rowan.

Rowan, of all people—he didn’t exactly strike her as someone who ‘believed in heroes.”

Once Elissa and Frank had walked off, Lorraine glanced at the pen sticking out of Rowan’s pocket and felt a weight lift from her chest.

Lately, Rowan had suddenly swapped out the fountain pen he'd used for

years.

And he seemed unusually protective of this new one, even though its style was completely out of character for him.

He wouldn't even let anyone else clean it.

19.07

For days Lorraine had felt uneasy, half-convinced Rowan must be

interested in some woman. She'd never have guessed it was a gift from

Elissa.

Cherishing something from his sister—well, that made sense.

Frank took Elissa to an upscale restaurant.

He'd even booked out the entire place.

If he was trying to show he was sorry, he was certainly going all out.

"I really did misunderstand you about the hickey thing," Frank said earnestly from across the table, after placing their order. "Let's just forget all those angry words from last time—can we?"

With the whole place empty, all they could hear was the lilting piano music in the background.

It felt like something straight out of a romantic drama.

By the script, this was the moment the heroine should accept the apology and let the matter drop.

But Elissa just smiled and asked, "What about Marcia? She accused me of something I didn't do. You made me apologize to her—shouldn't she apologize *to* me now?"

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Frank rubbed his fingers together, brow furrowing slightly. “She just acted out of desperation. That’s all.”

“Are you sure it was just desperation?” Elissa’s tone was dry. “Or was it something she planned all along? Don’t you already know the answer?”

She couldn’t help but admire his talent for self-deception.

Her clear eyes held his, unblinking, until Frank finally gave in, sighing in resignation. “Little Elissa, I know she crossed a line. I can make it up to you for her...”

He didn’t finish; his phone—resting on the table—began to ring.

Elissa didn’t bother to check the caller ID. From the weary look on Frank’s face, she already knew it was Marcia.

‘Sorry, I need to take this.’

Elissa gave a half-hearted smile. “Go ahead.”

He'd invited her out to dinner and promised an apology, but before the food even arrived, he was already answering a call from the very person

who'd started all this.

She couldn't help but feel how pointless it all was.

"Ma'am? Excuse me, ma'am?"

The waiter had *to* call her twice before Elissa snapped out of her thoughts. She saw a dish had been set on their table. "Sorry, what was that?"

"This pendant," the waiter said, holding out a delicate green pendant. "I believe the gentleman you're with left it on his chair. Would you mind keeping it for him? Just so it doesn't get lost."

"Of course. Thank you."

Elissa took the pendant automatically, about to set it down on the table. But when she glanced at it, her mind went blank.

It was her pendant.

The very same one that had been stolen from her all those years ago at the orphanage.

She'd thought about finding it, but she'd been at the orphanage such a short time, she couldn't even remember the girl's name who'd taken it. When she'd gone back once, the place had already been shut down.

She'd wanted to look, but there was nowhere to start. She never imagined it would land back in her hands so suddenly.

Before she could process it, the pendant was snatched away.

Her instincts took over; she lunged to get it back.

As a child, she had never been able to win these fights.

But she wasn't a child anymore. She wouldn't lose the one thing her parents had left her.

“Give it back!”

“Give it back?” Frank looked at her, startled by her intensity, his brow creasing. “That’s Marcia’s. She’s had it since she was a kid. I can’t just give it to you.”

Elissa forced herself to breathe. “It’s Marcia’s?”

“Yes,” Frank said, assuming she was just interested in jewelry. He placed a piece of cod on her plate. “There’s a charity auction in a couple of days. Come with me. If you see something you like, I’ll make sure you get it. My treat, all right?”

But Elissa couldn’t hear a word he was saying. Her mind was spinning, focused solely on the pendant.

“Can I see it again?” she asked, her gaze burning.

**2/3**

“Of course.” Frank placed it back in her palm.

Elissa cradled it, tracing her finger along the inside edge. She peered closer.

Her childhood nickname was engraved there.

Her father's handwriting.

All the love and hope her parents had for her was etched into that tiny charm.

Little Nine. The wish that she would grow up safe and sound.

She was certain—this was hers. Not Marcia's.

In fact, she realized, Marcia must have been the girl who'd bullied her at the orphanage all those years ago.

She'd stolen her pendant as a child. Now, as adults, she'd taken her husband, tried to take her job, her project.

Marcia had spent her whole life competing with her for everything.

Elissa traced the letters inside the pendant, looking up at Frank with a small, cold smile. “Her nickname’s Little Nine, too?”

## A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator

### Chapter 105

Frank whipped his head toward her, locking eyes with a gaze that refused to waver. “Also? Who else has the nickname ‘little Nine’?”

‘Little Nine’ was about as ordinary a childhood nickname as *you* could get. It was hardly surprising if someone else shared it.

But the way Frank was staring at Elissa, desperate for an answer, made her instinctively wary.

She lowered her gaze, hiding her emotions. “No, just... it’s a pretty common name, that’s all.”

She’d witnessed firsthand just how fiercely Frank defended Marcia earlier today. If he ever found out Marcia had once bullied her... His first reaction would almost certainly be to stand by Marcia’s side. Marcia might even twist the story to make herself look like the victim. Besides, Elissa wasn’t even sure what really happened yet. All she had was this jade pendant...

Elissa pressed her lips together, her expression innocent as she looked up at Frank. “Frank, this jade pendant’s design is really unique. Could I borrow it for a few days? I want to show it to a friend of mine who designs jewelry, see if she can custom-make one like it.”

Frank hesitated, clearly torn. Maybe it was guilt from the whole Hickey situation, or maybe he’d always felt he owed Elissa something. Whatever the reason, when he met her pleading eyes, he gave in with a reluctant nod. “Alright.”

But then he softened, voice gentle, “This pendant means a lot to Marcia, so I’m trusting you with it. Please take good care of it. Try not to let anything happen to it.”

“I will,” Elissa replied, nodding earnestly.

It was one of the rare moments lately when she was genuinely open with Frank. He seemed momentarily lost, as if he glimpsed the sweet,

thoughtful girl she’d once been. Reaching out, he gave her hair a gentle, almost affectionate ruffle. “Alright, let’s eat. See if the food’s to your

liking.”

“Okay.”

For the first time in ages, Elissa ate dinner with a sense of contentment. Now that she’d gotten back something so important, even her appetite

had returned.

When they left the restaurant, it was still early. But with winter’s short days settling over Vistapeak City, the streets were already aglow with the first sweep of evening lights.

They walked side by side to the car. Ever the gentleman, Frank opened her door for her. “Come on, it’s not often we get to head home together.”

Elissa slipped her hand into her coat pocket, fingers brushing over the smooth, cool jade pendant. But her mind was occupied with how she could refuse Frank’s offer—gently, but firmly. From the moment she’d moved out of Greenwood Manor, she’d resolved never to spend another night there, not even for appearances’ sake.

She was still searching for a good excuse when her phone buzzed in her other pocket. Before she even glanced at the screen, she’d already decided: whoever it was, whatever they wanted, she’d use the call to make her escape. Even if it was just a spam call.

“Hello, Tanya?”

Not a scammer—Tanya Foster.

Tanya's voice was bright, almost conspiratorial. "Are you off work yet? Please tell me you're not working late. Hurry home—I've got a surprise for you!"

"A surprise?" Elissa echoed, puzzled.

Tanya kept her tone teasingly mysterious. "Yep! Just get here in twenty minutes, or you'll miss it!"

"Alright, I'm on my way."

Hanging up, Elissa turned to Frank, relief and purpose mingling in her expression. "Tanya wants me to stop by her place. You go on ahead

without me."

Frank had overheard enough of the call to recognize Tanya's voice. But he wasn't stupid—when Elissa turned away, he swallowed hard and asked quietly, "Elissa, you moved out a while ago, didn't you?"

Elissa froze.

She hadn't expected Frank to ask that—not after years of him ignoring everything that had to do with her. She never thought he'd notice anything was different. After all, for most of the past three years, she'd barely seen him at home at all.