

Bound love 1411

Chapter 1411:

She paused, then added softly, “And you, Nick, ended up being one of her victims. She played you like a fiddle.”

Nick appeared on the verge of tears. “That’s not true! It was you who sabotaged me, wasn’t it?”

Faced with his complete disbelief, Elyse presented him with news articles confirming Fiona’s arrest. The photos of Fiona in handcuffs were unmistakable.

Nick’s hands shook as he muttered, “How is this possible? This can’t be happening. You must be lying!”

Elyse sighed. “I know this is difficult to accept, but it’s the truth.”

Now understanding the harsh truth, Nick struggled to digest it. Following the competition, Elyse, having finished her duties, watched from backstage. It was clear Nick wasn’t performing his best.

Chloe walked over with concern etched on her face. “What did you say to him up there? He looks terrible and utterly spent. He’s not the energetic guy who was arguing with you earlier.”

“I simply told him what happened,” Elyse responded. “He’s finding it tough to handle.”

Chloe nodded in understanding. “So, he’s in shock.”

Elyse massaged her forehead. “Work’s done. Let’s head home. I’m worn out.”

Chloe agreed. “Sounds good. If we leave now, I’ll still have time for a nightcap.”

A faint smile appeared on Elyse’s face. “That does sound tempting. I think I’ll head home and pour myself a drink too.”

As they chatted, they left the studio and walked towards the parking lot. There, they spotted a man by their car.

Chloe's body stiffened, and she positioned herself protectively in front of Elyse. "Who are you?" she demanded.

The man looked up, and in the dim light, Elyse recognized him.

"Victor?" she called out, surprised.

Victor stubbed out his cigarette. "Finished for the day?" he asked cheerfully. "I came to take you to a party. It started just thirty minutes ago, so we're not late at all."

Chloe's eyes narrowed slightly. "What kind of party is this? Nothing sketchy, I hope?"

Elyse looked towards Victor, still a bit confused. "He said it's a party for music enthusiasts."

Victor confirmed with a nod. "Exactly. It's just a bunch of people coming together to enjoy music, drink some wine, and share stories. I thought it might be something Elyse would like."

Chloe's expression softened. "That sounds nice. You don't really have a lot of friends, Elyse. It could be good for you to socialize a bit more, perhaps open up a little."

Elyse touched her cheek, feeling uncertain. "Am I really that reserved?"

Chloe coughed, quickly steering the conversation in another direction. "So, does she need to dress up for this, or is casual wear fine?"

Victor held the car door open, gesturing for Elyse to get in. "It's just a casual gathering. No need to dress up."

Chapter 1412:

Before Elyse realized what was happening, she was seated in the car.

“I’m not sure I want to go,” she whispered softly.

Victor fastened his seatbelt, and his demeanor turned serious. “Come on, I’ve already told everyone you’re coming. Don’t let me down now and embarrass me.”

Elyse rolled her eyes. “Great, so I’m just your trophy for the evening.”

Victor let out a laugh. “Got me. Now buckle up, we’re leaving.”

With a resigned sigh, Elyse secured her seatbelt and rolled down the window to talk to Chloe. “Go on ahead, I’ll be fine.”

Pulling up to the lively buzz of the party, Victor and Elyse emerged from the car.

Victor, eyeing Elyse’s empty hands, hesitated before speaking. “Elyse, your violin... wouldn’t they want a tune or two tonight?”

Already stepping away, Elyse paused and shot him a skeptical glance, then ducked back into the car to grab her violin case.

Hoisting it with a flourish, she quipped, “Performances aren’t for free, you know.”

Victor gave an awkward chuckle. “Right, of course not. Wouldn’t ask you to play for free on your night off.”

With a snort, Elyse strode towards the entrance, leaving Victor to catch up, rubbing his nose as if that could erase his faux pas.

As they entered, the melodies of a guitar caught Elyse’s attention, soon joined by the deep, rich tones of a viola. The pair’s music wove a haunting spell.

“Wow, this is epic,” Elyse whispered, awe coloring her voice.

The party unfolded just as Victor had promised. A symphony of sounds from various instruments filled the space, complemented by the easy chatter and laughter of the crowd. Elyse spotted someone deftly balancing a glass of red wine while tinkering with piano keys. Victor watched Elyse with a playful smile, clearly amused by her sheer delight at the party.

Elyse bubbled over with excitement. “This party is out of this world! I love it here—the energy is just through the roof!”

Victor laughed softly. “Take it easy. I can see you’re having a blast, but let’s not get teary-eyed just yet. I’d be at a loss if you actually started crying.”

“I wasn’t on the verge of tears,” Elyse retorted, a touch defensively.

“Come on,” Victor said with a wink. “Let’s meet a buddy of mine. He was at the Swan Cup live, if I remember right.”

Elyse’s face brightened instantly. “Really?”

“Why would I lie about that? Let’s head over.”

Victor led her through the lively crowd towards the pulsing center of the party.

They approached a group gathered around a man who was impressively managing both a harmonica and guitar.

“Zayn,” Victor shouted over the music. “Check out who I brought!”

The tunes halted suddenly. Zayn Torres looked up, locking eyes with Elyse and momentarily freezing.

As the crowd turned to follow Zayn’s stare, a murmur of recognition for Elyse spread like wildfire.

Feeling eyes on her, Elyse instinctively sought refuge, tucking herself behind Victor.

Zayn jumped up, his excitement barely contained. “Elyse, here? Victor, you really brought my idol!”

Chapter 1413:

Trying to play it cool, Victor replied, “You mentioned her the other day. Turns out she’s a friend’s cousin—almost like family. So I thought, why not invite her?”

Elyse gave Victor a stealthy pinch on the waist—hard.

“Almost like family? Quite the stretch, Victor!”

Victor managed to suppress a grimace, maintaining his laid-back facade.

Oblivious, Zayn looked at Victor with a mix of envy and admiration before turning his starstruck gaze back to Elyse. He edged closer, his voice trembling slightly. “Hi, I’m a massive fan. I’ve followed your journey from the start. You were mesmerizing—impossible to ignore.”

Flustered by such gushing praise, Elyse shuffled her feet.

“Oh, there were some fantastic competitors too. It was anyone’s game, really.”

Zayn’s cheeks flushed a deep red. “Could I possibly get your autograph? And maybe... shake your hand?”

He glanced at Elyse, his eyes filled with a tentative hope.

“Of course,” Elyse responded, her smile genuine and inviting. “That’s no trouble at all.”

Zayn quickly sent someone off to fetch a pen and paper.

As they waited, he burst out, almost unable to hold back his excitement. “I’d really love to hear you play the violin. Would you mind playing something for me?”

Elyse, slightly surprised, nodded. “Sure, what would you like to hear?”

Zayn hesitated, his request timid. “Could I maybe ask for something a bit unconventional?”

Considering this, Elyse replied, knowing her strength lay in classical music, “If it’s a piece I’m not familiar with, I’ll need the sheet music.”

“What about ‘A Thousand Years’?” Zayn suggested hopefully.

“I’m familiar with it,” Elyse acknowledged, “But I’d still need the sheet music.”

Zayn’s excitement was palpable. “Of course! Oh, God! My favorite musician is going to play ‘A Thousand Years’ for me! I must be the luckiest guy around!”

Victor rolled his eyes, unable to hide his amusement. “Seriously? It’s just one song. You’re making a mountain out of a molehill.”

Zayn shot back, playful yet earnest, “You wouldn’t get it. You’re musically challenged.”

Elyse chuckled, joining in the banter. “Haha, that’s harsh! Looks like you can’t join the cool kids’ table, Victor.”

Victor clenched his jaw, trying not to smile. “Just remember, Elyse, I’m the one who got you into this party!”

Elyse acted as if she hadn’t heard what Victor had said while she opened her violin case and carefully retrieved her treasured instrument.

With the crowd’s eyes fixed on her, she began to play.

The tune of “A Thousand Years” was so mesmerizing that it caused many people to stop their conversations and direct their attention toward Elyse.

A few among them couldn’t resist joining in with their instruments, weaving together the sounds of viola, piano, and violin in perfect harmony.

What began as her solo performance soon blossomed into a full ensemble, resembling a small orchestra.

Chapter 1414:

Even Victor, who lacked any knowledge of music, found himself captivated by the collective symphony. He stood there with his arms folded, watching Elyse in astonishment. It seemed he finally grasped the magnetic power of music.

When the final note faded, the audience appeared eager for more. People began approaching Elyse to chat, and before long, Zayn was no longer the main attraction of the party, leaving Victor entirely overlooked.

Left standing alone on the outskirts of the gathering, Victor watched Elyse being surrounded by admirers. Feeling irked, he muttered, "Elyse is only here because of me, but now I'm the one left out."

Looking confused, Zayn responded, "You can't even carry a tune. Who would want to talk music with you?"

For a moment, Victor remained quiet, conceding the point. However, he quickly realized something and pointed at Elyse. "But she's here because I brought her with me," he argued.

Zayn brushed off the remark with a dismissive wave. "Someone like Elyse, with her charm, talent, and love for music, is always going to steal the spotlight. Competing with her is a losing battle. Accept the truth."

"Fine, I won't argue anymore," Victor replied, taking a bite of the cake Zayn had handed him, his mood clearly soured.

As Zayn relished his strawberry cake, he asked casually, "Even though she's your friend's cousin, how did you convince her to come along?"

Victor, sounding indifferent, said, "It wasn't difficult. How could she say no to a music party? Plus, Elyse might be my bride, so I had some influence over her decision."

Zayn froze with his fork mid-air, sensing that something wasn't quite right. He turned his head with exaggerated slowness. "Wait, Elyse—my favorite musician—might be your bride?"

Victor gave a casual nod. "Our families played matchmaking."

Zayn almost choked on his cake, struggling to get the words out. "You absolute scoundrel! Elyse's my idol! How could someone like you possibly deserve to marry her? What gives you the right?"

Victor stammered, searching for words. "I get that you're upset, but isn't that a bit much? No need to make it personal, okay?"

Zayn turned his head away dramatically. "I don't think we can stay friends anymore. You've betrayed me!"

Victor's lips curved into a mischievous grin. "Well, if Elyse and I do tie the knot, I promise you'll be the first in line to be my best man. Don't worry, I won't forget you, buddy."

Zayn shot Victor a fiery glare before stomping off in frustration. Watching him leave, Victor let out a low chuckle, thoroughly amused by the reaction.

Zayn was ridiculously easy to mess with; a few playful remarks, and he was already fuming.

"Victor," Elyse's voice suddenly called out, breaking through his thoughts.

He turned around to see Elyse gesturing toward him, her expression silently pleading for assistance. Without hesitation, he understood her distress.

He maneuvered through the gathering to reach her side and announced firmly, "Excuse me, everyone, but I need to have a quick word with her. You can catch up with her later."

Chapter 1415:

Leading her to a quieter corner of the party, Elyse let out a long, relieved sigh. "Finally! I can breathe again."

Noticing the weariness on her face, Victor asked with concern, "Is this kind of crowd too much for you?"

Elyse pushed her bangs out of her face and gave a small, awkward nod. She had always been the type to fade into the background, whether at home or at school, never drawing attention to herself. Being the focus of everyone's gaze was something entirely foreign to her. With a weary sigh, she said, "It's overwhelming."

Victor observed her downcast expression and was reminded of what Pearce had shared with him earlier. Pearce had mentioned that Elyse had recently reunited with her real family.

Family and that her previous living conditions hadn't been ideal. It made sense why she struggled to adjust to being in the limelight.

Shifting the conversation, Victor said with a grin, "Regardless of everything, I owe you a big thanks. You've helped me make such an impression on my friends, and now they're practically green with envy."

Elyse let out a light laugh. "It's really nothing. Please, don't make a fuss over it."

Victor kept sneaking glances at Elyse before he ventured, "You know, at these parties, there's a tradition where everyone circles up to dance. How about we join in later?"

Elyse mulled it over for a brief second, then flashed a smile. "Sure."

His eyebrows shot up in surprise. "That was quick! You agreed just like that?"

"Why not?" Elyse retorted playfully. "Was I supposed to turn you down?"

"You wouldn't turn me down, not with the special bond we share, right?" Victor asked, a hint of mischief in his tone.

Elyse's eyes went wide. "What bond? I just got to meet you recently."

Victor let out a weary sigh, his face clouding over. "I've been holding back on something."

Elyse tilted her head, puzzled.

"Our families believe we are a good match and have arranged a marriage for us. If we get along well, we'll be headed for an engagement party sooner rather than later."

Stunned, Elyse exclaimed, "Hold on, are you telling me I'm already promised to you?"

Victor nodded solemnly. "Yes, but you were out of the loop, so I was stumbling over the right moment to tell you..."

Silence hung between them for a long stretch before Elyse spoke again. "So what's this outing really about? How do you see us?"

"You're my buddy's cousin, and I know how much you dig music," Victor explained. "I figured introducing you to other music lovers would be right up your alley."

Elyse arched an eyebrow. "Is that it?"

"Spot on," Victor confirmed. "Though, my folks are keen on us getting to know each other better. They've got me inviting you to all sorts of things. I'm hoping you're cool with that."

Elyse's face flickered with conflicting emotions. "If I agree, does that mean we're dating?"

Chapter 1416:

Victor looked at Elyse with a hint of sadness. "If you say no, it's going to make things pretty rough for me."

Elyse bit her lip, her expression clouded with hesitation.

Just as the tension between them thickened, Zayn's voice cut through from a distance. "Come dance! Enough talking!"

Seizing the moment, Victor grabbed Elyse's hand and pulled her towards the dance floor.

Elyse looked around, bewildered. "We're dancing now?"

"Why not just dance and see where it takes us?" Victor suggested, guiding her closer with an arm snug around her waist. They began to move with the rhythm.

Initially, Elyse stumbled a bit, but soon she was moving in sync with Victor, her steps growing more confident.

Victor laughed softly. "You've got some serious moves."

Lost in the music and the festive vibe, Elyse flashed a wide smile. "Looks like I've got a great teacher."

In that moment, Victor gazed down at her; her eyes sparkled, her cheeks tinged pink from the excitement of the dance.

He reached out, gently brushing her cheek.

Elyse's eyes widened, but then Victor held up a feather. "It's just a feather from the lady next to us; it landed on you."

With a playful roll of her eyes, Elyse teased, "Here I thought you were making a move."

Victor chuckled, his eyes twinkling. "I should be the one worried about you making a move on me."

Elyse gave a short, amused snort but didn't reply.

After a brief pause, Victor ventured, "How about dinner tomorrow?"

Without hesitation, Elyse declined. "No, thanks. I'm swamped with work."

“Having dinner won’t interfere with your work,” Victor pointed out.

“You should think of a way to get your parents to back off this arranged marriage idea,” Elyse countered, curling her lips.

Victor pressed his lips together, holding back his real thoughts.

Saying them aloud might just make her refuse to dance with him again. When the music faded out, they drifted apart.

Zayn wove his way through the crowd, his eyes bright with excitement. “Elyse, you’re incredible! Dance with me too?”

“Sure,” Elyse responded with a nod.

Her agreement seemed to spark a buzz, and soon, several others were vying for a chance to dance with her.

For the first time, Elyse was the center of attention at a party, and it both surprised and overwhelmed her. She glanced instinctively at Victor.

Victor crossed his arms and offered a reassuring smile. “Just go with it and enjoy the tunes.”

After a moment’s hesitation, Elyse turned and joined Zayn on the dance floor.

Victor watched her, a childlike smile spreading across his face, and he couldn’t help but mirror her joy.

Chapter 1417:

“Victor, have you fallen for her?” Emilia Avila approached, wine glass in hand, and raised an eyebrow.

Victor gave her a quick look. “You might want to get your eyes checked, Emilia.”

Emilia laughed, a light, teasing sound. “It’s clear as day. Don’t play dumb.”

“You’re wrong,” Victor stated firmly.

“Liking someone is like a feeling you can’t shake,” Emilia pressed on. “Sometimes, you don’t even realize you’re in love. You just find them nice and want to stick around.”

“That’s absurd,” Victor shot back, his voice tinged with annoyance.

“But Victor, you couldn’t take your eyes off her while she danced,” Emilia continued, unfazed.

“We were just having a good time, that’s all.” Victor deflected, sidestepping her insinuations with a shake of his head.

Emilia caught Victor’s firm resistance and sighed in quiet surrender. “Fine. You’re right.”

Victor let out a weary breath. “Growing older is no walk in the park, you know.”

Emilia’s brow furrowed in confusion. “What does age have to do with this?”

Victor mumbled under his breath, as if speaking more to himself than to Emilia, “Some things are meant for youth. Once the years pile on, they’re just out of reach.”

Intrigued, Emilia leaned in. “What is it you’re longing to do? Maybe I can help.”

Victor chuckled dryly, shaking his head. “Don’t waste your time. I wouldn’t know where to start even if I tried.”

Sensing the wall he’d built, Emilia dropped the subject, her attention drifting to Elyse. Watching her for a moment, she remarked, almost absentmindedly, “Elyse doesn’t look anywhere near your age. How many years apart are you two?”

Victor's face darkened instantly, his expression as stormy as a thundercloud. "Some questions are better left buried," he said curtly.

With a snort, Emilia made a quick exit.

Left alone, Victor's gaze locked on Elyse, who stood hesitating by the dance floor after finishing her twirl with Zayn.

Before Elyse could decide her next move, a bold man, either impatient or with his own agenda, seized her hand and led her back to dance. The troubled look in Elyse's eyes ignited a spark of fury in Victor. Barely holding back his temper, he strode forward and yanked Elyse into his arms with a firm grip.

Victor's voice was low but brimming with menace. "Can't you tell she's uncomfortable? If you're so desperate for a dance, why don't you try me instead?"

Recognizing Victor, the man paled, retreating with all the enthusiasm of a scolded dog.

From the sidelines, Zayn scratched his head, baffled.

Victor stepping in for others? That wasn't like him. In the past, Victor had always been the guy sitting back, enjoying the spectacle. Yet when it came to Elyse, he was a completely different person. Zayn squinted at Victor's posture toward Elyse—too protective, too territorial. The kind of stance that screamed—she was his.

Had Victor been serious when he'd introduced Elyse as his future bride? Was he serious about her?

The realization hit Zayn like a ton of bricks. His jaw dropped, disbelief written all over his face. It felt like the universe had flipped on its head. Meanwhile, Elyse, speaking barely above a whisper, said, "Thanks for stepping in, Victor. I'm done with dancing for now. Let's head somewhere quieter."

Chapter 1418:

Without a second thought, Victor nodded and steered her toward the food area.

Victor glanced at her, his expression softening slightly. “I just realized something. You came straight from work, didn’t you? Aren’t you starving?”

Elyse let out a long sigh. “Starving doesn’t even begin to cover it.” Without wasting another second, she picked up a plate and began selecting her favorite dishes with practiced ease.

Victor followed her lead, filling his own plate before they both settled into a cozy corner to eat.

Midway through their meal, Victor broke the silence. “I’ll give you a ride home later. Sound good?”

Elyse, without even glancing up from her plate, waved off the offer.

“Thanks for the offer, but someone’s already coming to get me.”

Something about her nonchalant tone set off a flicker of unease in Victor. “Who’s picking you up?” His voice carried an edge of curiosity—and something more.

Elyse answered casually, “My ex-husband.”

Victor froze, his fork hovering midair. After a pause, he asked, almost reluctantly, “Jayden Owen?”

When Elyse nodded, confirming his suspicion, Victor’s appetite vanished like smoke on a breeze.

He leaned back in his chair, the crease in his brow deepening. “Why would you let him pick you up? You’re divorced. That chapter’s closed.”

Elyse’s answer was blunt, as though she found the question absurd. “Because he wants to start over. He’s been persistent about giving things another shot. I’m willing to give him a chance, so I said yes.”

Victor’s lips thinned, his tone sharpening. “That’s a mistake. If a relationship ended, there was a reason for it. Life’s nudging you forward, not backward. Why go through the same heartache twice?”

Elyse finally looked up from her plate, her brows knitting together in confusion. “That’s an odd tone, Victor. Are you... upset?”

Victor nodded, his expression stern but sincere. “Of course I’m upset. As your cousin’s friend, I can’t help but feel a little responsible for you—like an older brother.”

“Know? And I have to say this; marriage isn’t some walk in the park. If it didn’t work the first time, there’s no shame in letting it go. You need to have the courage to move forward, not cling to something that’s already broken.”

Elyse mulled over Victor’s words, acknowledging their logic, but they felt oddly out of sync with her situation.

After a moment, she said thoughtfully, “You might be right, but Jayden and I rushed into things before. We made mistakes, sure, but now we’re taking the time to work through them. So far, it’s been going well.”

Victor’s frown deepened, a hint of frustration flickering in his eyes. “You’re missing my point entirely. You’re too young to see all the possibilities out there in the world. There are plenty of men better suited for you than your ex. You don’t have to settle for him just because he’s familiar. You have so many other options.”

Elyse blinked, startled by the conviction in his tone. Her gaze lingered on his face for a moment before she asked, her voice soft and curious, “Are you saying you’re one of those better men?”

Chapter 1419:

Caught off guard, Victor shook his head quickly. “While I consider myself a decent man, I’m not an option for you. I’m your cousin’s friend—that’s all.”

A small smile tugged at Elyse’s lips as she nodded. “Oh, I see. For a second, I thought you were hinting I should pick you.”

Victor laughed softly and said playfully, “If you choose me, that’s fine; I can make sacrifices and bring you home as my wife.”

Elyse responded with a wry smile, “That’s not going to work for me. I need someone who wants to marry me genuinely, not out of obligation.”

“I’m serious,” Victor insisted. “I could really take care of you.”

Elyse snorted and responded, “Sure, as if.”

Victor started to say something in response, but then decided against it and remained silent.

As he continued to eat, Victor found himself thinking about Elyse’s ex-husband and couldn’t resist asking, “Are you only thinking about getting back with your ex right now?”

Elyse replied, “At this point, yes. If that doesn’t pan out, I’ll consider other possibilities.”

“And what might cause it not to pan out?” Victor continued to inquire.

Looking slightly taken aback and pausing as she swallowed her food, Elyse asked, “Why do you keep going on about this? I haven’t even figured it all out myself.”

Victor earnestly replied, “I’m just watching out for you, as your cousin asked me to. It’s important for you to think these things through.”

Elyse scratched her head. “Pearce told me to deal with my own romantic problems. He said it’s time I handled things myself since I’m an adult.”

Victor shook his head, clearly disheartened. “Then he’s not doing his job as family. If your ex sweet-talks you back into marriage, you might end up regretting it later.”

Then, shifting the conversation, Victor suggested, “As a friend of your cousin, let me help you see if he’s a good choice for you.”

Elyse paused to consider before shaking her head. “No, that won’t be necessary.”

“Trust me, I can be useful,” Victor reassured her, patting his chest with solemnity. “Your ex is picking you up later, right? I should meet him.”

Elyse appeared doubtful. “Is that really a good idea?”

“I assure you, I won’t let anything harm you,” Victor said, convincing himself as much as her. He waited patiently for Jayden to show up. At close to 11 P.M., after Jayden called, Elyse said, “He’ll be here in about ten minutes.”

Victor adopted a serious tone. “When he drops you off, make sure he doesn’t stay over.”

Elyse paused briefly before awkwardly saying, “Well, I haven’t actually moved out yet. I’m still living at his place.”

Startled, Victor jumped slightly. “Aren’t you two divorced, though?”

Elyse touched her nose as she explained, “It’s just that real estate prices in Cambape are sky-high. I can’t afford to buy there.”

Despite having some savings, the goal of purchasing a home remained out of her reach.

Victor, looking for a solution, asked, “Didn’t Pearce set up a place for you? Didn’t he offer you some financial help?”

Chapter 1420:

Elyse responded, “He mentioned he had several properties, and I was welcome to pick one, but I chose not to. I also didn’t accept any money from him.”

Taken aback by her response, Victor’s expression revealed his shock—his eyes widened and his mouth hung open slightly.

He murmured in admiration, “Your principles are quite strong. You refuse to take anything handed to you.”

Elyse explained, "I'm earning my own money now. I'd rather not be indebted to anyone."

After a moment's thought, Victor suggested, "What about renting my place?"

Caught off guard, Elyse said, "Rent from you?"

Victor affirmed with a nod. "You're trying to reconcile with your ex, but maintaining some space might help you see things clearer. If you're hesitant to accept a house from Pearce, consider renting from me. I'll ensure the rent is reasonable, so you can focus on sorting out your personal matters."

Elyse considered his suggestion thoughtfully. "That does sound logical. I'll think it over."

Seeing her contemplation, Victor allowed a small smile to form on his lips.

Elyse remained quiet for a moment, mulling over the practicality of his idea.

Her train of thought was interrupted by a call from Jayden.

She grabbed her violin case and said, "He has arrived. I need to leave."

"I'll accompany you outside. I'd like to meet him," Victor replied protectively, rising to follow her.

Jayden stepped out of the vehicle and tilted his head to find Elyse coming closer, her violin case tucked under her arm, her face lit up with a radiant grin.

He could tell she had thoroughly enjoyed herself.

But then his attention shifted to Victor.

Victor wore a neutral expression, yet his eyes, when they locked with Jayden's, conveyed an unmistakable air of contempt and resentment. Jayden's brows knitted ever so slightly. Masking his thoughts, he strolled toward Elyse and gently took the violin case from her grasp.

“I met so many amazing musicians tonight,” Elyse said, her voice brimming with excitement. “You wouldn’t believe how much fun it was to jam with all of them.”

“I can’t say I know much about that world,” Jayden responded, “but seeing you this thrilled makes me feel great, too.”

Elyse glanced at him, startled. He was being unusually considerate. Turning his gaze to Victor, Jayden asked, “And who might this gentleman be?”

Elyse pivoted toward the poised Victor. “Oh, I nearly forgot! This is Victor Hayes, one of Pearce’s friends. He’s the one who invited me to the party.”

“If another gathering comes up, I’ll be sure to inform you,” Victor remarked with a polite smile.

“That’s really thoughtful of you,” Elyse replied, clearly moved by his kindness.

“Sounds like a blast,” Jayden interjected. “Would it be okay if I joined next time?”

Victor raised an eyebrow. “Do you play an instrument?”

“I’m no musician,” Jayden confessed, “but I’m an excellent audience.”

“Good to know,” Victor said coolly, “though I believe they’re already well-stocked with listeners. Musicians, on the other hand, are always in demand.”