

Bound love 1281

Chapter 1281:

Elyse clenched her teeth tightly. This man was impossible! She realized that no matter what she said, Jayden would not stop. With a sigh, she gave up resisting and let him continue. Once they were done, Elyse pushed at Jayden, who was still on top of her.

“Get off, you’re too heavy.”

Jayden complied, rolling off her, but almost immediately pulled her back into his embrace.

Elyse’s voice was tinged with irritation as she asked, “Do you really need to hold me?”

“I’m trying to think of what to tell you about,” he replied.

Elyse’s eyes widened in surprise, realizing he was finally ready to share details about his past. She studied his face carefully, sensing the weight of his thoughts.

After a moment of silence, Jayden spoke. “Why don’t we start with dessert?”

Confused, Elyse furrowed her brows. “Dessert? Are you going to explain why you dislike it?”

Jayden’s expression softened, and he shook his head slightly. “No, it’s not that I dislike dessert. I just can’t eat it,” he said, his tone unusually calm.

Elyse was bewildered. “Why not? What’s so bad about dessert?”

Jayden sighed, his gaze distant. “Enzo insists that, as the future head of the Owen clan, I shouldn’t favor any food. I loved desserts, but he forced me to abandon them.”

He paused, a faint smile tugging at the corners of his lips as he touched his chin thoughtfully, as if reminiscing.

“Did you manage to stop?” Elyse asked, her curiosity piqued.

Jayden shook his head, his voice quieter now. “No, I never could. But it’s a habit I learned to hide.”

“I’d avoid desserts during the day, but at night, I’d sneak into the kitchen for them. At first, he didn’t catch on, but eventually, he did,” Jayden admitted, his voice carrying a hint of lingering pain.

Elyse’s voice trembled slightly as she asked, “What did he do when he found out?”

“He forcibly stopped me from eating desserts,” Jayden replied quietly, his tone somber.

Elyse, taken aback, leaned closer. “How did he do that?”

After a pause, Jayden said slowly, “One night, I snuck into the kitchen for dessert again. Just as I took a bite, I knew something was wrong. The filling of the cake... it was made of animal organs and blood.”

Elyse’s hand flew to her mouth. “God! How could he do something like that?”

Jayden’s gaze turned distant, his voice low as he continued. “I’d almost forgotten about that night, but I’ve been dredging up these memories recently... for you.”

His Adam’s apple moved noticeably as his eyes drifted unfocused toward the ceiling. “I once had a pet, a little bunny I cherished deeply. When I joined the Owen family, I brought it with me, cradling it in my arms. Perhaps that gave him the idea.”

Elyse stared at him, horrified, as he went on. “Enzo wanted to mold me into an emotionless machine, devoid of vulnerabilities. He wasn’t just trying to wean me off sweets—he was determined to destroy what I loved most.”

Chapter 1282:

Jayden's voice trailed off, and a haunting silence filled the room. His eyes dulled, the light within them extinguished by the weight of his memories.

"That evening," he said softly, "I held the cake in my trembling hands, smeared with blood. My teeth chattered from the terror as I stared at it. Enzo had come down from his quarters to the kitchen. He wanted to see me break."

A shiver ran through him as he added, "I can still see the disdain on his face. That expression... it's burned into my memory. I'll never forget it."

With a voice thick with scorn, Enzo had said, "Jayden, you're paying the price for your disobedience. Neither sweets nor the bunny are yours to claim."

Jayden's hatred for Enzo surged to unprecedented levels. He longed to destroy him, to avenge the death of his cherished bunny. Yet, at that time, he was nothing more than a defenseless, vulnerable child.

Elyse watched Jayden closely, her heart heavy with turbulent emotions. Whatever notions she had of his past were nothing compared to the cruel realities Enzo had imposed on him. Without thinking, she drew Jayden into an embrace.

"Are you alright now?" she asked softly.

Jayden sighed, his voice tinged with lingering pain. "I'm not sure if I can ever fully recover, but Peyton reminds me that Enzo's influence lingers in my behavior."

"But I killed Enzo. He's gone!" Elyse insisted, her voice firm.

"He may be gone physically," Jayden replied, his tone laden with resignation, "but he still haunts me. His presence lingers in my flesh, in my memories. His stain is something I'll carry forever."

Overwhelmed, Elyse found herself speechless. A tense silence enveloped them, heavy with unspoken feelings. After a moment, she mustered her courage, cradled his face in her hands, and kissed him gently.

Jayden, surprised yet pleased, blinked in mild confusion. "Why did you do that?"

“That’s your reward,” Elyse whispered softly. “Your history is burdensome, and while I can’t change it, I’m grateful you opened up to me.”

Jayden’s mouth opened slightly in surprise. “A kiss? That’s all I get after sharing so much?”

Elyse’s eyes widened slightly. “What more do you expect?”

Jayden moved closer to her, his eyes alight with a renewed passion. “You’ve stirred something in me again. Why did you have to be so enticing?”

Elyse was utterly baffled. Before she could respond, Jayden had already acted. By the time she realized what was happening, she found him inside her again.

When Jayden finally finished, the evening sun cast long shadows across the room. Elyse, utterly drained, immediately passed out.

Feeling content, Jayden got up from the bed. After a refreshing shower, he made his way down to the living room, where Driscoll had been waiting patiently.

Driscoll greeted him with a slight nod. “Half an hour ago, Peyton called. He said he wanted to talk to you.”

Jayden quirked an eyebrow. “I thought he was going on a trip. What does he want to discuss now?”

Without further delay, Jayden walked into the study and called Peyton, who answered almost immediately. Jayden’s tone was teasing. “You’re on vacation and still thinking about me?”

Chapter 1283:

On the other end, Peyton sighed deeply. “An hour ago, I got a call from back home. There’s been trouble with my clan.”

Chewing on his cigar, Jayden asked coldly, “Wasn’t it just the usual family power struggles? What went wrong this time?”

Peyton’s voice carried a note of helplessness. “There’s been some malicious sabotage. Someone crippled the hand of one of our top surgeons.”

Jayden’s expression shifted, shock evident in his voice. “Who would go to such extreme lengths within their own clan?”

Peyton sighed again, the weight of the situation apparent. “It doesn’t matter who did it. The main issue is that this person needs to be jailed, and the injured party can no longer take over the hospital.”

Jayden chuckled, a smirk tugging at the corners of his lips. “Isn’t that convenient for you? You secure the hospital director position without lifting a finger. If I were you, I’d be celebrating.”

Peyton’s voice carried a hint of confusion. “But they’ve crippled his hand. The damage is severe; he’ll never perform surgery again.”

Realization dawned on Jayden. Peyton wasn’t thinking about personal gain—he was mourning the loss of a skilled doctor. Flicking ash from his cigar, Jayden responded, “So, you’re telling me this because you need my help?”

After a brief silence, Peyton admitted, “The city where I’m vacationing has erupted in conflicts, and flights have been canceled. I can’t find a way back home. Can you sort this out for me?”

Jayden clicked his tongue, shaking his head. “I knew it. You never call unless there’s a problem.”

Frustration tinged Peyton’s voice. “I’m not to blame. The real problem lies with this country. Why can’t they focus on progress instead of tearing each other apart? War is terrifying.”

Jayden exhaled a long breath. “Alright, I’ll handle it as quickly as I can. With the war going on, you’d better hurry back home. And don’t you dare die out there,” he added with a dry edge to his tone. “Because if you do, I’ll be the one to come and collect your body.”

Peyton sighed, the weariness evident. "I went through all this trouble to have a vacation abroad, and I barely got to enjoy it. Now I have to head back and deal with this disaster."

Jayden's reply was casual, almost teasing. "Looks like I'm cleaning up your mess as well."

Peyton chuckled, then shifted the conversation to a lighter topic.

"How are things going with Elyse? Have you two been able to communicate effectively?" Peyton asked, his tone curious.

Jayden nodded slightly before replying, "Yes, I've actually taken some initiative this time."

"And? Any progress?" Peyton sounded genuinely interested.

Reflecting on Elyse's recent actions, Jayden couldn't help but smile, his mood visibly brightening. "Definitely. She made the first move and kissed me."

"She initiated the kiss, huh?" Peyton's voice carried a playful edge.

Chapter 1284:

Jayden chuckled. "I followed your advice, and it really seemed to work."

Peyton explained, his tone thoughtful, "It's because you're gradually opening up to her. She senses that. Since it's what she's always wanted, the results are naturally positive."

Jayden paused, pondering Peyton's words. "So, this is what it means to open up?"

Peyton didn't respond immediately, leaving Jayden in quiet contemplation.

Unbeknownst to Jayden, Peyton had played a significant role in his growth. Over the years, Peyton had studied psychology on his own, becoming an informal therapist for Jayden, carefully guiding him toward emotional openness. It was no easy feat.

Jayden struggled with understanding emotions and had always approached relationships with a blunt, almost transactional mindset. He either showered others with material gifts or lost control entirely, acting impulsively and without connection to his deeper self.

Elyse, however, was different. She had a vibrant inner world and valued deep, meaningful exchanges in a relationship. Being with her was like trying to offer peaches to someone who truly desired grapes—Jayden had no understanding of what she sought, but he was slowly learning.

The one desiring grapes felt unfulfilled, while the one providing peaches believed he was offering the best he had. What were grapes, anyway? He had never even seen them.

With a deep understanding of both their natures, Peyton patiently guided Jayden, helping him learn how to express his true feelings to Elyse.

Jayden might not fully grasp the significance of his growth, but Elyse certainly would. She was inherently more adept at loving than Jayden, her heart naturally attuned to the complexities of connection and emotion.

Peyton, reflecting on all his unnoticed efforts, felt a twinge of exasperation. “If you and Elyse fix things, you owe me big time,” he remarked. Providing psychological advice to Jayden was no simple task.

But Jayden, uninterested in Peyton’s grumbling, promptly ended the call and began arranging Peyton’s flight.

Ten minutes later, a knock at the door interrupted his thoughts. Driscoll stepped inside. “Dinner is served. Should I call Elyse to join us?”

Jayden glanced at the time, stood, and responded, “No, I’ll go get her.”

He left his study and headed to the third floor. Upon entering the bedroom, he found Elyse fast asleep, her peaceful expression softening his heart. But dinner was ready, and she needed to wake up.

He approached her gently, lightly shaking her shoulder. “Time for dinner. Driscoll mentioned the chef prepared all your favorites tonight,” he said with a soft smile.

Elyse murmured in a disinterested tone, her eyes barely opening as she tried to sink back into the pillow. “I don’t want dinner. I just want to sleep. I’m exhausted.”

Jayden’s smile turned playful. “If you don’t get up, I might have to wake you up another way.”

Reluctantly, Elyse sat up, her expression annoyed as she glared at him. “Fine,” she muttered, brushing her hair from her face.

Chapter 1285:

Jayden grinned and offered, “Come on, I’ll help you get ready.”

Elyse swatted his hand away irritably. “I don’t need your help dressing. Move, you’re on my clothes,” she snapped, her tone sharp.

Jayden stepped back, amused, watching her fuss with the blanket. “You’re always cranky when you wake up,” he remarked, crossing his arms.

Elyse shot him a pointed look. “Well, it’s good you recognize that.”

Jayden observed Elyse as she got dressed, then they headed downstairs together.

Driscoll greeted Elyse with a cheerful grin. “The chef is particularly motivated today. He’s eager to impress you.”

Elyse, now aware of the growling in her stomach, smiled. “I can already smell the delicious food.”

They proceeded to the dining room. True to the chef’s promise, the meal was exceptional. Elyse savored one dish after another, her enthusiasm evident. Even Jayden found his appetite growing, eating more than usual.

Curious, Jayden asked, “Why has the chef outdone himself today?”

Driscoll chuckled. "It's because Elyse is home. He's delighted."

Overhearing this, Jayden raised his voice playfully. "Why doesn't he ever cook like this for me?"

Elyse turned to him, her tone laced with mock superiority. "Do you really think you can compare to me? Hmph!"

Driscoll, unfazed, added plainly, "I believe if you were to remarry Elyse, the chef would gladly prepare meals like this every day."

Jayden suddenly felt his appetite diminish. Was there truly no one in this house who supported him?

Elyse continued enjoying her meal before finally finishing and excusing herself to her room to rest. Jayden, on the other hand, returned to his study to tackle some work.

Shortly after, his phone buzzed with an anonymous text message. The message was blunt and accusatory: "You murderer! You killed your own family! Go to hell!"

Jayden glanced at the message briefly, his expression unreadable. Without hesitation, he deleted it and returned to his work, unbothered.

Though Jayden seemed unaffected on the surface, the anonymous message left a subtle imprint on his heart.

The next morning, Elyse was roused by a phone call from Chloe. Still groggy, she answered, "Chloe, what's up?"

Chloe's voice was brisk. "I'm coming to pick you up. Get up and put on a face mask. We're heading out for a magazine shoot."

Elyse glanced at the time and frowned. "But it's barely eight o'clock."

Chloe insisted, her tone leaving no room for argument. "We have five outfits to shoot today, and it's going to take longer than you think. Hurry up, I'm already on my way."

Chapter 1286:

Elyse sighed deeply, burying her head under the covers for a few more seconds before resigning herself to get up and get dressed.

Once ready, she headed downstairs. Driscoll, ever attentive, greeted her. “Are you heading out? Would you like some breakfast first?”

Elyse nodded. “Yes, please.”

She was nearly done eating when Chloe arrived. Bursting into the dining room, Chloe pulled a face mask from her bag and handed it to Elyse. “Use this mask. It’ll hydrate your skin nicely, making your makeup apply smoother.”

Elyse took the mask and was about to head to the bathroom on the first floor when Chloe grabbed her arm. “Let’s do it in the car,” Chloe said firmly. “It’s a one-hour drive, and we’ll be short on time.”

Elyse blinked, surprised. “It’s that far?”

“We’re shooting outdoors, not in a studio. Let’s get moving. No time to waste,” Chloe replied, her tone hurried as she briskly ushered Elyse out the door.

Driscoll watched them leave, a small smile playing on his lips as the house grew quiet again.

“It feels as though life has returned to its usual rhythm—rushed, yet routine.”

Chloe had whisked Elyse away for location shots, and by the time they finished, it was nearly 4 PM. Holding up her phone to check the schedule, Chloe confirmed the next appointment.

“I’ve arranged a makeup session for you. Since you’ve just come back, tonight is your first big event. You need to make an unforgettable entrance.”

Elyse took a sip of water and asked curiously, “Why do you care so much about this?”

“This event is your stepping stone,” Chloe explained confidently as she guided Elyse toward the car. “I want to ensure you secure partnerships, so your image needs to be flawless.”

Gripping the steering wheel firmly, Chloe continued with determination. “I’m an excellent agent, and you’re a remarkable violinist. Together, we’ll make you the most famous violinist.”

Elyse couldn’t help but giggle at Chloe’s resolute tone. “That sounds amazing. If I do become the best, I could set up a national tour, couldn’t I?”

Chloe beamed with pride and nodded enthusiastically. “You could even go on a world tour!”

Elyse’s grin widened as she imagined herself touring the world, firmly established as the leading violinist in the industry.

Upon arriving at the salon, Elyse changed into the dress Pearce had chosen and began her makeup session. Chloe had meticulously studied Elyse’s facial features and had already discussed every detail of the look with the stylist the day before.

Once everything was ready, Elyse followed Chloe to the banquet hall. On their way, Pearce called Elyse.

“Where are you? Do you need me to come get you?” Pearce’s voice carried a hint of concern.

Looking out the car window, Elyse replied, “No, I’m almost there. I’ll be there in about ten minutes.”

Chapter 1287:

“Alright, I’ll be waiting at the entrance,” Pearce said before ending the call.

Shortly after, Chloe pulled up to the venue. Pearce stood at the entrance, letting out a sigh of relief as he watched Elyse step out of the car.

Seeing his expression, Elyse asked with a touch of surprise, “What’s wrong? You look worried.”

Pearce lowered his voice and explained, “Remember I was setting up the dinner banquet for you yesterday? It turns out several notable families have shown interest in attending. We now have a number of VIP guests here, and I’m worried I might need help managing everyone.”

Elyse’s mind raced as she processed this. “VIP guests? Like who, exactly?”

“Celeste Griffin, for one. She’s here,” Pearce said solemnly.

Elyse blinked, confused. Not familiar with the intricacies of the city, she admitted, “I have no idea who that is.”

Pearce couldn’t hide his surprise. “You don’t know her?”

Blushing slightly, Elyse scratched her head. “I don’t think it’s that odd, is it?”

Pearce’s brows furrowed in bewilderment. “Hasn’t Cody ever mentioned Celeste to you? That’s strange.”

Elyse’s confusion deepened. “What does Cody have to do with this?” she asked, her mind racing.

Realizing she truly had no idea, Pearce softened his tone as he explained, “Celeste was both your dad’s and Cody’s violin teacher.”

Elyse gasped, her hand flying to her mouth in shock. Pearce continued, “She publicly renounced Cody and your dad as her students years ago. They’ve been estranged ever since.”

Pearce paused, his face clouding over. “Celeste and Grandma... let’s just say they’re like oil and water. They don’t get along.”

Elyse’s confusion deepened. “Why? What happened?”

Pearce sighed, his tone heavy. “It all started when Grandma said some pretty awful things to Celeste, accusing her of corrupting your dad and making him neglect his family duties. Celeste was

outraged, and their relationship has been tense ever since. Whenever they meet, an argument is inevitable.”

Elyse nodded slowly. “So, you’re telling me there will be drama if they meet at the banquet?”

Pearce hesitated before nodding reluctantly. “Exactly.”

Elyse blinked in thought. “If they cause a scene, can’t you just kick them out?”

Pearce grimaced. “Me? I’m not that capable!”

Elyse grinned at his expression and, taking Chloe’s hand, led her into the venue. She maintained a cheerful demeanor, but inside, her heart was weighed down with apprehension.

A woman who bore a grudge against Cody and her father—Elyse couldn’t shake the feeling that tonight might be chaotic.

Chloe, noticing Elyse’s tension, squeezed her hand gently and said, “Don’t worry too much. Even if Celeste plans to stir up trouble at the banquet, she wouldn’t dare do it openly. That would be highly inappropriate.”

Chapter 1288:

Elyse nodded in agreement, trying to reassure herself as they stepped further into the bustling hall.

“You’re right. This is my event. Even if she wants to air her grievances, she wouldn’t cause a scene in public, would she?”

Chloe nodded confidently. “Exactly. Just relax and enjoy the evening.”

As Elyse entered the grand banquet hall, all eyes turned her way, their gazes a blend of curiosity and admiration. Unfazed by the attention, she walked with practiced grace to the center of the gathering, her presence commanding the room. A warm smile graced her lips as she spoke, her voice carrying the perfect mix of charm and authority.

“Welcome, everyone, to my banquet. I hope tonight brings you all joy and great company.”

Chloe stepped forward, offering a flute of champagne, which Elyse accepted with a small nod. Without hesitation, she downed the drink in one elegant motion, earning nods of approval from the watching crowd.

Elyse’s poise was impeccable. Every tilt of her head, every movement exuded polished confidence. Many in the room found themselves captivated by her magnetic presence.

One by one, guests approached, eager to introduce themselves and bask in her effortless charm. Amid the swirl of greetings and pleasantries, Elyse remained sharp, her wit sparkling like the champagne she raised. She laughed, clinked glasses, and moved through the crowd like a seasoned performer on a brightly lit stage, setting the lively tone for the evening.

Not far away, Pearce observed her quietly, his gaze filled with admiration he made no attempt to hide.

Jayden strolled over, arms crossed, his expression skeptical. “Aren’t you going to step in and lend her a hand?”

Pearce glanced at him briefly before rolling his eyes in mock exasperation. “Why would I? Elyse has this under control. If she stumbles—which she won’t—I’ll step in. But right now, she’s doing just fine.”

Jayden’s silence lingered before he finally spoke. “Don’t you find it sad? Being surrounded by all these people?”

Pearce frowned, his lips tightening. “Sad? Are we even at the same banquet? Elyse isn’t some damsel in distress. She’s dazzling them all with her charisma and skill. She doesn’t need pity—she needs respect.”

Jayden glanced toward Elyse, who was laughing and effortlessly charming a group of influential guests. A strange heaviness settled in his chest, a shadow he couldn’t quite shake.

“Funny,” Jayden said softly. “I can’t see it the way you do.”

Pearce barely spared him a glance. “And what exactly do you see?”

Jayden’s voice carried an earnest weight. “She’s surrounded by people who might turn on her in a heartbeat. She needs to stay with me so I can protect her from any harm.”

Pearce raised an eyebrow, his expression caught between disbelief and amusement. “So that’s why you didn’t want her heading abroad for the competition?”

Jayden nodded, his eyes clouded with lingering worry. “After losing her child, she was vulnerable. I couldn’t let her face more on her own. I had to protect her.”

Chapter 1289:

Pearce faltered, his words caught somewhere between his thoughts and his tongue. Several times, he opened his mouth as if to speak, only to clamp it shut again. Jayden, ever perceptive, arched an eyebrow. “If you’ve got something brewing up there, just spit it out already.”

Finally, Pearce let out a sigh, meeting Jayden’s gaze with a hint of exasperation.

“Ever consider that you’re seeing Elyse all wrong?” Pearce’s tone was firm. “You think she’s fragile, but maybe she’s anything but. She’s solid, dependable, and more than capable of handling whatever life throws at her.”

Jayden’s brows furrowed, his lips tightening, but he didn’t interrupt.

Pearce’s voice softened slightly. “You’ve gotta stop clinging to the Elyse you’ve imagined. Take a good look at the one in front of you—the one standing tall and handling everything like a pro. She’s far from breakable.”

As he finished, Pearce shifted his gaze back to Jayden, his expression growing increasingly incredulous. The longer he looked, the more convinced he became that Jayden was utterly clueless. How had this man not pieced it together yet? Pearce couldn’t help but wonder—if Jayden couldn’t grasp something this obvious, how on earth had he managed to become so successful?

Meanwhile, Elyse remained blissfully unaware of the conversation unfolding between Jayden and Pearce. She was far too engrossed in navigating the crowd, making connections, and leaving her mark.

In just thirty minutes, she had already gathered a small circle of admirers, her charm and confidence weaving an effortless spell. Pearce approached her quietly, leaning in to speak.

“You’ve been on your feet for a while now. Do you want to take a breather? The night’s still young; no need to overdo it.”

Elyse flashed him a quick smile, shaking her head. “I’m fine. So far, everyone’s been easy to talk to—no troublemakers yet. They’ve all been surprisingly accommodating.”

But just as the words left her lips, a sharp, cutting voice sliced through the hum of conversation.

“Well, it seems I arrived late. I hope my tardiness hasn’t soured our gracious host’s mood.”

The chatter around them stilled as heads turned, all attention drawn to the older woman who strode toward Elyse with deliberate steps, the crowd parting like waves before her.

The woman carried herself with an undeniable air of authority, leaning slightly on a cane yet losing none of her regal bearing. Her dark purple dress complemented her gray hair, styled meticulously into an elegant updo. Though her face bore the marks of age, her sharp, piercing eyes suggested a spirit as vibrant and unyielding as ever. It wasn’t difficult to imagine her as a stunning beauty in her youth.

Elyse leaned slightly toward Pearce and whispered, “Is that...?”

Pearce’s expression grew serious. “Celeste Griffin.”

The name hit Elyse with a ripple of unease. Celeste Griffin—Cody’s teacher and, more significantly, her father’s mentor. What could bring such a formidable figure to her banquet?

Elyse couldn’t shake a twinge of apprehension. Whatever Celeste’s intentions, they couldn’t be taken lightly. Yet, she kept her composure. No matter the circumstances, Celeste was a guest, and Elyse knew better than to falter. Putting on her most gracious smile, she stepped forward.

Chapter 1290:

“Ms. Griffin, it’s an honor to have you here. Thank you for coming. I hope you enjoy the evening.”

Celeste’s gaze swept over Elyse, appraising her from head to toe with unapologetic scrutiny. After a moment, her lips curled into a faint smirk.

“Do you know who I am?” Her tone carried a cutting edge, her sharp eyes fixed on Elyse.

Elyse nodded politely, her tone calm and measured. “Yes, I’ve heard of you. You’re from the esteemed Griffin family and served as a mentor to both my teacher, Cody, and my father. It’s an honor to meet someone of your stature.”

“Mentor?” Celeste’s voice was tinged with skepticism, her smirk widening slightly. “I doubt either of them ever treated me as such.”

Leaning more firmly on her cane, Celeste’s sharp gaze bore into Elyse. “So, I hear you’ve won the Swan Cup,” she said, her voice carrying just enough skepticism to cut through the air. “A world-class accolade, no less. Tell me—did you really earn it?”

The room seemed to hold its breath as a collective gasp rippled through the crowd. Guests exchanged murmurs, their curiosity piqued by the confrontation unfolding before them.

Pearce leaned closer to Elyse, his voice low and quick. “Careful now. Celeste won the Swan Cup herself over forty years ago. I can’t recall the exact year, but back in her prime, she was a violin prodigy—hailed as the best in the country.”

Elyse felt a flicker of surprise upon discovering that Celeste, too, had once triumphed in the Swan Cup. She quickly composed herself, keeping her expression neutral.

Celeste, noticing Elyse’s reaction, pressed on. “I’m familiar with Cody’s level of skill. He barely scraped a win in the Swan Cup himself. What caliber of students could he possibly produce? There might have been some... underhanded tactics at play.”

As the words left Celeste's lips, a ripple of whispers coursed through the crowd.

Some of the guests, well aware of the longstanding rivalry between Celeste and the Benson family, observed the scene with a mix of amusement and disapproval. Their curiosity was piqued, tinged with the thrill of potential scandal.

Those unfamiliar with the feud, however, now looked at Elyse with newfound skepticism. Doubts crept into their minds, and their glances were laden with suspicion, questioning the legitimacy of Elyse's accomplishment.

Elyse, though fully aware that Celeste's barbs were aimed to demean her, was puzzled by the unnecessary inclusion of her mentor, Cody. Steeling herself, she responded in a calm and steady voice, "It seems you're underestimating me, which is your prerogative. But Mr. Tucker's reputation isn't up for debate. The Swan Cup was a battleground; each contestant was a formidable adversary, fully capable of claiming victory."

Celeste's lips curled into a scornful sneer. "Oh? So you're asserting that there was no foul play at all?"

Elyse met Celeste's accusation with a resolute stare. "If you're suggesting I cheated, I implore you to present some proof. Demonstrate how I erred in the competition instead of unjustly accusing me."

"Pressuring an innocent person like me to admit to deeds I never committed is unjust," Elyse said firmly.