

Bound love 1531

Chapter 1531:

And so, the bodyguard recounted the events at the bar.

Jayden nodded when he was finished. "Dig up dirt on those men and make sure they're punished accordingly. Also, who was that woman? By the sound of it, Shaun seems completely taken by her."

"I'm afraid I didn't get a closer look at her face," the bodyguard replied. "But from what little I saw, I could tell she's very beautiful. She has a great figure, too."

Elyse was immediately miffed. "How dare he be interested in any other woman besides Tracy? Humph, I knew it! Men are all the same. I can't believe a single word men say!"

She directed those words at Jayden, who was understandably caught off-guard.

"We haven't figured things out yet. Let me look into that woman's identity first," Jayden said, trying to calm her down.

But Elyse wasn't having it. She turned away with a derisive snort and marched toward the emergency room.

Shaun was still inside.

Jayden could only heave a helpless sigh. "All right," he told the equally bewildered bodyguard. "Go and have your wounds treated." The bodyguard nodded and took his leave.

Jayden then took out his phone to check the surveillance footage from the bar.

After watching for half an hour, he couldn't shake the feeling that the woman in question seemed familiar somehow. It took him a few more seconds before realization struck. "Isn't this Tracy? Did Shaun run into Tracy at the bar?"

He watched the footage a few more times to confirm that it was, indeed, Tracy. Only then did he approach Elyse.

“There’s a good chance that Shaun will regain his memory once he wakes up.”

She gave him a quizzical look. “What makes you say that?”

“Because the woman he met at the bar was Tracy. They finally met again.” Jayden handed his phone to Elyse and played the video. “Unfortunately, the cameras don’t pick up the audio. We have no way of knowing what they might have talked about.”

Elyse’s jaw fell open as she watched the video. “It really is Tracy.”

“After the chaos broke out,” Jayden continued, “most of the patrons fled the bar. Tracy disappeared with them.”

Elyse fell silent for a while. When she spoke again, her voice was quiet.

“I don’t think we’ll be seeing her again for quite a while.”

Jayden said, his voice tinged with concern, “Shaun might go find Tracy the moment he gets his memory back.”

Elyse shook her head. “His memory won’t just snap back into place so easily.”

“He took a serious knock to the back of his head,” Jayden argued. “There’s a solid chance it could jog his memory.” He paused, a thoughtful look overtaking his features. “And if it does, I’m free from playing babysitter.”

Meanwhile, Elyse was preoccupied with thoughts of Tracy.

Her eyes were glued to her phone, watching the surveillance footage again. Tracy appeared unchanged, yet something was subtly off. The thought nagged at Elyse, threatening to bring tears to her eyes.

Two hours later, Shaun was back in his VIP room, having dodged serious injury. However, the blow to his head was still a cause for concern. The doctors couldn't commit to whether his amnesia would be permanent or if his memory might flicker back to life.

Chapter 1532:

Jayden stood by the bed, arms crossed, gazing down at Shaun. "Maybe I should dig into Tracy's recent activities," he pondered aloud.

Elyse looked up, her surprise evident. "Why would you do that?"

"Don't you wonder what she has been up to?" Jayden stroked his chin thoughtfully. "I'm actually more curious about who might be aiding her."

Elyse dropped her gaze, her bangs shielding her expression. Silence stretched between them until she finally responded, "Let me think about it."

"Look, if Tracy is really cooking up trouble, the sooner we know, the better we can counter it. Plus, the Ruiz and Kennedy families are no pushovers," Jayden pointed out with a serious tone.

Elyse started to object, then sighed and nodded in agreement. "You might be right. We need to stop her before she pulls something reckless."

Jayden gently placed his hand on Elyse's head. "I know how close you are to Tracy. That's precisely why you can't let her spiral out of control."

Elyse muttered under her breath, then added softly, "If you discover anything about her, you must tell me right away. Keep nothing from me."

"Okay," Jayden promised. "I'll let you know the minute I find out."

Content with his promise, Elyse let the matter rest. They stayed a while longer at the hospital before making their exit.

The next evening, Jayden received a text from the hospital's bodyguard: Shaun was awake.

After wrapping up his day's work, Jayden headed to the hospital to check on Shaun and ensure all was well.

Having pocketed a hefty sum from Shaun's family, showing a bit of concern was the least he could do.

Upon arrival, Jayden discovered Shaun's room was empty. He made a quick call and learned Shaun had wandered out to the small garden. Navigating his way there, Jayden found Shaun perched on a bench, lost in thought, gazing into the distance.

His eyes seemed hollow, a deep sadness carved into his expression. Approaching cautiously, Jayden broke the silence. "Remember anything yet?"

Shaun was startled, then his face brightened at the sight of Jayden. "You came to see me!"

"Of course. You played the hero yesterday; it was quite the deed. I just had to see how you were doing." Jayden's eyes narrowed, scrutinizing. "Have some more memories come back to you?"

Shaun scratched his head, his brow furrowed in confusion. "Should there be?"

"You really don't remember anything?" Jayden's gaze intensified. "The person you protected yesterday was Tracy Bernard!"

Shaun's expression froze, his eyes glazing over. "That name rings a bell. I know her. Elyse mentioned Tracy was the love of my life. So, is the woman from last night the one I've been yearning to meet again?"

Jayden remained silent, a puzzled look overtaking his features. Typically, even a slight mention of Tracy would evoke a reaction from Shaun. Yet, even after meeting Tracy face-to-face, he still insisted on having no memory.

Jayden began to suspect that Shaun was feigning amnesia, deliberately denying his returning memories.

But to what end? Regaining his memories would surely benefit Shaun. Realizing he could no longer decipher Shaun's thoughts, Jayden felt as though he was trying to read a closed book.

Chapter 1533:

Shaun gripped his head, sinking into his seat. After a lengthy silence, he pleaded, "Can you help me track down Tracy? She saw me at the bar yesterday and acted as if I were a stranger. I need to find out why she's avoiding me."

Jayden retorted sharply, "Why should she acknowledge you? Haven't you already abandoned her once?"

"I never abandoned her! I don't remember any of that!" Shaun retorted, his voice laced with frustration.

"It wasn't the you of today who abandoned her, it was you in the past," Jayden said with a shrug.

Shaun choked, stammering, "I can't recall any of it."

"Your forgetting doesn't erase her memory." Jayden sighed, weariness seeping into his voice. "She was hurt more deeply than you know."

Shaun collapsed into his chair, his shoulders sagging, a portrait of despair.

Jayden noted the sorrow in his eyes but felt no sympathy.

Shaun had squandered countless chances to steer clear of this disaster but had arrogantly let each one slip away.

He had always believed he was in control, blind to the fact that those around him were not chess pieces.

Jayden observed Shaun silently for a long moment, deciding against any insincere words of comfort. He checked his watch.

He stated plainly, "Well, since you seem fine, I'll head home."

Unlike the unattached Shaun, Jayden had Elyse awaiting him. It was time to head back for a pleasant evening meal.

Shaun looked up eagerly. "Can I tag along? The hospital grub is dreadful, and I'm dying for a taste of your chef's cooking."

"No," Jayden replied without a hint of warmth.

"My family has sent a lot of business your way!" Shaun protested. "A meal at your place is the least you could do."

Jayden's patience thinned. "You remember you've had a concussion, right? Stay put. You're not leaving this hospital until you're fully healed."

"You're so cold!" Shaun exclaimed. "Just one meal. I'll head right back after."

Shaun's complaints echoed down the hallway, irritating Jayden further. Finally, out of sheer frustration, Jayden agreed to take him home, but only if he promised to return to the hospital immediately after dinner. Shaun quieted down at last.

At Jayden's home, Elyse greeted them at the door. Surprised to see Shaun, she remarked, "You're up already?"

"The doctor said it's nothing serious, but I should still be cautious," Shaun responded.

"He's got a mild concussion," Jayden added matter-of-factly. "Might even spew in the middle of dinner." Elyse gave Shaun a sympathetic look.

Shaun shifted uncomfortably under her concerned gaze. "I wouldn't spoil the dinner table, I promise."

Elyse led him to the dining room without a word.

Halfway through the meal, Shaun glanced up at Elyse. "Jayden told me the woman I protected yesterday... was Tracy, the woman I love." Elyse froze, her eyes darting to Jayden. "Why did you tell him that?"

Jayden shrugged, the picture of innocence. "I thought he'd remembered. Guess not."

Chapter 1534:

Shaun pressed on, "Will I see her again? I didn't recognize her then, but I won't make that mistake again. I want another chance with her."

Elyse massaged her temples, pausing to take it all in. "You want to pursue her again?" she asked, disbelief coloring her tone.

Shaun nodded, his face earnest. "It might sound crazy, but even though I didn't recognize her, it felt like love at first sight."

Elyse's mouth fell open, at a loss for words.

Jayden's face twisted with mixed emotions. "Love at first sight?" he repeated skeptically.

"You know that chemistry, huh?" Shaun continued passionately. "When I laid eyes on Tracy, I was completely enchanted."

Elyse finally found her voice, though strained. "So, you want us to help you find Tracy... to start over?"

"I'm not sure how much I messed up before," Shaun confessed, his voice laden with determination. "But I'll do whatever it takes to win her forgiveness."

He looked ready to drop to his knees right then and there.

Elyse covered her face, groaning. "Oh my god, what have we gotten ourselves into?"

She had helped Tracy dodge a wedding with this very man, and now he was intent on chasing her again. This was madness.

Noticing Elyse's dismay, Jayden stepped in. "Hold up," he advised Shaun. "Maybe get your memory back first before chasing after Tracy. That's a huge step."

Shaun's eyes were resolute. "Even if I remember it all," he declared, his jaw set firmly. "I'm going after Tracy. That won't change."

Elyse's face darkened, waves of displeasure rolling off her. "You're so determined now," she said, her voice laced with venom, "but why couldn't you treat Tracy nicely before?"

She shoved her plate away with enough force to rattle the silverware, her expression as turbulent as a summer storm, before storming out of the dining room.

Jayden watched her retreating figure with a weary sigh, then turned to face a bewildered Shaun. "Don't take it personally. She hasn't lost her memory. She remembers everything that happened between you and Tracy, probably better than anyone. She's just... fiercely protective of Tracy."

"I know. It's my fault," Shaun replied, slumping in his chair, lost in a maze of regret.

Jayden, maintaining his composure, continued with his meal in practiced silence.

After finishing, he gestured for Shaun to head toward the door, calling out to Driscoll to ensure Shaun's safe return to the hospital.

At the threshold, Shaun turned back, a glimmer of hope dancing in his eyes. "Will you help me get Tracy back?"

"Whether I can help you find Tracy depends on Elyse," Jayden responded plainly. "And whether Tracy wants to come back to you... that's entirely up to her. Some things can't be forced, Shaun."

A shadow of melancholy swept across Shaun's features. "I know," he murmured before disappearing into the night.

Jayden sought out Elyse, discovering her curled up on a small sofa, seemingly absorbed in a book.

Settling beside her, he asked, "You hardly ate anything at dinner. Aren't you hungry?"

Chapter 1535:

Elyse's face remained as impassive as marble. "No. I'm too angry to eat."

"Shaun's mistakes in the past shouldn't be a reason to starve yourself," Jayden said softly.

"Is he gone?" Elyse asked, her expression still thunderous.

"Yes. Driscoll took him back to the hospital." Jayden shifted slightly before adding, "He was so anxious to come over for dinner. I think he was hoping we'd help him get back together with Tracy."

"I'm certainly not going to help him with that," Elyse scoffed, her loyalty to Tracy unwavering. She wasn't about to let Shaun hurt her friend again.

A sudden, chilling thought pierced through her anger. "Any news on Tracy?"

Jayden shook his head. "Nothing. I had someone pull the security footage from yesterday, around the time she disappeared. It's gone. Someone wiped it clean."

"Does she have such powerful backing now?" Elyse asked, her voice tinged with disbelief.

"The more powerful the connections, the more dangerous whatever she's planning might be," Jayden said, his tone heavy with concern. "The fact that someone scrubbed the footage means they don't want her found."

Horror flickered across Elyse's face. "You don't think she's actually going to... hurt anyone, do you?"

Jayden's expression darkened like a storm cloud gathering. "It's a real possibility. We need to find her before something terrible happens."

Elyse's fingers found their way to her mouth as she nervously nibbled on her nail, dread coiling in her stomach like a serpent.

The sharp buzz of Jayden's phone cut through the tension. He glanced at the screen—an unknown number stared back at him.

"Who's that?" Elyse asked, leaning forward to peek at the display.

"I don't know," Jayden replied with a shrug, rejecting the call. The phone buzzed again, more demanding this time.

With reluctance etched on his features, he answered, "Hello?"

A voice as sharp as winter frost came through the line. "This is Lowell Ruiz. We need to meet."

Jayden's eyes flickered to Elyse, who sat perched on the edge of her seat, curiosity painted across her features. "Alright. Where?"

"I'll text you the address," Lowell stated curtly before the line went dead with a decisive click.

"Who was that?" Elyse leaned forward, intrigue evident in her voice.

"Lowell Ruiz," Jayden replied.

Elyse's forehead creased in confusion, unable to piece together why Lowell would seek out Jayden.

Rising smoothly, Jayden extended his hand to Elyse, pulling her gently to her feet. "Come on."

"Where are we going? I'm not seeing him," she protested, digging her heels in.

“I’m not taking you to him,” Jayden said with a touch of exasperation. “But you are going to finish your dinner. You’ve hardly touched it. I don’t want you starving yourself.”

With gentle insistence, he guided her back toward the dining room.

Chapter 1536:

As night descended, Jayden made his way to meet Lowell.

The designated location sat quiet and unassuming as he pushed through the door, choosing a seat by the window where streetlights cast long shadows across the table.

Minutes ticked by before Lowell finally sauntered in.

Jayden arched an eyebrow at his tardiness. “You ask me to meet, and then you’re late.”

Lowell cleared his throat. “My apologies. My girlfriend was a bit upset, so I had to go back.”

Jayden’s eyebrows shot up in genuine surprise. “Girlfriend? You’re dating someone? I thought you were... well, I thought you had a thing for your sister.”

Lowell’s expression transformed into a thunderous mask of rage. “Don’t spread ridiculous rumors. I would never have feelings for Dolores!”

Jayden let out a derisive laugh, his voice dripping with mockery. “If you were truly innocent, you wouldn’t carry on like a lovesick fool, always banging on about doing everything for your precious sister. You wrecked someone’s wedding just because her heart got broken. Admit it—only love that deep could make someone act so irrationally.”

Lowell’s expression darkened, displeasure clouding his features. “You said it yourself—she’s my sister. How could I possibly turn my back on her?”

“By all means, play the dutiful brother,” Jayden quipped, picking up his coffee mug with a casual air. He took a slow sip, his eyes brimming with sarcasm and disdain. “Nobody said you shouldn’t.”

Lowell exhaled sharply, his frustration barely contained. "I didn't call you here to squabble about that."

Jayden smirked. "Then get to the point. I'm listening."

Lowell squared his shoulders before speaking. "My sister and my parents are plotting against Shaun. They're scheming to use his amnesia to manipulate him into marrying her."

Jayden paused, his sharp gaze narrowing. "And you're not on board? Shouldn't you be thrilled if she lands the man of her dreams?"

Lowering his eyes, Lowell replied softly, "I've recently come to understand that love can't be forced."

"Oh, so now you've got a conscience? Ever think about the couple you tore apart? It's rare enough for two people to get together, and you went and ruined that for them." Jayden chuckled, the sound bitter and cutting.

Lowell stiffened, struggling for words. "Why dig up the past? It's done, and I can't undo it, even if I wanted to."

Jayden snorted, dismissing Lowell with a wave of his hand, too disdainful to waste more breath.

Lowell shifted uncomfortably, Jayden's barbs rattling him. Finally, he said, "Look, all I'm asking is for you to help Shaun. It's clear he doesn't have feelings for my sister."

Jayden leaned back in his chair. "I'll help Shaun, sure. But how I go about it isn't your business."

Lowell's brows furrowed. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"These days, my wife can't stop bringing up Tracy. There are some unsettled scores there—don't tell me you've conveniently forgotten?" Jayden remarked, crossing one leg over the other and reclining leisurely against the back of his chair, exuding an air of nonchalance.

Chapter 1537:

Lowell froze, his body stiffening as if bracing for a blow. After a moment, he lowered his head, his voice subdued. “Why bring up Tracy? She’s been gone for months.”

Jayden’s expression hardened. “Just because no one mentions her doesn’t mean we’ve forgotten. Have you?”

Lowell’s jaw tightened, anger flashing in his eyes.

After a long, tense silence, he finally spoke. “Anyway, I’ve said what I needed to. I’m leaving.” Without waiting for a reply, he turned and walked off.

Jayden watched him go, the satisfaction of unsettling Lowell fading. He soon lost the desire to linger and headed home.

Back at home, Jayden recounted his exchange with Lowell to Elyse.

Elyse was livid when she discovered the Ruiz family planned to profit from the commotion. “What’s the matter with Dolores? Why does she thrive on scheming? And seriously—does she have to marry Shaun?”

Jayden, lounging comfortably on the bed, replied with a trace of amusement, “Maybe she’s just utterly fixated on him.”

“Twisting someone’s arm to stay in their life isn’t love; it’s control, plain and simple,” Elyse fumed, folding her arms tightly. “Why does she have this obsessive grip on Shaun and no one else?”

“Because he almost tied the knot with Tracy. That near-miss has burrowed into Dolores’s mind, turning into an unhealthy obsession,” Jayden remarked knowingly, peeling back the layers of Dolores’s stubborn motives.

Elyse began pacing, her heels clicking on the hardwood floor. After a moment, she stopped and declared, “No way—we can’t let Dolores have her way. You’ve got to warn Shaun to steer clear of the Ruiz family.”

Jayden gave a reassuring nod. “Relax, I’ve already given him the heads-up.”

Elyse exhaled in relief but then tilted her head with curiosity. “Wait—you really brought up Tracy in front of Lowell? How’d he take it?”

Jayden smirked at the memory. “He had this cocktail of emotions written all over his face, but guilt wasn’t one of them.” After a beat, he added, “Oh, and he’s seeing someone.”

Elyse’s eyes widened, her disbelief evident. “Lowell’s seeing someone? I once thought he’d end up with Dolores...”

Jayden chuckled, shaking his head. “That’s exactly what I told him. You should’ve seen his expression.”

Meanwhile, Lowell sat alone in his car, a cigarette dangling from his lips. Though he didn’t take a single drag, the ash crumbled to the tip as it burned itself out.

He crushed it in the ashtray before fishing out his phone. After a brief hesitation, he dialed Tracy’s number.

Tracy, still awake, picked up quickly. Her voice carried a hint of surprise. “Lowell? Shouldn’t you be working? What’s up?”

Lowell’s voice softened, a rare vulnerability creeping in. “I just... miss you,” he admitted quietly.

For a moment, Tracy was caught off guard. Then, with warmth in her tone, she replied, “If you miss me, then come over. I’m home, and I’d love your company.”

Lowell’s lips curled into a faint smile. “Alright, I’m on my way. Need me to grab you any snacks, darling?”

Tracy’s voice turned playful. “No snacks for me, honey. Just having you here is more than enough.”

Chapter 1538:

Dolores had spun her web to trap Shaun, but Jayden, working in the shadows, ensured her plans unraveled before they could even take root.

After spending a few quiet days at home, Elyse and Chloe boarded a plane bound for Manfek. Upon landing, Elyse quickly notified Jayden of her safe arrival before heading to the hotel.

But fate, it seemed, had woven a surprise into their itinerary. At the hotel lobby, they stumbled upon familiar faces.

“Nick! Celeste! What brings you here?” Elyse exclaimed, removing her sunglasses and dashing toward them with delight.

Nick greeted her with a gentle smile. “I was invited to perform here, and Ms. Griffin came along to make sure I didn’t trip over my own shadow. It’s my first time performing on an international stage, after all.”

Celeste, arms crossed, didn’t look particularly thrilled. “How many times do I have to tell you? Don’t call me Celeste. We are not that close.” Elyse scratched her head, caught in an awkward moment. “Right. Sorry, Ms. Griffin. Noted.”

Celeste gave a curt nod of approval. “Good. Now listen. You’re all performing for royalty, which means no room for error. Understood?”

Nick nodded with calm determination. “Yes, Ms. Griffin. I’m ready.”

Elyse chimed in with eager enthusiasm, “Me too! I won’t let you down.”

Satisfied, Celeste said, “The performance is the day after tomorrow. Until then, you’ll scout the venue and dedicate the rest of your time to training. That includes you, Elyse Lloyd.”

Elyse blinked in surprise. She hadn’t expected to be part of the rigorous routine.

Later, as they waited for the elevator, Nick hung back and leaned in to whisper, “Elyse, a word of advice: don’t let your mind wander when practicing with Ms. Griffin. She’s not as forgiving as you might think.”

Elyse was skeptical. “For real? How strict can she be? Cody was the strict one.”

Nick shot her a knowing glance, his tone full of sympathy. “You’ll find out soon enough. Just don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

Elyse brushed off his words—until reality struck like a lightning bolt that afternoon. When they gathered at a nearby park for practice, Celeste’s stern demeanor took center stage.

She stood before them, ruler in hand, her expression as unyielding as a granite cliff. “Let’s start with Golden Butterfly. Begin!”

Elyse raised her violin and started playing, but her gaze kept drifting to the ruler in Celeste’s hand.

One glance became two, and then—disaster struck. Her fingers faltered, and the melody crumbled.

Nick stopped playing, his eyes filled with silent pity.

Frozen like a deer caught in headlights, Elyse looked up at Celeste with a sheepish grin. “Sorry! I, uh... got distracted.”

Celeste’s sharp gaze could have sliced through steel. “You truly are Cody’s student—getting distracted in the middle of a piece!”

Elyse swallowed hard, her breath shallow as though even breathing too loudly might provoke another scolding.

Nearby, Chloe stood as still as a statue, her phone buzzing in her hand. When Jayden asked what Elyse was up to, Chloe hesitated before typing back, “Getting a taste of discipline.”

Chapter 1539:

After what felt like an eternity of relentless practice, they finally returned to the hotel.

Nick rubbed his stomach and glanced at Elyse. “Did you pack any snacks? I’m starving.”

Elyse darted a cautious glance at Celeste before whispering, “I did. Come by my room later.”

Once inside her room, Elyse leaned against the door, letting out a sigh as though she’d just escaped a lion’s den.

Chloe smirked. “Celeste’s presence is so intense! I didn’t even dare blink.”

Elyse groaned, rubbing her sore backside. “Tell me about it! I thought she was just waving that ruler around like a prop, but no—she really means business.”

Nick’s warning echoed in her mind, and she muttered, “Now I understand why he told me to stay focused.”

Collapsing onto the bed, Elyse rolled around in frustration. Chloe laughed as she grabbed her towel. “Relax, Elyse. I’m going to shower.” Elyse waved her off, still stewing over the day’s events.

She hadn’t been lying there long when her phone rang. It was Jayden.

Answering the call, she barely had time to say hello before he teased, “So, I heard someone got their punishment.”

Elyse bolted upright, incredulous. “How on earth do you know about that?”

A realization dawned, and her voice rose in mock betrayal. “Chloe! You betrayed me!”

Jayden chuckled. “Don’t be too hard on her. I only asked what you were up to, and she gave me the short version. But I must admit, I never expected you to lose focus. I thought you were focused during practice.”

Elyse huffed, indignation flashing in her eyes. “I just got distracted. But I’ve learned my lesson and stayed on track ever since.”

Jayden chuckled, his laughter bubbling up uncontrollably.

Blushing furiously, Elyse shot back, “Alright, alright. Enough with the laughing already.”

“Fine, I’ll behave,” Jayden said, clearing his throat dramatically. “I’m wrapping up my work soon. I should be able to make it in time for your performance. Afterward, we’ll have a few days to spend together before heading back.”

Elyse murmured a soft reply but then hesitated before asking, “Have you heard anything about Tracy today?”

Jayden shook his head. “No updates yet. Are you worried about her?”

“I am,” Elyse admitted quietly. “I miss her and want to see her.”

Jayden reassured her, his tone steady. “I’ve got someone digging into it. We’ll have answers soon.”

Their conversation lingered for a while longer before they hung up. Elyse, feeling more at ease, began settling in for the night.

Meanwhile, Chloe emerged from her shower, only to find Elyse already fast asleep. With a gentle smile, she pulled the blanket over Elyse before turning in herself.

The next morning, Elyse stirred awake, her body luxuriating in the bliss of a natural wake-up. But as her eyes fluttered open, she froze, her gaze locking onto a familiar figure that had no business being in her room.

She squinted, her voice groggy. “Louise? What on earth are you doing here?”

Louise looked up leisurely, a playful smile tugging at her lips. “Good morning, sunshine. I’m here to take you out for breakfast.”

Chapter 1540:

Clutching the blanket tighter, Elyse scanned the room in disbelief.

“Wait—how did you even get in?”

“The show’s performers are all booked at this hotel, remember?” Louise said with a nonchalant shrug. “I sweet-talked the front desk into giving me a key card after you checked in. Thought I’d surprise you.”

Elyse sat up, still processing. “You could’ve at least warned me! You nearly scared me out of my skin.”

“But then it wouldn’t be a surprise, would it?” Louise teased, shrugging again.

As Elyse noticed Louise working intently on her laptop, her lips quirked into a sly smile. “Poor Chesney doesn’t stand a chance against you, does he?”

“When I play to win, no one does,” Louise replied, her confidence glowing as brightly as her mischievous grin.

Elyse tossed the covers aside and grabbed her clothes to change in the bathroom. With a playful smirk, she teased, “Losing to his own sister — Chesney must be feeling pretty frustrated, huh?”

Louise chuckled. “At first, yeah. But these days, I’ve shattered his confidence so much that he’s practically given up.” She shrugged dramatically, letting out an exaggerated sigh.

Elyse grinned. “He’ll have to come to terms with the fact that he just can’t compete with you.”

With that, Elyse headed into the bathroom to change.

Once Elyse had freshened up, Louise closed her laptop with a satisfied click. “I’ve cleared my schedule for the next three hours just for you. Let’s kick things off with breakfast, shall we?”

Elyse smiled warmly. “Sounds perfect. But I need to let Chloe know where I am first. Don’t want her to worry if she can’t find me.”

Louise nodded, watching as Elyse went off to talk with Chloe.

After Elyse informed Chloe, she returned to find Louise waiting eagerly. The two linked arms and strolled out of the hotel together, heading for a cozy breakfast spot.

As they settled into the restaurant, Louise suddenly remembered something and glanced over at Elyse. “So, how are things with you and Jayden?”

Elyse nodded with a small smile. “I think we’ve made up. Things are better now.”

“Well, now that you two are back on track, when’s the wedding?” Louise asked, her curiosity piqued.

The question caught Elyse off guard. She quickly sipped her milk, swallowing her food before responding.

“I haven’t really thought about marriage. I was married before, but it wasn’t the best experience, so I’m not exactly eager for another wedding.”

Louise raised an eyebrow. “How can you say that? If you don’t get married, how will I have a reason to visit your country?”

Elyse stared at her in disbelief. “Do you really need a reason?”

Louise sighed, rolling her eyes. “Of course, I do. I’m practically the heiress to the throne, remember? These three hours? I only have them because I busted my back for days to clear some time.”

Elyse looked at her with sympathy. “You’re really working that hard? Now I almost don’t want you to be the heiress.”

Louise's face flickered with bitterness for a moment, but she quickly regained her composure, sitting up straight. "Oh, no way. If I fail as heiress, they'll force me into an arranged marriage with some boring stranger. I'm not marrying anyone they pick."

Elyse, intrigued, leaned in slightly. "So, what's your ideal partner like?"