

Bound love 1491

Chapter 1491:

“Well, you’ve had your kiss,” Gavin said with a sigh, his tone somewhere between exasperated and resigned. “Can you get off now?”

Freda wasn’t backing down that easily. “Changed my mind. Today, I’m aiming for a proper French kiss. And when I say it, I mean it!” she declared, her eyes alight with determination.

In that moment, she couldn’t fathom how she’d ever wasted time on someone like Theo. Compared to Gavin, Theo was a total loser. How had she been so blind? The more she thought about it, the more she became convinced—she had to lock Gavin down, and fast. Who knew how many other women were eyeing him like a prized trophy?

With newfound resolve, she cupped his face and leaned in again, her lips locking onto his with determination.

Gavin, desperate to avoid her, tried to shift away. But in the chaotic struggle, his push was a bit too forceful, and Freda tumbled unceremoniously to the floor.

She hit the ground with a dull thud, sitting there in a daze, her wide eyes filled with a mix of bewilderment and disbelief.

Gavin immediately crouched down, offering her his hand. “Sorry about that. I guess I went a little overboard. Are you alright?”

Freda blinked, slowly processing what had just happened. Her lips trembled, and tears welled up in her eyes. “Seriously? Not only did I miss out on the kiss, but now I’ve been pushed to the floor?”

She sat on the floor, wailing her frustration for the world to hear. Gavin sighed. Gently tilting her chin up, he leaned in and planted a soft, lingering kiss on her lips.

Freda froze. Her thoughts scattered like autumn leaves in the wind, and her eyes sparkled as they locked onto Gavin’s.

Without a word, Gavin scooped her up and settled her onto his lap, wrapping her snugly in his arms. “If I hold you like this,” he said, “will you stop crying? And yelling, maybe?”

Freda, blushing furiously, tried to muster some defiance. “What’s that supposed to mean? Do you think I’m some kid you need to calm down?”

Gavin chuckled, his voice warm and easy. “Well, aren’t you acting like one?”

That crooked smile of his hit Freda square in the heart, unlocking a flood of memories she had tucked away. She thought back to the time she had fallen head over heels for him—a moment she hadn’t dared revisit until now.

It had been three days after that unforgettable party when their paths crossed again. She had just realized, while standing in line for ice cream, that her wallet and phone had been stolen.

Freda, holding a half-eaten ice cream cone, had only realized the predicament when the vendor demanded payment. His stern glare cut through her like a knife, and before she knew it, tears began to fall.

Gavin, as if summoned by fate, appeared just in time. He paid for her ice cream without a second thought and led her out of the shop. At first, she’d unleashed her frustration on him, her fists pounding against his chest as she wailed, “Why weren’t you here sooner? Do you have any idea how embarrassing that was?”

But Gavin, ever unflappable, simply tousled her hair with a soft chuckle. “Sorry for being late,” he said gently. “Now, come on. Let’s turn this day around.”

Chapter 1492:

Gavin spent the rest of that day spoiling her with lavish gifts and quirky souvenirs, each one a balm to her bruised pride. It was on that very day that she found herself falling for him.

Snapping back to the present, Freda gazed at Gavin, her heart pounding in her chest. Acting on impulse, she leaned in and kissed him, this time with a daring flick of her tongue, testing the waters.

Gavin pulled back slightly, raising a brow. “Are you really this impatient? Shouldn’t we take our time, really get to know each other before diving in?”

Freda groaned, throwing her hands up in mock exasperation. “Are you kidding me? I’ve already planned our future, picked out baby names, and you want to take it slow? Just kiss me properly already!”

Gavin didn’t hold back this time. Freda got the kiss she’d been daydreaming about—a fiery, passionate French kiss.

They had no idea how long it lasted, but when they finally pulled apart, they were both breathless, their lips swollen and glistening. Dizzy from the kiss, Freda collapsed against him, still reeling.

Once her head cleared, though, she took charge of the moment. With a teasing smile, she playfully declared, “Well, since we kissed, I guess that makes me your girlfriend now.”

He hesitated, then let out a soft sigh as he gently rubbed her lower back. “Is your butt still sore?”

She almost blurted out that it didn’t hurt anymore, but a playful thought crossed her mind. She put on a pitiful expression and whimpered, “It hurts! You were so rough earlier; it really aches.”

Upon hearing her complaint, Gavin softened his touch, easing into a gentle massage.

She melted into the moment, but then, with a mischievous glint in her eye, she traced circles on his chest with her finger. “If you’re not going to say anything, then it means you don’t want to admit I’m your girlfriend, huh?”

He shot her a look and replied, “And if I don’t, what are you going to do about it?”

She pouted, her voice dripping with faux sorrow. “What can I do? I guess I’m just not worthy of being your girlfriend.”

Seeing her on the edge of tears, he couldn’t resist. He lifted her chin and kissed her again, this time softly nibbling on her lips, filled with tender affection. Once more, Freda’s mind went fuzzy from the kiss, uncertain of what he really meant.

Noticing the confusion on her face, Gavin smirked and said, “What’s with the stare? I’m kissing my girlfriend. Are you going to stop me?”

Freda’s eyes sparkled with joy, and she asked eagerly, “Am I really your girlfriend now?”

“If you don’t want to be, I can always find someone else,” he teased with a grin.

She immediately pouted. “You’ve got a backup? Who is she? Come on, tell me, is she prettier than me?”

Gavin, overwhelmed by her relentless questioning, finally gave in. “There’s only you. You’re my one and only girlfriend.”

Freda’s face lit up with pure happiness.

Chapter 1493:

She pulled out her phone with a determined smile and said, “Make it official!”

Gavin chuckled, taking her phone with a playful grin. “How do you want this picture? Just a heads-up, I’m not exactly a pro behind the lens. If it turns out terrible, don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

Freda huffed, tossing her hair back. “We’re both too good-looking for any angle to be bad. Trust me, we’re picture-perfect.”

Gavin laughed, clearly amused. “Give me a kiss! I want a picture of us kissing,” Freda demanded confidently, her eyes twinkling.

Gavin teased her back. “Don’t you think your possessiveness is a bit much?”

“I don’t care. You’re mine,” she replied with a playful pout, making it clear that there was no backing out. Gavin, of course, couldn’t resist and obliged, capturing the perfect kiss.

Afterward, she was quick to share the photo online, even using Gavin's account to make it official.

Not long after, Gavin's phone buzzed with a call from Elyse.

As he reached for it, his phone rang again—this time, it was Irving.

Suddenly, the desire to answer either call vanished into thin air. Freda's phone rang too, and it was Celeste on the other end, confirming that she'd join her for dinner.

Freda beamed, looking at Gavin like she'd just won a battle. "See? I told you I could handle Celeste. Didn't I? Your girlfriend's got your back, huh?"

Gavin nodded, impressed. "You did a good job."

Freda hesitated, her eyes glancing at him shyly before she finally spoke up. "So... can I get a reward?"

He raised an eyebrow, puzzled. "A reward? What, like a handbag?" His mom was all about handbags, and his dad had a habit of buying them to keep her happy.

"I don't want a handbag," Freda said, almost shyly. After a pause, she hesitated before suggesting, "Could you just... hold me?"

He gave a questioning look but, seeing her blush, obliged. He wrapped his arms around her, pulling her close.

"And... a kiss too," she added, pointing to her lips with a coy smile.

Gavin blinked in confusion. "Didn't we just kiss?"

"Just because we kissed doesn't mean we can't do it again," she argued, her voice soft and teasing. "I love it when you kiss me. You owe me a reward, remember? You have to kiss me all afternoon."

"All afternoon? My lips are gonna be sore," Gavin said, bewildered by the request.

“I don’t care,” Freda pouted, acting cute as she wrapped her arms around him. “Just hold me and kiss me, please!”

Gavin, utterly charmed, couldn’t say no.

So, that afternoon, he found himself doing nothing but holding Freda and showering her with kisses.

Elyse sat in the yard, scrolling through her phone when she stumbled upon Freda’s latest post—a carefully staged shot of her kissing Gavin.

Her heart skipped a beat as the image registered in her mind. Without thinking, she swiped to refresh, only to find the same photo on Gavin’s own feed.

Chapter 1494:

She’d known that Freda had been chasing Gavin for a while, but had it really happened this fast?

Elyse could hardly wrap her head around it. She quickly dialed Gavin’s number, hoping to get some clarity, but he didn’t pick up.

She sat there, completely stunned.

Chloe, noticing Elyse’s dazed expression, raised an eyebrow and asked, “What’s up? You look shocked.”

Elyse rubbed her temples, trying to shake off the surprise. “I’m fine. It’s just... Gavin’s announced he’s in a relationship.”

Chloe nodded knowingly. “But isn’t it a good thing? I mean, he’s happy, right? Can’t you handle it?”

“It’s not that I can’t handle it,” Elyse replied, pausing as she tried to find the right words. “It’s just... yesterday, they were still—” She trailed off, unsure if she even needed to say it out loud. She decided not to dwell on it.

Gavin was always the more level-headed one, so if he’d made this decision, it was probably the best one for him.

With that thought, Elyse took a deep breath and let the emotions settle. She took a sip of her drink to calm her nerves and then said, “My cousin’s taking me out for dinner later. Want to tag along?”

Chloe’s eyes lit up with interest. “Free food? Of course, I’m in.”

Elyse grinned and nodded. “Great. I’ll let him know.”

Curious, Chloe asked with a playful twinkle, “Is your cousin single?”

Elyse glanced up from her phone, slightly surprised. “Yeah, he is. Why? You into him?”

Chloe let out a dramatic sigh. “It’s not so much about him. It’s just... all my friends are in relationships, and I’m the only one flying solo. Feels like I’m the last person on Earth.”

Without someone to call my own. Elyse raised an eyebrow. “So, you thinking about giving my cousin a shot? I could help you out, you know.”

Chloe shook her head with a laugh. “Nah, I’m good. I’d rather stay single. If I ever did get into a relationship, I’d probably get bored and break up before it even went anywhere.”

Elyse sighed, feeling a bit helpless. “With that kind of attitude, when do you think you’ll ever meet your Mr. Right?”

Chloe took a calm, unhurried bite of her cake. “No rush. Love will find me when it’s ready. I’m working hard, so I trust the universe won’t let me down.”

Elyse nodded, agreeing with her. “You’re right. Love is probably just waiting for you around the corner.”

But even as she said that, she couldn't help but think that maybe it was worth a shot. Maybe tonight would be the night Chloe and Pearce clicked. If not, no big deal.

That evening, Elyse and Chloe arrived at the restaurant as planned. The moment they stepped into the private dining room, Elyse felt the weight of eight sets of eyes on her.

Chapter 1495:

Pearce stood up, offering a reassuring smile. "Don't worry, Elyse. They're all just my friends. Come sit next to me, and I'll introduce you to everyone."

Still a little jittery, Elyse took Chloe's arm and followed, settling into her seat.

Victor broke the ice with a friendly smile. "Hey, Elyse! Do you like berries? The ones here are super fresh."

He placed a bowl of berries in front of Elyse with a flourish.

Elyse couldn't hide her delight. She was a sucker for berries, and seeing her favorite fruit made her heart lift. She flashed Victor a grateful smile. "Thanks, Victor. But I don't think I ever told you I liked berries, did I?"

Victor chuckled, a mischievous glint in his eye. "We've crossed paths a few times, and I couldn't help but notice you seemed to enjoy them, so I made a mental note of it."

A man, clearly enjoying himself, teased, "Since when did you start paying so much attention to Pearce's cousin, Victor? You don't even know my favorite fruit, yet you've memorized hers. What's going on here?"

Victor quickly shot back. "Hey, don't go accusing me."

The man grinned and continued, "Accuse you? You walked in and ordered berries without hesitation, but when we reached for them, you acted like they were a precious gem. Even Pearce here doesn't have your level of attention to detail."

Pearce, sensing something wasn't quite right, raised an eyebrow, his eyes wide with realization. "Wait a minute, Victor, you sly dog! You've got a thing for Elyse, don't you? I'm warning you, my innocent-as-an-angel cousin deserves someone better than you."

Elyse, unable to stay silent any longer, gently interjected, "Pearce, please don't make me sound like some saint."

Pearce chuckled and placed a calming hand on her. "Hush now. In my eyes, you're as pure as an angel. Just sit tight while I handle this rascal."

Victor, rubbing his chin with a playful smirk, retorted, "I'm just looking out for her."

"You want to look out for her? I'm her family. I can do that!" Pearce's voice was tight with irritation as he challenged the situation. "So you're the hero for taking care of her, and I'm the failure?"

Victor flashed a knowing smirk. "I've figured out Elyse's likes and dislikes just by paying attention. That makes me more thoughtful and considerate than you, doesn't it?"

"Elyse is my cousin, not yours!" Pearce said, his frustration mounting. "Can't you stick to your own family instead of trying to butt into mine?"

Unruffled, Victor shrugged, still smiling. "Elyse is delightful. Can you blame me for wanting to be close to her?"

Right then, one of their friends cut in with a sly grin. "Victor, it sounds like you're hunting for a girlfriend."

Pearce's expression darkened. He rose abruptly. "Victor, we need to talk. Outside, now."

Victor complied, following Pearce out without a word.

Left in the room with Pearce's friends, Elyse felt a flush of nervousness. She gripped Chloe's hand, seeking solace, and offered a hesitant smile. "Hi, everyone," she began, her voice quivering a bit. "I'm Elyse Lloyd. It's great to meet you guys."

Chapter 1496:

The group was visibly charmed by Elyse, who seemed even more endearing in person.

The room buzzed with banter.

“Wow, Pearce has been hiding a beautiful cousin like you? Some of us have been on the market way too long!”

“Pearce definitely plays favorites! Victor already knows Elyse. They’re both in for some good-natured ribbing!”

“Don’t sweat it, Elyse, we’re all decent folks here,” chimed in another, smoothing over the playful teasing.

Elyse’s cheeks turned a deep shade of red as she edged closer to Chloe, feeling somewhat overwhelmed.

Chloe whispered reassuringly, “You clearly haven’t hung around guys much. Just take it easy and chat with them.”

Elyse’s head spun slightly, but Chloe’s encouraging words anchored her, allowing her to cautiously engage with their probing questions. As the conversation took a turn towards personal relationships, Elyse unexpectedly revealed her divorced status.

Silence suddenly blanketed the room.

Just then, Pearce and Victor strolled in, surprised by the stark quietude. Pearce raised an eyebrow. “Why’s it so quiet in here? This isn’t like you.”

Flushed with embarrassment, Elyse had been nervous about Pearce’s dinner possibly being a setup to make her meet his friends. She felt compelled to be upfront about her past.

“Really, Pearce?” someone challenged. “You let such a kind, lovely cousin marry a jerk!”

Pearce’s features stiffened. “I didn’t even know Elyse back when she got married!”

Regret twisted inside him. He felt a burden of responsibility. Had he met Elyse sooner, perhaps she could have avoided all the turmoil with Jayden.

Elyse gently shook her head. “The marriage wasn’t a disaster, honestly. It actually helped me recognize some personal faults. I’m genuinely happy with my life now.”

“Wow, Elyse, you’re a saint!” someone declared.

A shy smile touched Elyse’s lips. “Oh, I’m hardly that,” she said with a dismissive wave. “I’ve got plenty of flaws.” Laughter and conversation filled the air once more.

As the meal was served, everyone dove in.

Pearce, keen to show his brotherly affection, kept loading Elyse’s plate with more food.

“Pearce, I’m not a child,” Elyse whispered, her voice laced with amusement. “There’s no need for the extra fuss.”

“Just let me strut my stuff a bit, okay?” Pearce murmured back, leaning in closer. “I have to keep up appearances here.” Elyse rolled her eyes, at a loss for words.

Victor chimed in suddenly. “Hey, Elyse, any plans on moving out of your ex’s place soon? A buddy of mine is selling his house, and I might snag you a great deal.”

Elyse caught Chloe’s eye before responding, “I’m just waiting on my last paycheck. I’ll start house hunting as soon as it’s in my hands.”

Chapter 1497:

Pearce looked puzzled. “Hang on, did something go down with Jayden again? Is that why you’re moving?”

Elyse shook her head. “No, it’s not like that. I just want my own space. I don’t actually own any place yet, you know?”

Pearce, ever the generous cousin, threw out an offer nonchalantly. “If it’s about a house, I could buy you a couple.”

Elyse’s response was swift and decisive. “Thanks, but no thanks. I want to make it on my own.”

Victor grinned. “How about this, why not marry me? You’d get all my properties. Heck, I’d even transfer all my assets to you.”

Shocked, Elyse’s fork slipped from her hand and clattered onto her plate with a soft thud.

The private dining room fell into a hushed stillness, every gaze turning toward Victor, each person silently trying to decipher the sincerity behind his words.

After a moment, Pearce broke the silence. With a sharp motion, he pushed back his chair, slamming his palms down on the table. His voice rumbled, “You told me in the corridor you were just making jokes. What’s this now?”

Victor, unfazed, offered a warm smile in Elyse’s direction. “I mean it. Elyse, don’t reconcile with your ex. Be with me. I’ll take better care of you than he ever could.”

A few heads turned, the room filled with quiet murmurs as they all tried to gauge just how serious Victor truly was.

Elyse sat in silence for a moment, then spoke softly, almost skeptically. “You must be joking, right?”

One of Pearce’s friends attempted to ease the tension with a chuckle, adding, “Victor must be joking. He’s an eligible bachelor. Why on earth would he be interested in a divorced woman?”

The words cut, though Elyse kept her composure. They were truthful, after all.

However, Victor wasn't one to back down easily. With a confident yet earnest tone, he pressed on, "Elyse, I'm your cousin's friend, after all. Marrying me wouldn't be such a bad idea, don't you think? Besides, whatever your ex has, I have too. And whatever he could offer you, I can match—if not do better."

Elyse's breath hitched slightly, the weight of Victor's seriousness dawning on her. He didn't seem to be playing around.

Pearce and the others caught on as well, the tension in the room thickening.

No one quite knew how to respond.

They thought Elyse, after her divorce, would fade into the background—an afterthought. But here was Victor, someone they all thought highly of, showing interest in her.

The question hung heavy in the air: why would Victor choose Elyse? It was bewildering.

Pearce's expression darkened, his tone taking on a sharper edge. "Victor, seriously? This can't be real. Elyse is divorced, sure, but she's decent. If you're messing with her, you'll have me to answer to."

Victor finally turned his gaze to Pearce, his smile never faltering. "Did you know your grandma tried to arrange a marriage between Elyse and—"

Chapter 1498:

Pearce's eyes widened. "That's impossible. No one said a word about it."

"She made sure you wouldn't hear," Victor said smoothly.

Pearce sat back, stunned. "And you went along with it? Don't tell me you actually have feelings for Elyse."

Hearing that, Elyse pressed her lips together, her gaze soft but steady as it found Victor's.

Victor felt the weight of her stare and paused, his voice gentle. "It's not exactly love, but there's definitely some attraction there. If marrying Elyse is an option, I think it's a choice worth considering."

Pearce couldn't help but cut in, his frustration bubbling over. "Just some attraction? You're even thinking about marriage? That's absurd! I get it—you're sick of your parents pressuring you into it, and now you're picking someone you think fits the mold. But Elyse won't settle. She deserves more than convenience. She'll marry for love, not out of convenience."

The others chimed in, nodding in agreement with Pearce. "He's right. Marriage is more than just a label. It's a lifelong commitment. Rushing into it would be a mistake."

Victor stayed quiet, his eyes locked on Elyse with an intensity that no one could ignore.

After a long pause, Elyse said, her voice calm but firm, "I think we need to talk alone."

Without missing a beat, Victor placed his glass down with a soft clink and rose to his feet. "Alright, let's step aside and have a word in private."

The two left the room in silence, side by side.

Pearce watched them go, still stunned. The entire scene had left him speechless.

"Pearce, what if Victor really likes Elyse?" one of his friends finally broke the silence, a hint of curiosity in their voice.

Pearce shook his head, his tone dismissive. "No way. Victor has high standards. He doesn't throw around marriage talk lightly."

The friend pressed on, "Exactly! He doesn't casually talk about marriage. But this time, he's bringing it up with Elyse and even mentioning giving her all his assets. That has to mean something serious."

Pearce looked bewildered, his mind racing to process the situation, unable to shake off the disbelief.

Meanwhile, Chloe, sharper than the rest, saw right through Victor's facade. It wasn't just about convenience or societal pressure—he genuinely cared for Elyse. His light banter was a shield for something deeper.

In the midst of the tension, Chloe discreetly sent a message to Jayden, her fingers moving swiftly across her phone.

“Mr. Owen, if you don't come soon, someone else might win Elyse over.”

Elyse slipped out of the private room and strolled to the end of the corridor, resting her back against the window. Victor trailed after her. He cocked an eyebrow, his tone curious but casual. “Alright, what do you want to talk about?”

Chapter 1499:

Elyse's brow furrowed, her voice laced with bewilderment. “What's gotten into you? You're not sticking to the plan. Weren't you just using me as a front? Didn't I tell you to hurry up and persuade our families to drop the idea of an arranged marriage? So why are you dragging your feet?”

Victor rubbed his chin thoughtfully, his words steady and deliberate. “Well, after mulling it over at home, I realized there's no downside to marrying you. Actually, there's plenty of upside. And honestly? I don't hate being with you. Quite the opposite—I think you're great, and if we tied the knot, it wouldn't be a bad thing.”

Elyse's response came quick and sharp. “No, it would be a disaster. Jayden and I are working things out. We're finally on the same page again, better than ever, really. There's a real chance we'll remarry.” She paused, as if weighing her words, then added with conviction, “I can't keep this engagement going. Jayden and I are rebuilding something solid, and I'm not about to jeopardize that for anything else.”

Victor folded his arms, his expression serious. “Marriage is supposed to be forever, Elyse. Are you sure doubling back to your ex is the right move? If he was the perfect fit, you wouldn't have split up in the first place. Divorce doesn't just happen out of thin air—it's about deep-seated incompatibility.”

Elyse didn't bristle at his reasoning. Instead, she nodded thoughtfully. "You're not wrong. Jayden and I rushed into things the first time, and that led to a lot of unresolved issues. It's what caused the divorce. But even afterward, we stayed connected. That connection forced us to look at ourselves and each other with fresh eyes. Through all of that, we found a way to grow closer again."

Victor leaned in, undeterred. "But what if history repeats itself? What if you remarry him and it falls apart again? Then you'll be looking at a third marriage down the line."

Elyse met his gaze with calm resolve. "If Jayden and I divorce again, I won't marry anyone else. That'll be it for me."

Victor chuckled softly, "That's a bit dramatic, don't you think? You're putting all your eggs in one basket. Maybe the issue is you've had too few relationships. You're laser-focused on Jayden, but what if someone better suited is out there? You'll never know unless you open yourself up to the possibility."

Elyse didn't reply right away. Instead, she let a small, knowing smile play on her lips. "Victor, the truth is, I don't feel anything romantic for you. There's no spark, no chemistry. And if that's missing, how could I ever see you as anything more than a friend?"

Victor fell silent for a moment before letting out a soft sigh. "You're sharp as a tack, Elyse. You know exactly what you want, leaving me no wiggle room."

Elyse's lips curved into a wry smile. "I can't read other people's minds, so I focus on understanding my own. Maybe that sounds heartless to you, but honestly, it's one of the things I love most about myself."

Victor lifted a hand and ruffled her hair gently, a faint shake of his head accompanying the gesture. "No. I admire you for that. Being sharp and self-aware isn't something I find annoying at all."

Elyse blinked, startled by his sudden touch, unsure how to react. Dropping his hand, he let out a dramatic sigh. "Alas. If I'm being honest, I'd rather marry you than keep going on these endless, awkward blind dates."

Elyse couldn't help but laugh. "You can't be serious. Marrying me just to dodge blind dates? That's no way to treat yourself."

Chapter 1500:

“Yeah, yeah, I know,” Victor muttered, pulling a cigarette pack from his pocket. “I’m just venting. Go on, head back to the room. I need a minute to brood with this cigarette before I rejoin you guys.”

With a lighthearted smile, Elyse nodded. “Alright, don’t take too long.” She turned and disappeared into the corridor. Moments later, Pearce strolled over, a cigarette dangling from his lips.

“Victor,” Pearce said as he lit up, “did you mean what you said back there?”

Victor glanced at him sideways, his expression unreadable, but stayed silent.

Pearce didn’t press further. Instead, he lit his cigarette and smoked quietly beside him.

After a while, Victor finally broke the silence. “You know, I kept thinking just now... if only I were younger. Twenty-five, maybe twenty-six. That’d be something.”

Pearce raised an eyebrow. “Why the sudden wish for a time machine?”

“If I were younger,” Victor began, a wistful smile tugging at the corner of his lips, “hearing what Elyse said would’ve sparked a fire in me. I would’ve stood my ground, argued back with confidence, and found a way to make her see things my way. The younger I were, the more relentless I would have been—doing whatever it took, pulling out all the stops, and using every trick in the book to make her mine.”

Pearce shot Victor an exasperated look, disbelief coloring his words. “Have you lost your mind? Listen to what you’re saying!”

Victor nodded. “You’re right. I must have lost my mind.”

Pearce studied his face, unused to such candor from him. “Do you actually have feelings for Elyse?”

Victor's fingers found another cigarette, the lighter's flame illuminating his contemplative expression. He took a long drag before responding, "I wouldn't call it that. Just had this passing thought that maybe... settling down with her wouldn't be the worst thing in the world."

The smoke drifted lazily between them as he continued, "It's not love. More like... an appreciation of possibilities."

"In all the years I've known you," Pearce chuckled, "that's the closest you've ever come to admitting interest in anyone."

Victor quipped, "If you'd introduced me to Elyse sooner, I might be married already."

"Just stop it. You just said it wasn't love!" Pearce gave him a playful kick before crushing out his cigarette and heading back inside, leaving Victor alone with his thoughts and the dying ember of his smoke.

What he kept to himself was how turning thirty loomed over him like a shadow, making him analyze every life choice with mathematical precision.

The moment he caught himself trying to calculate love like some equation, he knew he'd already lost to Jayden.

A bitter smile crossed his face. Growing up, it seemed, meant trading gut instincts for careful consideration.

The cigarette burned to the filter, jolting him back to reality. He ground it out and stepped back into the room, where conversation died instantly.

The thick silence broke as Elyse's teasing voice cut through it. "Victor! We all thought you were too heartbroken and scared to speak up!"