

Bound love 161

Chapter 161:

After heading to the study, Jayden didn't come back to the bedroom. Unable to sleep, Elyse fidgeted in bed before finally rising and making her way to the living room sofa to wait for him. Sleep eventually claimed her, but a sudden tilt of her head jolted her awake. Groggy, she grabbed her phone to check the time and saw it was already past 2 AM. She glanced toward the study, still illuminated, and pondered the length of time Jayden had been secluded there.

With a mix of confusion and concern, she got up, knocked on the study door, and got no reply. Thinking Jayden might have dozed off inside, she opened the door only to find the room empty. "Could he have gone back to our bedroom while I was asleep?" she whispered to herself. She bypassed the wheelchair next to the desk and climbed the stairs back to the bedroom, only to find it empty as well.

"How odd. Where could he be?" Elyse mused, remembering the day's earlier tensions and speculating that Jayden might be sulking somewhere around the house. She wrapped herself in her shawl and started searching the vast, cold villa. The silent, sprawling house seemed more imposing by night, especially with the servants confined to their quarters.

As she ventured into a seldom-visited part of the house, her anxiety heightened. For the first time, the villa's grandeur felt unsettling, as if an intruder might appear from a shadowy corner at any moment. Elyse was on edge as she heard footsteps drawing nearer. It was late, and she wondered who else would be wandering through the house at this hour.

Glancing down at her fluffy slippers, she quickly slipped them off, stepped barefoot onto the cool floor, and found a place to hide. In the darkness, she held her breath. When the figure appeared, she was taken aback—it was Peyton. She almost called out to him but stopped herself when she noticed he was carrying a leather suitcase. Tonight, he seemed like a stranger to her.

Unaware of her presence, Peyton continued toward the basement. Elyse paused for a few seconds, then decided to follow, driven by a gut feeling that Jayden might be down there.

Although she had never explored this part of the house before, she knew about the basement; Driscoll had mentioned it was filled with Jayden's wine collection, but she had never had an interest in visiting.

Stepping into the basement, Elyse was struck by its well-appointed decor and the eerie silence amplified by the carpet that muffled all footsteps. She put her slippers back on and began to wander through the basement. As she reached the innermost part, she noticed a room with a light on and heard voices.

She listened intently and, recognizing Jayden's voice, straightened up and marched toward the room, anger rising within her. He was secretly drinking wine in the basement, wasn't he?

"Elyse!"

"Aaah!" Elyse jumped as someone patted her shoulder. Clutching her heart, she spun around in a panic, only to see a strange man smiling at her. Fear gripped her, and her legs gave out, sending her collapsing to the floor.

Clive, noticing her distress, glanced up and winked at Peyton, who had poked his head out of the room upon hearing the commotion. Clive then bent over and offered his hand to Elyse, saying, "Sorry, Elyse, I didn't mean to startle you."

Still shaken, Elyse didn't take his hand and asked tensely, "Who are you? I don't know you. Why are you in my house?"

"I'm Clive Yates. Nice to meet you," he introduced himself.

"Are you Jayden's friend? Why are you here so late at night?" Elyse asked, her realization dawning as she spoke. With a scowl, she turned and marched toward the brightly lit room.

"Jayden!" she called out as she pushed the door open and found Jayden lounging on a sofa, casually smoking a cigarette. He looked up at her with a piercing gaze.

Jayden flicked the ash off his cigarette and smiled. "Why did you wake up? Can't you sleep without me nearby?"

His words stunned Peyton so much that he almost gaped in disbelief.

Meanwhile, Elyse's cheeks flushed. "You! Stop talking nonsense. I did fall asleep earlier," she retorted, then paused, a new confusion settling in. "Where is your wheelchair?" She scanned the room but didn't see his wheelchair anywhere, wondering how he had managed to get to the sofa.

Peyton was also caught off guard by her question. They were all so accustomed to the setup that they hadn't anticipated Elyse discovering this room without preparing the wheelchair.

"The wheelchair was still in the study."

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Elyse stared at Jayden's long legs, lost in thought. "How did you manage to get here without the wheelchair?"

Raising his head to glance at her, he asked, "How do you think I did?"

She stared at him for some time, doubts about his disability stepping into her mind. She always felt Jayden was the one who had come to save her when she was kidnapped by Joanna. Or was it all a dream?

Elyse walked up to him and pinched his thigh with all the strength she could muster. Peyton stood aside and held his breath, afraid Jayden wouldn't endure the pain but shout. On the other hand, Jayden calmly stared at him as he tried to hold back the pain.

Elyse's doubts were cleared after the physical examination. "I can't feel the pain, but I'm sure there is a bruise left. Would you like to examine another spot?" Jayden asked with a sigh.

Not quite satisfied, Elyse withdrew her hand. "How did you get down here?"

“Ask him,” Jayden pointed at Peyton.

Peyton trembled with fear on hearing his name. Why was he being involved in the issue?

“Peyton, why did you come to our house at this time of the night? And of all places, the basement,” Elyse interrogated.

Jayden had invited them previous the night; he had walked to the basement by himself too.

Peyton rubbed his forehead, trying to come up with an excuse. “I had a bad day, so I came to have a drink with my friends.” He glanced at Jayden and continued, “He didn’t want to follow us, so we carried him down here.”

Jayden nodded in confirmation and shrugged helplessly as he said, “See, I was forced here, outside my will. It was never my intention. All I wanted to do was to go to bed.”

Elyse was still not convinced. She didn’t believe him until she saw the cart that contained bottles of whiskey and ice close to Clive.

“What happened to you? Why did you bring him down here for a drink this night? It’s not good for him,” she addressed Peyton dissatisfactorily.

“He broke up with his girlfriend,” Jayden defended.

What? Peyton was shocked. How could he have had a breakup and not know about it?

The dissatisfaction in Elyse’s voice suddenly turned to pity. “I promise I knew nothing of that nature. I wasn’t aware you were seeing someone.”

Clive tried to hold back his amusement as he walked up to Peyton and patted his shoulder. “We didn’t know about his relationship until today as well.”

It made more sense. Elyse was completely convinced. She yawned and said to Jayden, “Where is your wheelchair? I’ll help you get it.”

“Don’t worry about that. They will help me with that. You just go back to sleep,” Jayden reassured her.

She thought about it for a while, then turned around and left the room. When they were certain she had left, Clive said, “Fortunately, I saw her follow you to the basement.”

Peyton hissed as he faced Jayden. “It’s high time you told Elyse the truth.”

Jayden stood up and collected the bottle of whiskey from Clive. He observed the bottle as he nonchalantly replied, “Why should I? You even did the most intimate thing with her. Don’t you trust her enough to tell her the truth?”

Peyton continued, “I think she cares about you a lot. She deserves to know the truth.”

Jayden objected without hesitation. “She is not smart. I don’t want her involved in my affairs.”

Peyton frowned. “Have you ever thought about how she would feel if she found out that you’ve been lying to her?”

However, Jayden couldn’t care any less. “I have my plans. Besides, I’m certain she’ll understand me then.”

Peyton didn’t like that Jayden wasn’t listening to him. Clive noticed this and came over, patting Peyton on the shoulder as he said, “Forget it, man. He just feels that it’s not the right time. Brook has Enzo pissed off, and things are really tense in the Owen family.”

Jayden nodded in affirmation. “So, my mother is anxious to arrange for Bryce to work in the company. She desperately wants a share.”

Peyton sneered. “Your brother is just a dumbass. He’s bound to embarrass himself.”

“More reason why I’m going to the company tomorrow. I’d like to teach him something,” Jayden replied.

“Really? Are you that kind?”

Chapter 163:

After returning to the room, Elyse swiftly succumbed to sleep. Upon waking in the morning and finding Jayden peacefully slumbering beside her, her good mood enveloped her. However, curiosity gnawed at her, and she yearned to know the time of his return to bed the previous night. After a brief internal debate, she abandoned the notion of rousing him.

Having changed attire, she departed the room and encountered Driscoll preparing breakfast on the ground floor. “Good morning,” Driscoll greeted warmly.

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“Good morning.” Yawning behind her hand, Elyse inquired, “Are Jayden’s friends like Peyton expected to arrive around midnight?”

Driscoll affirmed, “Indeed. His companions maintain late hours. They typically arrive at midnight, granted entry by security.”

It appeared to be more than a coincidence; they genuinely relished nocturnal gatherings. Rubbing her temple, she remarked, “I noticed them indulging in libations in the basement yesterday. You hadn’t mentioned this before.”

Driscoll smiled and remarked, “Because they rarely visit. When they do, the household servants are typically asleep. I’ve never even crossed paths with them late at night before.”

Elyse returned the smile and began her breakfast.

Later, after dinner, she headed to the studio. Just as she retrieved her violin, Wanda summoned her to the office. Seated in the chair, Wanda regarded Elyse with pride in her eyes.

She said, “Elyse, you’ve exceeded my expectations. You’ve clinched the first place in the second-round selection.”

Elyse felt a rush of flattery. Being acknowledged by Wanda was her utmost desire, and now she had achieved it.

She said happily, “I’ve been dedicated to practicing.”

Wanda nodded, reminiscing, “I believed you could have won first place last year, but you opted out of the selection. I was quite disappointed in you then.”

A bashful smile graced Elyse’s lips as she reflected on her decision to forgo the selection the previous year, filled with regret. Fortunately, this time she persevered, pressing onward toward her dream.

Last year, no participant stood out significantly in the selection. If you had participated, victory would have been within reach. But this year is different. The field is teeming with talent, particularly Vicky Aston, who tied for first place with you. Her prowess cannot be underestimated.

Wanda’s expression darkened as she spoke with a weighty tone, “Were it not for you, she would have claimed the title of youngest concertmaster in the orchestra this year.”

A somber silence followed, during which Elyse recollected Vicky’s remarkable skill as a violinist. Previously, her attention had been solely on Theo. She had never fully committed to her craft, hence her scant recollection of Vicky. But now she did.

“Vicky surpasses you in skills. While your music effectively conveys your emotions, your skills remain a weakness for you,” Wanda declared earnestly. “With just two days remaining until the selection of concertmaster, you must dedicate yourself to rigorous practice and strive to bridge that gap.”

Feeling the weight of expectation, Elyse nodded determinedly. “I will.”

“Although you both secured the top rank, the other three players boast considerable talent as well, with their instructors being esteemed members of our team. These instructors are

poised to impart their extensive knowledge. Hence, your adversary extends beyond Vicky alone.”

After bidding farewell to Wanda, Elyse exited the office, her eagerness to return to the practice room palpable. To her surprise, she encountered Vicky standing by the practice room entrance.

With her violin case in hand, Vicky playfully remarked, “You’ve already claimed the top spot. Why do you look unhappy? It’s quite the stroke of luck to share the top spot with me, isn’t it? Shouldn’t that bring a smile to your face?”

Maintaining a stoic expression, Elyse met Vicky’s gaze squarely and retorted bluntly, “Indeed, I’m not pleased. It implies I haven’t performed well enough; otherwise, I wouldn’t share the top rank with...”

Vicky sneered. “I admire your confidence, but don’t let it blind you. High expectations often lead to harsh falls. I wouldn’t want to witness you lose too embarrassingly to me.”

“I also appreciate your confidence,” said Elyse.

Vicky nervously bit her lip, grappling with a new sensation of sharing the top spot for the first time. In the past, she not only claimed first but also outshone her nearest competitor by a significant margin. Now, with Elyse’s presence, a non-noble contender, Vicky felt a pang of shame.

In a tense exchange, Vicky remarked, “Do you truly believe you’re superior? In my view, your position beside me is merely luck. You’ll never match my skill level.”

“This time, you’ll stumble. It’s about time you experienced failure,” said Elyse with disdain.

Chapter 164:

Elyse and Vicky locked eyes, their parting marked by unspoken discord. Upon entering the practice room, Elyse released a heavy sigh before retrieving her violin, poised to begin her rehearsal. It was then that Freddy stepped in, offering a friendly greeting. “You

seem burdened,” he remarked, noting Elyse’s solemn expression. “Vicky’s existence must weigh heavily on you.”

Looking up, Elyse met Freddy’s gaze and confided, “It’s usual for me to feel this much pressure.”

Freddy nodded knowingly. “Aside from Vicky, you have four other competitors to contend with: Grace Fuller in second place, Bart Gino in third, Darren Bill in fourth, and Gary Hank in fifth. Are you familiar with them individually?”

Hearing this, Elyse shook her head, indicating her lack of prior knowledge regarding the competitors.

“Grace, Bart, and Gary are all seasoned violinists from previous batches,” Freddy explained. “While not necessarily exceptional, they possess formidable skills.”

Pausing, Freddy added, “Darren and Vicky, on the other hand, are rising stars. Although newcomers, they show promise. Unfortunately, Darren’s nerves got the best of him during his last performance, likely due to seeing Cody Tucker.”

Elyse absorbed this information, her curiosity piqued. “Is Vicky’s instructor the assistant director of the orchestra?”

Glancing around cautiously, Freddy leaned in to whisper, “Yes, Vicky’s mentor happens to be the assistant director. And Darren? He’s the director’s nephew.”

Elyse was taken aback. “Both of them have influential connections.”

Freddy nodded gravely. “Do you understand why I felt compelled to share this with you?”

After a moment of contemplation, Elyse replied, “You want me to be vigilant and diligent.”

Freddy shook his head with a sigh. “I just want to inquire if you have any influential supporters. Without strong backing, even if you secure victory in the selection later on, your path won’t be smooth.”

Elyse opened her mouth, grasping Freddy's implication. She sighed helplessly. "You might as well have kept this to yourself. Aren't you adding to my stress now?"

Freddy shook his head gently. "No, it's simply because I consider you a friend. I wanted to share this with you before the selection."

Continuing in a serious tone, Freddy emphasized, "This also concerns your future. One is connected with the assistant director, and the other is connected with the director. It wouldn't bode well for you to upset either of them."

Elyse fell silent, contemplating the weight of Freddy's words. She lacked a renowned mentor like many others did in the orchestra; only Wanda extended her guidance to Elyse.

Elyse came to the stark realization that she lacked a powerful advocate. In such a fiercely competitive environment, lacking support could swiftly lead to her elimination. Elyse spoke in a subdued tone, her determination evident. "I may not have a strong backing, but I'm not without strength. I still want to give it my best shot."

Freddy nodded approvingly. "Now that you've thought it through, go for it."

Gazing at the violin clutched in her hand, Elyse tightened her grip, resolve coursing through her. She had already traversed a challenging path to reach this point, so she refused to surrender now. As Freddy observed the resolute gleam in her eyes, a fleeting hint of concern crossed his own. Yet amidst that concern, he couldn't help but admire Elyse's unwavering determination.

After steadying her emotions, Elyse immersed herself in playing the violin for a while. Suddenly, a stranger appeared at the doorway, calling out to her. "Are you Elyse Lloyd? The director, Merlin Reynolds, wants to see you in his office."

Stunned, Elyse instinctively turned to glance at Freddy. Without a word, his expression conveyed a silent message, and Elyse comprehended instantly. She said to the messenger in a hushed tone, "Okay, I'll head over as soon as I stow away the violin."

The man's impatience was palpable, yet he still urged, "Please hurry. Mr. Reynolds doesn't like to be kept waiting."

As the man departed, Freddy seized the moment and whispered urgently, “This might be your opportunity. Mr. Reynolds must want to discuss the concertmaster selection happening in two days.”

“I suppose you’re right,” Elyse replied with a composed expression.

Having been in the orchestra for quite some time, Elyse found it peculiar that Merlin hadn’t considered meeting with her before. However, the sudden summon, just as she was vying for the position of concertmaster, seemed like more than a coincidence, prompting her to ponder Merlin’s intentions.

Setting aside her violin, Elyse remarked, “Rest assured, I won’t make any rash decisions.”

Freddy nodded in understanding, his concern evident as he watched her depart.

Upon entering the director Merlin’s office, Elyse found him seated on the couch, drinking tea. Approaching, Merlin offered her a warm greeting and invited her to join him for tea.

Feeling a twinge of nervousness, Elyse cut to the chase. “Mr. Reynolds, may I ask what prompted you to summon me?”

Merlin waved his hand dismissively. “No rush. Let’s take a moment to enjoy some tea first. It’s quite good. Please have a sip.”

Observing Merlin’s reluctance to dive into business matters, Elyse opted not to push the issue. With a gracious smile, she accepted the tea from his outstretched hand and took a few sips.

After Elyse had finished her tea, Merlin raised his gaze, fixing it on her. “You’re quite skilled with the violin. Who is your instructor? Who did you learn to play the violin from?”

Elyse responded candidly, “I haven’t had a formal instructor. Wanda Hopkins has offered guidance in certain aspects; she’s been akin to a makeshift instructor for me.”

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Merlin slowly stroked his chin and asked, “Have you ever thought that your path won’t be smooth if you find yourself in the spotlight too much due to the poor state of your foundation?”

Understanding what Merlin’s words really meant, Elyse widened her eyes in shock. Clearly, Merlin was telling her to give up. Fuming inwardly, she couldn’t help but wonder why he would want her to do such a thing. Was it because there was no one backing her and that she had the potential to be better than other contestants?

Clearing her throat, Elyse locked her eyes onto Merlin’s and replied firmly, “Sure, I don’t have any powerful connections, but that doesn’t mean I don’t have an iota of strength. I have, and shall always fight for myself.”

Merlin let out a sigh and said expressionlessly, “There’s nothing wrong with young people working hard to achieve their dreams.” Then he ceased talking and looked away.

Uneasy, Elyse frowned and bit her lips as she tried to figure out what was going on in Merlin’s mind at that moment. After studying him for a few seconds, she realized that he was kind of unhappy. But then, what was the connection between his feelings of unhappiness and her?

Gritting her teeth, Elyse decided that come what might, she’d do whatever it took to be concertmaster, for it was what she wanted. Besides, she also wanted Cody Tucker to view her through a new lens and appreciate her skills. Her wish was to stand on the biggest stage in the world and perform her solo to millions of fans from across the globe.

Suddenly clearing his throat, Merlin, with his eyes fixated on the tea inside the cup that he was holding, said, “Let me go straight to the point without beating around the bush. I want you to drop out of the selection. In return, you can tell me whatever you want, and I’ll do all I can to give it to you. In fact, I’ve made arrangements to have you as the concertmaster for the next tour as long as you don’t compete in this selection.”

Elyse pursed her lips and let Merlin’s words sink in. Before they went on any tour, everyone was given a chance to prove themselves and earn the title of concertmaster. So Elyse couldn’t help but wonder why Merlin, of all the tours that he could have tried to make unfair, was so particular about this upcoming one. Was this just a regular tour or was it much more?

After all, why would Merlin be willing to designate her as the concertmaster of the next tour after the upcoming one just to get her to agree to not compete in the selection?

When Elyse didn't say anything after a while, Merlin continued, "Do this for me, and I'll be hugely indebted to you. Any help you might need in the future regarding music, I'll gladly provide it."

Though his clout didn't extend to the international level, Merlin, the director of the Celestial Sounds Symphony, nonetheless had the capability to move an artist from obscurity to nationwide fame.

Repeating in her mind Merlin's words about being indebted to her, Elyse felt fully sure that there was something unique about this upcoming tour. As she thought of all of this, Elyse kept her mouth shut and said nothing.

Not wanting to overpressure her, Merlin decided not to urge her again. After all, since the selection was still two days away, there was ample time for Elyse to think his offer over and make the wise decision by agreeing. The only important thing now was for her to bow out of the selection before it kicked off. Taking a sip of his tea, Merlin dismissed her, saying, "There's no need for you to come to a hasty decision now. Go back and give my proposal a thought."

Elyse stood up from her chair, walked out of the office, and headed to the lounge. On the way, feeling dizzy and upset, she accidentally bumped into someone. Covering her aching nose, Elyse apologized to the person repeatedly. With tears gathering in her eyes, she looked up and quickly turned her face back to the floor. The person she had bumped into was Darren Bill, a nephew of none other than Merlin. Not wanting Darren to see her red nose, Elyse covered it and tried not to make eye contact with him. She really hated him a lot now.

Noticing that Elyse was hostile towards him, Darren asked calmly, "Seeing that you just came out of the director's office, is it safe to say that you're mad about something that my uncle said to you?"

Elyse rubbed her nose and retorted in an irritated manner, "Why ask when you already know the answer? Tell me, all your so-called talents and outstanding achievements that you've been scooping up since you were a kid, are they truthful or were they just bestowed upon you by Merlin?"

Instead of getting angry at her sarcastic words, Darren simply pushed them aside, let out a soft sigh, and said, "I knew he must have offended you. So is it about the selection? Did he ask you to drop out?"

Elyse scoffed and replied, "I'm glad that you know that you're being propped to the top unfairly."

Darren shrugged and said, "Well, just so you know, I don't need any propping to get to the top. So please don't accept his proposal. I know that I might struggle with my performance due to nervousness and failing to be strong-minded, but that makes me all the more determined to win this competition. However, if you drop out and I win first place, my victory will feel hollow."

Hearing this, Elyse bit her lip in hesitation, not sure of whether to believe his words or not.

"Actually, I had no intention of agreeing to his ridiculous request in the first place. I don't care what he offers me. I'll stay here and compete in the selection, and I'll leave all of my competitors, including you, in the dust," Elyse proclaimed firmly, as her eyes flashed with determination.

At this moment, unlike before when she had been nervous thinking of her opponents, she felt very sure that she would come out on top in the competition. All Merlin had succeeded in doing was waking up a spirit of competitiveness in her.

She was determined to never yield to anyone and march to victory, regardless of any obstacle that stood in her way.

Seeing the flame of anger flare up in Elyse's eyes, Darren, who rarely showed any emotion, smiled softly. Cocking his head slightly, he suddenly asked, "Do you know why my uncle is so fixated on who wins this selection?"

Elyse raised an eyebrow in confusion and said, "I don't know. Perhaps you could tell me."

In the Celestial Sounds Symphony, the concertmaster who made the most impressions on the audience and the board would be granted the opportunity to participate in a tour. Getting all worked up regarding a domestic tour wasn't something that one would expect from Merlin.

Therefore, Elyse was sincerely confused as to why Merlin was taking this selection so seriously.

Looking quite amused, Darren cocked his head slightly and said with a smile, "Wow, you are really in the dark regarding what's going on. Well, there's a rumor flying around that Cody Tucker came here to select an apprentice."

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Elyse stammered for a moment before finally managing to string a cohesive sentence. "Is it true?"

Darren nodded. "My uncle mentioned that Cody is here with the express intent of taking an apprentice. He just never said who he wants it to be. He was silent on the matter even in the second round of the competition." He cocked his head to the side and stroked his chin. "As it is, they all think that Cody is going to make his decision after the concertmaster selection."

Elyse held her face in her hands, still trying to recover from the shock of this new information. It would be a great honor if she could become Cody's apprentice.

Darren noted the eager glint in her eyes and remarked, "You're a talented participant for sure. Despite my uncle's reservations in acknowledging your skills, the fact that he privately requested for you to withdraw is proof enough that you're the one to beat in this competition."

Elyse looked up at his calm face. "Aren't you worried? What if I take first place? I heard that you're a big fan of Cody as well. If you want to attract his attention and potentially bag his mentorship, you should be asking me to give up right now."

“Quite right,” he replied slowly. “But I’d still like to win fair and square. What kind of victory is to be had if the strongest opponent bows out of the battle? That said, I do not support my uncle’s thinking.”

Elyse was taken aback. While Darren seemed to be an honest man, she couldn’t shake off the doubt about whether he genuinely meant what he said.

“Well, I’m heading back to practice,” she said, not wanting to talk to him anymore. “You should work on your mental fortitude, by the way. Stage fright shouldn’t be an issue for a concertmaster. It would be a shame if it affects your performance.” With that, she walked past Darren and left.

Not long after, she arrived at the practice room. Wanda approached her with a glum look on her face and asked Elyse to join her outside.

Although confused and a little worried, Elyse followed her. They made their way to the café and settled in an empty corner. The atmosphere was somber, and Elyse was getting more and more curious about what could have happened. It was odd for Wanda to be in such low spirits; she was fine just an hour ago.

“Did something happen, Miss Hopkins?” Elyse prompted Wanda.

Wanda sighed before saying, “I just had a little talk with Merlin Reynolds, and he said something that really upset me.”

Elyse spoke without thinking, “Did he ask you to persuade me to back out of the selection?”

“How did you know?” Wanda’s eyes widened in surprise, then narrowed with suspicion in the next second. “Did Merlin… he talk to you?”

Elyse nodded. “In fact, he offered to appoint me as next year’s concertmaster if I agreed.”

Wanda sat back and scoffed in disdain. “I never thought he would go to such lengths for his nephew’s sake. I just found out that Cody is planning to take an apprentice. Merlin wants it to be Darren, naturally.” She slammed her fist against the table in frustration. “He should focus on improving Darren’s abilities instead of wasting his time on these

underhanded schemes. He is the director of the orchestra, damn it! How can he stoop so low?"

Wanda's anger warmed Elyse. All along, she had thought she could only rely on herself throughout this journey. Little did she know, Wanda had been supporting her in her own ways.

Wanda huffed and looked Elyse in the eye. "What do you think? Would you like to withdraw?"

Elyse shook her head. "I won't back out. I want a chance to be Cody's apprentice too."

Wanda nodded in approval. "Good. Music is one of the greatest forms of art. Those who wield it must be pure in their talent and intentions. The stage is no place for opportunists who use music as an instrument to satisfy their selfish interests."

"Don't worry, Ms. Hopkins," Elyse smiled. "I won't abandon my dreams so easily. No matter the result, I will be in the competition until the very end."

Wanda sighed in relief. "It reassures me to see your perseverance. I also heard that Merlin somehow managed to convince Gary Hank to withdraw. The poor boy apparently agreed after he was offered the position of concertmaster for next year."

"What?" Elyse let out a small laugh of disbelief. "But that's the same deal Merlin offered me."

Wanda raised an eyebrow and gave her a pointed look. "Remember, the opportunities you earn through your own hard, honest work are the only ones that are genuine. Whatever promises are offered to you can be taken back in the blink of an eye." Elyse fell silent.

If they had all agreed to Merlin's offer, Darren would only have to compete against one or two other participants. Heck, he might just have a showdown with Vicky. Vicky's instructor was the assistant director. He and Merlin had been openly at odds for years, so there was no way in hell Vicky would even consider Merlin's proposal.

It turned out that there was a lot more intrigue going on beneath the surface. Elyse finally understood why Jayden had called her foolish. It had taken her this long to discern Merlin's intentions and uncover his schemes.

It was a good thing that she was loyal to her music. If she had succumbed to the temptation and made the same decision Gary had, what would happen to her next year?

She highly doubted any of them would actually be concertmaster.

Elyse found herself missing Jayden all of a sudden. She missed him so much that she had to press her palm against her chest to dull the ache. Without another thought, she grabbed her phone and sent him a message. She wanted to know what he was doing at that same moment.

Chapter 167:

At the Owen Group, Jayden stepped out of the car and was greeted by a man with sleek black-rimmed glasses.

With a deep voice, Jayden addressed him, saying, "Lukas, it's been a year. Why the demotion instead of a promotion?"

Lukas Sugden sighed heavily, his gaze downcast. "Mr. Owen, please stop teasing me. You're aware of the challenges I faced in the company."

A glimmer of hope reflected in Lukas's eyes as he cautiously inquired, "Are you considering returning to assume leadership at the Owen Group?"

"No," a smile played on Jayden's lips. "You're overthinking, Lukas. I'm here to see my brother."

The glint in Lukas's eyes dimmed. He knew Jayden's comeback to Owen Group wouldn't be easy. Jayden's disability had rendered him ineligible for the competitive corporate ladder. He had been cast aside.

Lukas managed a bitter smile. “Mr. Owen, I eagerly anticipate your return. Your brilliance is undeniable. With my support, you’ll surely thrive.”

Jayden didn’t acknowledge the remark. “Move aside, I’ll go in,” he said calmly.

Lukas complied silently, stepping aside to let Jayden pass.

Though Jayden had been absent from the company for a year, his presence hadn’t faded from the minds of the company’s employees. His reappearance elicited surprise from all who laid eyes on him.

“He’s Mr. Jayden Owen, right? He’s back in the office today. It’s been ages since we last saw him.”

“He looks as handsome as ever. It’s a shame about his accident, though. He’s not as perfect as before.”

“What’s he doing here? Is he coming back?”

The employees buzzed with chatter about Jayden, reminiscing about his tenure as a decisive and capable CEO who had spearheaded numerous lucrative projects, each yielding over a hundred billion dollars in profit. His contributions were undeniable.

Walking alongside Jayden, Lukas couldn’t help but hear his coworkers’ conversations, a tumult of emotions swirling within him.

During Jayden’s CEO tenure, Lukas had held a pivotal role as the director of the project department, one of the company’s most critical positions. Yet, Lukas had harbored doubts about Jayden, believing him to be too impulsive and reckless, failing to consider the risks.

Consequently, Lukas had consistently opposed Jayden and was reluctant to cooperate with him. But with Jayden’s departure from Owen Group, Lukas soon realized that not everyone possessed Jayden’s astute decision-making prowess and visionary outlook.

Brook had tried to copy Jayden’s assertiveness by signing contracts without hesitation. However, lacking Jayden’s foresight, he ended up incurring losses. This disagreement

caused Lukas to clash with Brook repeatedly, resulting in successive demotions until he was stripped of his leadership roles in critical positions. Demoted to the director's role in the service department, Lukas settled into a routine mainly consisting of savoring cups of coffee throughout the day.

Although Lukas hoped Jayden would return to Owen Group, convincing him was proving to be an uphill battle. As Jayden approached the doorway of the design department, he noticed a heated exchange. One man was berating Bryce, whose irritation was evident. The man's anger escalated as Bryce remained unmoved, leading to harsher words.

"You've failed even at the simplest tasks. Perhaps it's time to consider leaving. This environment isn't suited for someone like you!" the man shouted.

Bryce's retort was sharp and unapologetic. "I couldn't care less. Do you honestly think I want to work under your command? Cease your pointless tirade!"

Unable to bear the tension, Lukas intervened by knocking on the door, drawing everyone's attention in the department.

"Mr. Owen!" the man exclaimed, surprised by Jayden's presence. "Are you the director of the design department?" Jayden inquired, his memory failing to recall the man's identity, suspecting that Brook had already ousted the senior staff who had worked under him.

"Yes, that would be me, the current director of this department," the man responded, adjusting his attire and approaching Jayden with newfound confidence. "Mr. Jayden Owen, it's a pleasure to have you visit our department. How may I assist you?"

A subtle sneer tugged at the corners of Lukas's lips, a glint of disdain flickering in his eyes. Jayden stated plainly, "I need to speak with my younger brother."

The man graciously acquiesced, wasting no time in granting Jayden permission. "Of course, please proceed."

Bryce observed the swift change in demeanor, disgusted by the hypocrisy, he resolved to leave the design department, convinced it was not worth his time or talent. Reluctantly, Bryce exited the office, following Jayden into the adjacent conference room.

Upon entering, Bryce couldn't contain his impatience. "What do you want?" he demanded.

Jayden met his gaze and got straight to the point. "Stop tarnishing your reputation in this company. You lack the business acumen to succeed here. It's time to go home."

Chapter 168:

Bryce's face flushed with anger as he pointed at Jayden and retorted, "What do you mean? You look down on me. I also majored in finance. How can you say I lack business acumen? You're just jealous of me."

Jayden stayed quiet, meeting Bryce's gaze calmly. Feeling the weight of Jayden's stare, Bryce's anger ebbed away, leaving behind a flicker of guilt.

"So, just because you majored in finance, you think you're ready to run the company?" Jayden quipped with a hint of sarcasm.

Annoyed, Bryce snapped back, "I can do everything you can. Mom believes I'm now our family's beacon of hope. As for you, you're just a has-been with no chance against me."

With newfound assurance, Bryce relaxed and said condescendingly, "Once I'm in charge, I'll make sure you have a job here. Am I not a generous brother?"

Jayden couldn't help but be amused by Bryce's naive confidence. Bryce couldn't even deal with the director of the design department. "You are really hopeless," Jayden sighed.

Taken aback by Jayden's bluntness, Bryce's temper neared its peak just as the door swung open. In walked Brook's assistant, who addressed Jayden with a pompous tone, "I'm Mr. Brook Owen's assistant. There's a meeting to review the first half of the year. Mr. Owen would like you to join them and sit in."

Jayden's response was devoid of emotion. "I've been away from the company for a year. Its business is no longer my concern."

The assistant was caught off guard by Jayden's indifference. "Mr. Owen believes you're quite familiar with the company. Perhaps you could offer some advice?"

Jayden merely replied, "If Brook requests it, I'll attend."

The assistant stepped aside, but as Bryce attempted to follow, he was blocked. Frustration colored Bryce's face. "Why am I being barred? I'm family too."

The assistant retorted haughtily, lifting his head, "You weren't invited. This meeting is not for everyone." Bryce, a mere design department employee, was clearly out of his depth. Realizing he wasn't taken seriously within the company, Bryce felt a surge of ambition to prove his worth.

Jayden reached the executive meeting room on the eighth floor, where some employees outside greeted him enthusiastically. "Mr. Owen, you're back at the company?"

Jayden replied with a shake of his head, "No, I'm just here to take a look."

The employees exchanged glances before opening the door for Jayden. As he entered, the executives in the room reacted with noticeable surprise. Those who had previous disagreements with Jayden were visibly restless, while others who didn't recognize him scrutinized him closely.

Brook took a moment to survey the room before inviting Jayden to join. "Jayden, we're reviewing the overseas business department's report. Please have a seat."

Jayden accepted the invitation and moved closer to the action. The department director, standing before a massive screen, announced confidently, "Our target is to acquire the third-ranked global airline within the domestic market. We aim to be the top in the country and fifth worldwide within three years. The announcement of our acquisition plans will impact several countries. I urge you to review the financial report related to this strategy. Our liquid assets stand at 21.5 billion, and our liquidity ratio is 2.1531."

Jayden interjected, "No, it's 21.531."

The director, caught off guard, echoed, "21.531." As the numbers were recalculated, a colleague confirmed in surprise, "Indeed, it's 21.531, not 2.1531."

Realizing the error, the director was visibly embarrassed but quickly attempted to recover. “Despite the miscalculation, our cash flow remains robust enough to support this initiative.”

Jayden, maintaining a stern demeanor, pressed further, “Even with sufficient cash flow, shouldn’t you approach such a significant acquisition with greater diligence? Your plan seems too vague. How realistic are our chances of achieving these ambitious goals within a few years? If you aim to really impress the staff, I suggest you draft a more comprehensive strategy.”

Sweat beaded on the director’s forehead as he avoided Jayden’s gaze, overwhelmed by the intensity of the critique and the firmness of Jayden’s stance.

Chapter 169:

“He’s still as sharp as ever, hitting the nail on the head”. “Every time I’m around him, he gives me chills. I’m up next for the presentation. I wonder if it’ll meet his approval”. Working under him felt intense. His presence is overwhelming. If I were his subordinate, I wouldn’t be able to relax for a moment.

Brook caught wind of some conversations about Jayden, and with a forced smile, he turned to Jayden, teasing, “Thinking about heading back to Owen Group, Jayden?”

Was Brook testing him? Jayden looked at him, noticing a hint of jealousy and reluctance behind that smile. It was obvious to Jayden that not everyone was convinced by Brook yet.

Jayden shook his head. “Since my disability, my physical abilities have declined. I’m concerned about my health.”

“I see,” Brook said, glancing at Jayden’s legs thoughtfully. He shifted the conversation to the next presenter without further discussion.

With Jayden’s presence, everyone became more focused on the data in the following presentations, wary of Jayden’s potential criticisms. Brook appeared unfazed during the

discussions. Once the meeting concluded and he escorted Jayden out with a smile, he struggled to conceal his frustration in his office.

“A bunch of losers. Worthless,” he muttered to himself.

He could sense that his employees still held respect and trust for Jayden. They seemed more inclined to follow Jayden’s lead than his own. This was a troubling sign. Brook couldn’t help but wonder what his grandfather would think of him. Could he really be deemed inferior to someone with a disability? If that were the case, he might lose his chance to inherit the company.

Brook had invited Jayden to the meeting hoping to showcase Jayden’s supposed downfall and affirm himself as the future leader of Owen Group. But his plan had backfired. Instead, he discovered that his employees remained unconvinced by him. The realization weighed heavily on Brook.

“Why didn’t you just die in that car accident?” Brook’s face contorted with hatred.

After leaving the Owen Group building, Jayden sat in his car.

Clive, sitting beside him, raised a glass of whisky. “Jayden, how does it feel to return to your old battleground?”

Jayden shifted in his seat, unbuttoned his shirt, and took the glass of whisky from Clive. “It’s no wonder Owen Group is faltering. Brook is not a capable leader. Definitely not. Your cousin may be ambitious, but he lacks the skills.”

Clive took a sip of whisky and chuckled. “Brook Owen must have felt the pressure this time, right?”

Jayden didn’t respond directly. Swirling his glass, he said, “I’ve heard that my uncle’s daughter is returning from overseas. If I’m not mistaken, she intends to challenge Brook for the position.”

“Your uncle’s daughter? Seth’s daughter?” Clive rang the bell and added, “Looks like there’s going to be quite a spectacle at Owen Group. If things go as expected, Bryce will end up as collateral damage in their power struggle.” After a pause, he continued, “Your

younger brother is rather naive. If he remains with the company, they'll easily shift the blame onto him. Why not persuade him to leave his position?"

"I've tried, but he won't listen," Jayden replied.

Clive chuckled. "Well, if there's nothing you can do, then just sit back and watch the drama unfold at Owen Group. You'll reap the rewards soon enough."

Clive observed Jayden's expression with a knowing smile. "Isn't that right, Mr. Jayden Owen, Chairman of Bayzee Group?"

Jayden glanced at him. "What are you getting at?"

"Your grandpa probably never expected the pawn he cast aside long ago to become the real player in this game. If he knew, would he regret his decision?"

"That's irrelevant. What matters is that I'll emerge as the victor in the end." After saying this, Jayden suddenly remembered he hadn't checked his phone in hours. Thinking of Elyse, he retrieved his phone from his pocket.

Clive thought there was something urgent. "Why the frown? Did Bayzee Group's stock price take a hit?" he asked.

"Nah, Elyse just said she misses me," Jayden replied calmly.

"Please spare me the PDA," Clive nearly choked on his whisky. "Why would you frown when your wife says she misses you? You're supposed to smile," he said, sounding slightly exasperated.

Jayden replied, "She must be in a bad mood."

After a brief silence, Clive asked, "So... do you love your wife that much?"

Chapter 170:

Jayden regarded Clive with a puzzled expression. “What makes you think I have feelings for Elyse?”

Clive countered, “If not, why are you so invested in her?”

Clive’s mind echoed Peyton’s words as he spoke. “If your feelings for Elyse are genuine, it’s imperative to disclose the truth about your condition. Are you willing to keep this hidden from her indefinitely?”

The reminder weighed heavily on Jayden, causing him a headache. Massaging his temple, Jayden queried, “Do you believe it’s the right moment to disclose this to her?”

Clive couldn’t discern Jayden’s thoughts, but he believed Jayden and Elyse shared a profound love. Keeping such a significant secret seemed incongruous. “When would you suggest is the ideal time?” Clive inquired with genuine interest.

Jayden deliberated briefly but found himself at a loss for a response. In his view, uncertainties loomed large, and dangers lurked in the shadows. Revealing his charade to Elyse felt like pulling her into danger. He couldn’t bring himself to be that self-centered.

Ultimately, Jayden dismissed Clive, urging him to find his own transport. “Get a taxi.”

Standing by the roadside, Clive locked eyes with Jayden. “Why can’t I accompany you to see Elyse?”

Perplexed, Jayden retorted, “Why would you want to come with me?”

Clive was speechless. He just wanted to witness Jayden’s attempt to please his wife. Was that too much to ask?

Jayden’s pragmatic response dashed Clive’s hopes. He watched as Jayden’s car pulled away, leaving him amidst the exhaust fumes.

Upon arriving, Jayden gained entry as Elyse's family member. Jayden was familiar with the layout of the orchestra's rehearsal studio and scoured various spots in search of Elyse, but she eluded his gaze.

Eventually, he found her nestled in a quiet corner of the garden, lost in her world. Elyse sat on a bench engrossed in her phone, unaware of Jayden's approach.

Soon, Elyse sensed a presence beside her. Startled, she glanced up in a panic, only to find Jayden standing there. Relief flooded through her, evident in the sigh that escaped her lips. "You scared me there, Jayden."

"Has someone been picking on you?" Jayden inquired, cutting straight to the point.

"Not exactly. It didn't quite reach the level of picking on me," Elyse avoided meeting Jayden's gaze and added, lacking conviction, "The director, Merlin, suggested that I withdraw from the competition for concertmaster so that another candidate could have a better chance."

"Isn't he picking on you?" Jayden questioned.

Elyse paused for a moment. "I didn't agree to Merlin's conditions," she stated firmly, her resolve evident.

Jayden lightly flicked her forehead, his expression tinged with helplessness. "He'll try to exert even more pressure on you once you refuse his terms. You're my wife. Why can't you confront him more assertively, leveraging my support?"

Rubbing her forehead, Elyse felt a pang of embarrassment. She couldn't help but wonder if Jayden held any significant influence in the music industry.

Aggrieved, Elyse expressed, "This opportunity is something I've worked tirelessly to achieve. Despite Merlin's attempts to persuade me otherwise, I wouldn't dream of giving it up. I have to persevere."

Jayden inquired, "Then why did you message me asking about my whereabouts and mentioning how much you missed me?"

Elyse parted her lips, her voice tinged with vulnerability. "I genuinely missed you then," she admitted softly.

Jayden fixed his gaze on her without a blink. As his stare lingered, Elyse's cheeks gradually flushed crimson, the warmth spreading to her ears under his unwavering scrutiny. He finally asked, "Elyse, don't say you have fallen in love with me."

"What?" Jayden's straightforward question laid bare her inner turmoil, sending Elyse into a state of panic. Jayden's directness caught Elyse off guard, leaving her wishing she had concealed her secret more effectively. Anxiously, she explained, "All I did was blush. Why do you assume I have feelings for you?"

Seeing Elyse's bewildered expression, Jayden's interest was piqued, prompting him to playfully tease her as he gently brushed his fingers against her cheek. A rush of warmth flooded through her body, her temperature rising noticeably. "What... what are you doing?" Elyse's shyness was palpable, though she attempted to feign indifference.

Unaware of her own trembling voice, she struggled to maintain composure. A mischievous smile danced upon Jayden's lips as he observed her, his eyes full of intrigue. "Elyse, I can hear your heart racing. Is your affection for me truly that strong?"

Startled by his observation, Elyse instinctively covered her chest, feeling the rapid thud of her heart against her palm. Shyness tinged her cheeks with tears. "Why are you doing this? Are you here just to tease me?" Elyse's voice wavered as she bit her lip nervously.

Jayden nodded, his smirk confirming her suspicion. "Yes."

Elyse glared at Jayden, retaliating by pinching his thigh firmly, her eyes brimming with resolve. "I don't have feelings for you, okay?"

Jayden bore the pain in silence, refraining from halting Elyse. Yet Elyse persisted, pinching his thigh without mercy. She genuinely believed Jayden was incapacitated.

In a fit of rage, Jayden seized Elyse by the waist, pulling her forcefully into his embrace and fiercely biting her lips. Indifferent to the consequences, he acted without concern. His sole desire was vengeance.