

Bound love 181

Chapter 181:

Elyse's cheeks warmed at Jayden's words, yet she remained doubtful about the previous night's events. Trying to piece together her memories, she said, "Was it really just a nightmare last night? But that man felt so real. I could feel his warmth when he touched me."

Jayden held her close, offering reassurance. "Could it be because I was holding you?"

"Really?" She looked at him, her expression uncertain. "Was it all just a dream?"

Jayden continued, "You know how secure our house is. It's impossible for a stranger to just appear here." He gently persuaded her, trying to convince her it was all a dream. "Today is your big day. Don't let a dream affect your performance," he advised.

Elyse nodded, taking his words to heart. She headed to the competition venue early that morning and noticed Darren and Grace were already there at the entrance.

"Morning. You both got here early," Elyse greeted them, holding her violin case, trying to sound nonchalant.

Grace rubbed her eyes and replied, "I couldn't sleep last night. I was too nervous. So I decided to come here early."

Darren's eyes were also red. He sighed and admitted, "I might be taking this more seriously than you. I couldn't even eat last night."

The three of them exchanged looks and sighed in unison. The selection was crucial; each was determined to give their best performance to impress Cody.

Anxious, they headed to the concert hall where the selection was to be held, only to find that Vicky and Bart were already there. The arrival of their competitors charged the air with tension.

Silence fell over the group as they each tuned their violins, avoiding eye contact. A few minutes later, Merlin arrived with the assistant director Abram Ellsworth, followed by Cody and several senior leaders and instructors, including Wanda.

Merlin surveyed the group with a solemn gaze, then turned to Abram and declared, "Since everyone is here, let's begin."

Abram nodded, his expression grave. "Start immediately. Let's not waste time."

The performances would proceed in the reverse order of the last ranking, with Darren being the first to perform. Elyse watched Darren, her nerves tingling with hope that he wouldn't falter today.

"Please enjoy 'Sonatas and Partitas for Solo Violin,'" announced Cole, who stood poised and delivered a seamless performance from start to finish. Elyse caught the look of surprise on Merlin's face. He had not expected Darren to remain so composed and deliver a flawless performance under such pressure. After Darren concluded, the judges began their evaluations.

Cody folded his arms and looked on, his expression devoid of any disdain. Instead, there was a hint of pleasure in his gaze.

Darren's impressive performance had not gone unnoticed, putting immense pressure on the other candidates. They knew they had to outperform him. Next up were Bart and Grace, both in peak form. They executed their pieces flawlessly, their performances not only error-free but also particularly delightful to the audience.

When it was Elyse's turn, she stood center stage and took a deep breath. "Please enjoy 'Viva la Vida,'" she announced, choosing a piece known for its vibrant and skill-showcasing melody. The atmosphere, once tense like a battlefield, softened significantly, breathing life and beauty into the hall.

The audience was completely captivated by her music. As the last notes lingered in the air and the audience was still reflecting on her performance, Vicky stepped onto the stage. Her high heels clicked like those of a noble white swan, and her voice, devoid of emotion, announced, "Please enjoy Sergei Prokofiev's 'The Bells.'" It was an elegant and clever piece designed to showcase a player's technique.

After Vicky's performance, all the candidates sat up straight, their faces etched with serious and anxious expressions. They all wondered, was Cody impressed? The tension was palpable as they awaited the judges' decision, which seemed to be deliberately delayed, heightening the suspense.

Finally, the call came. "Vicky, Elyse, come out!" In that moment, Cody unexpectedly called out their names. Pointing to Elyse and Vicky, he declared, "I want to see your leadership ability."

Elyse was taken aback, her eyes instinctively meeting Vicky's. Both showed clear signs of confusion at the sudden request. The assistant director, Abram, was the quickest to respond. With a smile, he said, "Of course, I'll arrange it right now."

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As the staff made arrangements, Darren sauntered over to Elyse, his eyebrows raised in curiosity. "So it's a toss-up, right? Cody Tucker seems to have a soft spot for both Vicky and you."

Elyse, still reeling with confusion, shook her head. "I'm not sure. My heart's racing so fast I might just burst," she replied, her nerves on edge.

Grace chimed in, leaning closer to whisper. "Regardless, Mr. Tucker's taken notice of you. Talent always wins out in our line of work."

Bart let out a small sigh. "I really stepped up my game this time, but did Mr. Tucker even notice?"

The collective disappointment hung in the air. Elyse racked her brain for a way to lift their spirits. Just as she was at a loss, she caught Vicky shooting daggers at her with narrowed eyes.

With a furrowed brow, Elyse marched over to Vicky, her tone firm. "Not convinced I've made the cut, huh?"

Vicky met her gaze with a smug smirk. “You’ve never had proper training. You’re just lucky. Think I’ll give you the satisfaction of being so cocky?”

Elyse’s anger flared at the jab. “Lucky? Can’t accept that I pose a threat? Fine. I’ll show you just how capable I am. Brace yourself, because if you doubt me, I’ll prove you wrong over and over again. Let’s see who truly has what it takes.”

Vicky’s narrowed gaze held a challenge as she asked proudly, “Are you declaring war with me?”

“I will be the winner,” Elyse shot back, her glare sharp as a blade.

The tension between them was palpable as they stood in a quiet corner locked in a silent battle of wills. Darren, sensing the charged atmosphere, intervened, breaking their standoff. “Everything’s set. Let’s head over there,” he said, whisking Elyse away from the brewing storm.

“Looks like you two were about to throw down,” Darren teased, attempting to lighten Elyse’s mood.

But Elyse remained silent, her mind consumed by the seriousness of the upcoming selection process.

“Hey, Elyse!” Richie’s voice broke through the corridor, drawing Elyse’s attention. As he approached, he offered a reassuring smile. “Heard you nailed it. Maybe your dreams are about to come true.”

His attempt at comfort faltered when he noticed Elyse’s troubled expression. Richie playfully jolted her shoulders, trying to lighten the mood. “Come on, Elyse, it’s just a small competition.”

Elyse shivered at the unexpected touch, her nerves on edge. “I wish I could relax, but this competition has me on edge,” she admitted, her voice tinged with frustration. Then a glimmer of hope flickered in her eyes. “If I win against Vicky, Mr. Tucker might become my instructor.”

“Uh... Well,” Richie hesitated, unsure how to break the news that Cody had already chosen Elyse as his apprentice. Before he could respond, Vicky appeared, her demeanor defiant. With arms crossed and chin held high, she issued a challenge. “You think you can beat me? You’ll have to prove it first.”

With a deliberate bump, she brushed past Elyse, leaving a trail of tension in her wake as she sauntered away. After being knocked off balance, Elyse regained her footing with a stagger.

“Are you alright?” Darren asked with concern.

Elyse shook her head silently, entering the venue. “It’s hard to get her to unwind,” Richie observed her with concern, noting how unusually serious she seemed. He had intended to tell her that Cody had already chosen her, but now didn’t seem like the right time.

Darren watched Elyse with worry. “She’s as tense as I was earlier. I’m worried she might mess up if she’s too stressed.”

“Everyone makes mistakes occasionally. It’s not a formal performance. Don’t worry too much,” Richie reassured him.

But Darren shook his head. “You don’t understand. We’re all vying for first place so Cody Tucker will pick us.”

Richie was taken aback. He hadn’t realized they were all aiming to be Cody’s apprentice rather than just becoming the concertmaster. He knew his uncle was influential and he had his fair share of devoted fans, but this level of fervor surprised him.

For the competition, Abram had assembled two seasoned orchestras. Vicky and Elyse stood in the positions of concertmaster, patiently awaiting their cues.

Feeling her palms slick with sweat, Elyse lowered her head, trying to calm herself. She opened and closed her fists repeatedly, trying to dispel the tension. Her palms eventually dried, but the nervousness still lingered.

She knew she needed to adjust her mindset and physical state for optimal performance. As she waited, Elyse observed Vicky, who stood calmly without a hint of nerves. Elyse

couldn't help but wonder why Vicky seemed so confident and if she was assured of winning first place. Lost in thought, Elyse's own tension began to mount, sending shivers down her spine.

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Elyse inhaled deeply, her heart racing to the point of dizziness.

Determined not to let nerves jeopardize her chance, she continuously tried to compose herself. Cody, observing from the side of the stage, leaned casually against a table and watched her with a calm demeanor. Though she appeared fine, Cody, familiar with such situations, noticed a shift in her mental state.

During this moment, Richie approached Cody and whispered, "Why haven't you publicly acknowledged that Elyse is your new apprentice? And why involve her with the orchestra for a competition? Is that really necessary?"

Cody averted his gaze, shot Richie a glare, and responded with irritation, "You're not the one to dictate my actions." Undeterred, Richie stepped closer and murmured, "Uncle Cody, make the announcement now so I can impress Elyse."

"Why must you show off? Do you see me merely as a means to flaunt?" retorted Cody, dismissing him with a firm shake of his shoulder and a stern, "Don't disturb me."

Richie rebuffed, moved away, and watched Elyse with concern. "The piece selected for you is Por Una Cabeza," announced Abram, his gaze cutting through the crowd until it landed on Elyse. Feeling his intense scrutiny, Elyse shuddered, her anxiety peaking again, prompting her to take another deep breath.

Ultimately, Abram decided that Vicky would close the show, assigning Elyse to perform first. Elyse quelled her inner turmoil as she approached the orchestra's forefront, standing poised, nodding at Abram to signal readiness, and lifting her violin to begin.

Word of the concertmaster competition had quickly spread, drawing a crowd eager to witness the event, including other orchestra members, Rebekah, and even Wanda. Upon noticing the audience's size, Elyse's heart fluttered with anxiety. She faltered during her

performance, an error not missed by the judges or Cody. Despite quickly regaining her focus and composure, the damage was done.

Nearby, Vicky couldn't hide her satisfaction, a smug smile breaking across her face as she observed Elyse's slip. Elyse performed moderately well. Unfamiliar with musical nuances, Richie noticed Freddy's concerned expression and inquired, "What's wrong? Didn't she play well?"

With a frown, Freddy paused before responding, "Her performance was generally good, but it wasn't flawless. There were several errors." Darren joined them, adding in a subdued tone, "She's yet to become accustomed to the stage. Her nervousness led to the same errors I've made myself. Stage fright was notoriously challenging to master."

Wanda, perceptive of the flaws in Elyse's execution, whispered to a nearby instructor, "After the competition, she needs more rehearsal time. How else will she manage live performances under such pressure?"

Overhearing the conversation, Rebekah, positioned behind Wanda, couldn't help but smirk. Elyse had been so arrogant, yet now she faltered significantly in her performance. Delighted, Rebekah turned to her friend with a grin. "I'm in such a good mood today; dinner's on me."

Her friend, puzzled, asked, "Really? What's got you in such high spirits?"

It was clear why Rebekah was elated; Elyse had blundered. Rebekah managed to contain her mirth and enthusiasm as she and her friend exited. For her, the competition's outcome was already clear; she felt no need to watch what she considered a foregone conclusion.

At the end of the performance, Elyse looked visibly disheartened. Without even glancing her way, the vice head informed Vicky, "Your piece will be 'Bilionera'."

Vicky looked up, her expression one of unwavering confidence, and declared, "No problem." As she began her performance, it was evident she outshone Elyse considerably.

Elyse's complexion grew pale while she remained on stage, her dismay apparent as she listened to Vicky. In stark contrast to her own showing, Vicky's performance dazzled, rendering Elyse's efforts negligible.

Darren, who knew Vicky's capabilities intimately, was aware of her longstanding role as concertmaster and her seasoned stage presence. Despite Elyse's talent, she simply couldn't match Vicky's seasoned stagecraft.

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As soon as Vicky wrapped up her performance, Abram wasted no time in showering her with praise. "Bravo! Excellent performance," he exclaimed, his admiration evident. Vicky held a special place in Abram's heart as his favorite apprentice. Her chest swelled with pride at Abram's words. She couldn't help but sneak a glance at the silent Elyse and stifled a laugh. She had already made it clear to Elyse that the latter was no match for her. Yet, there was Elyse, attending the selection only to be outshone by her. It was almost comical, like watching a clown trying to compete with a star performer.

As Abram, Merlin, and the others engaged in a flurry of post-performance chatter, they beckoned Cody to share his thoughts. It wasn't long before the fate of the Celestial Sounds Symphony's concertmaster for the upcoming domestic tour was sealed. "Congratulations, Vicky! You've earned the prestigious title of concertmaster for our upcoming tour," Abram announced proudly, his eyes darting over to Merlin with a subtle hint of whose apprentice reigned supreme. Merlin, sensing Abram's provocation, maintained a stoic expression and applauded along with the rest, refusing to engage in any overt rivalry.

The room erupted in thunderous applause and joyful cheers, a cacophony of celebration that filled the air as Vicky basked in the adulation of her peers. She had always stood out among her peers, her talent shining brighter than the rest. It was no surprise then that she deserved the title of concertmaster.

Elyse descended the stage stairs with a heavy silence hanging around her, her heart weighed down by the bitter taste of defeat. The stage reserved for winners had never felt more distant, more unattainable to her. Richie and Darren approached her, perhaps to offer comfort or words of encouragement, but she silently declined, shaking her head before leaving the performance hall.

Concern etched Richie's face. "What should we do, Richie?" he said anxiously. "I want to talk to her." He was aware that Cody had been eager to mentor Elyse for some time, but he suspected Cody's feelings might have changed. Despite this, Cody remained tight-lipped about his true intentions of watching the orchestra's concertmaster selection. As

the sole bearer of the truth, Richie found himself increasingly uneasy about keeping it to himself.

Darren placed a comforting hand on Richie's shoulder and shook his head. Grace interjected, "Let her be. The sting of a first failure is sharp, but she must find her own strength. Otherwise, she'll never rise again." Richie felt increasingly uneasy.

He wanted to defend Elyse, insisting that she hadn't truly failed; she was Cody's apprentice, and this setback wouldn't define her. Abram's booming voice interrupted their conversation. "Well done! You deserve to be my apprentice. No one your age can match you." They glanced over to see Vicky standing confidently before a group of instructors, her demeanor oozing arrogance. Perhaps Vicky noticed their scrutinizing gazes and responded with a subtle lift of her chin, a hint of smugness and challenge dancing in her eyes.

Bart, noticing Vicky's demeanor, furrowed his brow and said, "Achieving victory is commendable, but there's a fine line between confidence and arrogance." Darren resignedly added, "Vicky's track record is flawless. She truly stands out among her peers." Grace, wearing a displeased expression, interjected, "If only you could overcome your stage nerves, Darren. Then perhaps you'd surpass her one day." Darren, caught off guard by Grace's blunt critique, could only offer a helpless look in return. How could she prod at his insecurities like that?

Meanwhile, Vicky, reveling in her victory as the newly crowned concertmaster, eagerly sought out Cody's acknowledgment. However, upon scanning the room, she realized he was nowhere to be found. Turning to Abram, she tugged at his sleeve and asked, "Mr. Ellsworth, where's Mr. Tucker? Wasn't he here to scout for an apprentice? I've clinched first place. Why isn't he here?" Abram, now aware of Cody's absence, scanned the room in puzzlement. However, his questions to the nearby teachers yielded no clues about Cody's whereabouts.

Scanning the room in search of Cody, he puzzled aloud, "That's odd. Where could he have disappeared to?" Vicky's anxiety grew as she recalled seeing Cody engaged in conversation with Darren, Grace, and Bart—none of whom had been selected for the concertmaster position. She remembered how Cody had offered feedback, both constructive criticism and praise, highlighting their strengths and areas for improvement. Vicky couldn't shake the feeling of confusion. She knew she was an exceptional musician, so why hadn't Cody publicly declared her as his apprentice?

Vicky scanned the room with growing anxiety, oblivious to the fact that Cody had followed Elyse out of the performance hall. In the tranquil garden, Elyse found solace amidst the flowers, her sighs breaking the silence.

“It’s just a setback, no need for such heavy sighs,” Cody’s voice interrupted her thoughts as he approached, his hands clasped behind his back. Startled by his presence, Elyse rose from her seat, her eyes wide with surprise. “Mr. Tucker, what brings you here?” she asked, her voice tinged with uncertainty.

Cody regarded Elyse’s uneasy demeanor with a neutral expression before posing a question of his own. “Was this your first time standing on the front of the stage?” Elyse nodded slowly, her gaze falling to the ground. “Yes, it was. I’ve performed before, but always in the background, unnoticed. Today marked my debut as a concertmaster. Despite it not being a public performance, I felt uneasy,” she admitted, her voice barely above a whisper. “Being in such a prominent position made me uncomfortable.”

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Cody nodded, his tone calm as he remarked, “I could tell. You were sweating bullets.” Looking up at Cody, Elyse subconsciously touched her back and felt the sweat there. “I was too nervous to even notice,” she admitted awkwardly.

Cody gazed at her violin and asked, “Ever practiced so hard your strings snapped?” “No, never,” Elyse shook her head.

“You need to push yourself to that extent. It’s the only way to shake off the nerves and master your craft on stage,” Cody advised, his eyes seeing more than just her face.

After a moment of silence, Cody continued, “You’ve got talent, but you’re not putting in enough practice. You’re not as polished as Vicky.” It took Elyse a moment to realize Cody was critiquing her and offering advice.

“Thank you for the advice, Mr. Tucker,” Elyse felt a surge of hope. She had been feeling down, thinking she’d never gain Cody’s approval. Now she felt she had a shot. She wanted to ask for Cody’s number. After hesitating, she asked softly, “Mr. Tucker, could I have your number? In case I have any music questions?”

Without hesitation, Cody exchanged numbers with her. With Cody's guidance, Elyse felt a renewed sense of determination. "Head home. Don't linger here alone," Cody waved her off, seeing her newfound confidence.

As soon as Elyse heard Cody's comments, she trotted out of the garden. Elyse skipped back to the practice room where other orchestra members surrounded her, offering comfort and support.

Blushing under their attention, Elyse said, "I won't give up. I'll win next time."

"Next time? I doubt you can beat Vicky next time," Rebekah interjected, her tone dripping with disdain. "Compared to Vicky, you're nothing. Don't get your hopes up. You'll stay at the bottom next year too."

Someone moved to defend Elyse, but she stopped them. She didn't want others getting involved. Meeting Rebekah's gaze squarely, Elyse retorted, "I may be at the bottom, but what about you? If I recall correctly, you didn't even make it to the second round. You're not even as good as me. What gives you the right to criticize?"

Rebekah sneered, "Maybe I'm not as good as you, but you're just going to keep getting beaten by Vicky."

Someone in the crowd couldn't hold back anymore, saying, "We all know you've been sucking up to Vicky lately. I saw you following her around the other day, buying snacks for her like her personal servant. Why are you so obsessed with Vicky? Are you her lapdog now?"

Elyse laughed, calling her out. Caught off guard, Rebekah paled, her arrogance vanishing. Glaring at Elyse, she spat, "What are you so proud of? I may not be as bad as you, but I'm not as humiliating either."

"What's humiliating about me? I may not be as good as Vicky, but that just means I have room to improve. No one's laughing at me. Only you think I should be ashamed. Talk about narrow-minded," Elyse shot back.

"You—" Rebekah began but stopped short when Freddy entered the room. Their eyes met, and Rebekah blushed, unable to hold his gaze.

Ignoring Rebekah, Freddy walked straight to Elyse. “You’re back. Come with me. I need to talk to you.”

Confused, Elyse followed Freddy out of the practice room, leaving Rebekah seething with hatred. Out in the corridor, Elyse saw Darren asking, “What did you want to tell me?”

“Cody turned down Vicky as his apprentice. She was in tears,” Darren blurted out.

Surprised, Elyse asked, “But didn’t you say Cody came here to take on a student? That whoever became concertmaster would be his apprentice, right?”

Darren nodded. “Yeah, that’s what we all thought. Even my uncle was sure of it. He tried to pull some strings so I’d get the chance. But Cody told us the other day he didn’t necessarily have to choose the best performer.”

Elyse stood there for a moment, realization slowly dawning. “Then who does he want as his apprentice?”

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Darren shook his head when Elyse asked about Cody’s choice, saying that no one really knew. “Everyone thinks he won’t choose anyone, but I heard that he plans to stay in the city for a period of time, and he’s not in a rush to leave,” he explained. After that, he covered his mouth with his hand and sighed. “I’ve never seen Vicky cry in so many years. Her self-esteem has been shattered.”

Elyse asked if it was just Cody’s rejection, to which Darren replied, “Partly. Abram invited reporters and senior leaders. He thought Vicky would definitely be chosen, but she ended up getting humiliated.” Darren snickered, saying Vicky’s self-esteem was shattered in that moment.

Elyse and Freddy exchanged a look, commenting on Darren’s long-standing feud with Vicky. Darren raised a hand to cut Elyse off, saying, “She’s been mocking me for years, and I didn’t say anything. Today, can’t I have a good laugh?”

Freddy shrugged and said, "Sure, but take a look behind you first." Darren turned around to find Vicky's eyes full of humiliation and resentment, glaring at him as if she wanted to tear him apart. However, he wasn't afraid and added with a smirk, "Do you need to change locations to go cry now?"

Vicky wiped her eyes and shot back, "Losers don't have the right to mock me. Let's see how you feel after you win." He replied with indifference, "Well, it's my first time seeing a winner so humiliated." Vicky snorted and said nothing else, having competed with Darren for years. She walked up to them, bumped into Darren, and then glared fiercely at Elyse. To Elyse's surprise, Vicky wasn't going to say anything and just left unhappily.

"Don't fret about her. She's been cocooned in accolades for so long; it's high time she savored a dose of defeat," Darren remarked. He looked away from Vicky and said to Elyse, "Do you know what Cody said about Vicky's music before he left?"

Elyse was curious and asked, "What did he say?"

Darren replied, "He said her playing was all skill and no emotion. Her music fails to captivate or connect with the audience, and he suggested she tone down her arrogance." Elyse almost burst out laughing. "Mr. Tucker really has sharp eyes," Freddy joined. "He could see it in just one performance."

Darren nodded in agreement. "That's why he's one of the best." As Elyse listened to the conversation, she couldn't help but remember that Richie had said almost the same thing when he asked her to play in the park. It dawned on her that music devoid of a soul is hollow and lifeless. A performer couldn't lose their soul. She gained a newfound understanding of music.

Elyse was disappointed when she returned home and found out that Jayden wasn't there. She asked Driscoll, "Where is Jayden?"

"He went to the hospital, but there's been a traffic jam and he's delayed," Driscoll replied, noticing her disappointment. "What's wrong? Are you unhappy?"

Feeling sad, Elyse told Driscoll, "I lost. I didn't become the concertmaster."

Driscoll comforted her, saying, "Even if you're not selected, we all think that you're the best."

Elyse didn't say anything and just sat on the sofa, sulking. Driscoll noticed this and sent a message to Jayden, who was actually dealing with a business problem instead of going to the hospital as he had claimed earlier. When Jayden received the message, he guessed Elyse must be in a bad mood and ordered the driver to speed up. He rushed home in half an hour, where he was greeted by Bryce at the entrance, who had dark circles under his eyes and walked unsteadily.

"Bryce!" greeted Jayden. "I need to talk to you."

Hearing that, Bryce raised an eyebrow and said they could talk inside the house. He then controlled his wheelchair and moved toward the living room. The moment he arrived, Elyse stood up to greet him while Bryce couldn't hold back any longer and shouted, "I can't live in this house anymore! Your house is haunted, and I can't sleep at night!"

Elyse felt a pang of unease as she thought of the man from her dream again. Jayden glanced at Bryce and asked, "Will you leave after dinner?"

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Bryce hadn't intended to step inside the house. His plan was to simply say goodbye and leave this damned place. "I won't stay for dinner. I'd rather starve outside than enter your house!" he exclaimed loudly.

Jayden, with a blank expression, turned to Driscoll. "Send him home," he commanded.

Driscoll nodded, understanding Jayden's intention, and ushered Bryce towards a car. As Bryce settled into his car, a peculiar sensation washed over him. Hadn't he chosen to leave on his own? Why then did it feel as if he had been thrown out? Confusion clouded his thoughts as he sat in the car, trying to piece it all together.

Once Bryce was gone, Elyse observed a subtle lift in Jayden's mood. She recalled a conversation from a few days prior where Jayden had mentioned his plan to make Bryce leave of his own accord. It dawned on her that Jayden had something to do with the ghost. However, she lacked any proof to confirm her suspicions.

“You failed the competition and couldn’t become the concertmaster, right?” Jayden suddenly said, turning to face Elyse with an intense gaze.

She bowed her head, her voice tinged with sadness. “Yes, I failed.”

Jayden offered comfort. “I can arrange a personal concert for you if you want.”

Driscoll, returning just in time, overheard Jayden’s words and smiled warmly. It was clear Jayden had figured out how to bring joy to Elyse.

Feeling embarrassed, Elyse responded, “I don’t think I’m ready for a solo performance yet.”

Jayden withdrew his gaze and started toward the dining room. “Really? But I think you play the violin very well.”

Elyse paused, taken aback, and her cheeks flushed with color. She felt Driscoll watching and hurried to catch up with Jayden.

Later that evening while Elyse was practicing her violin, her phone vibrated. Glenda was calling.

She stared at the screen, hesitating for a moment before answering.

“Theo has let Mabel go home,” Glenda burst out immediately.

Elyse was taken aback. She had been messaging Theo, pleading for Mabel’s release, but there had been no reply. Now his sudden decision made her uneasy.

“Did he just let her go without saying anything?” Elyse asked cautiously.

Glenda’s voice, once filled with excitement, now wavered. “Yes…”

Elyse asked, her anger rising, “What were his conditions?”

Glenda responded, a note of guilt in her voice...

Elyse was stunned. "Did you agree to this?"

"Yes. Otherwise, I wouldn't have been able to bring your sister back," Glenda admitted, trying to maintain her composure.

"Mom, have you forgotten I'm married? Why would you promise him that? Have you thought about my situation at all? Aren't you worried that Jayden will be furious?" Elyse's anger surged.

Growing frustrated with Elyse's barrage of questions, Glenda retorted, "I've found out that Jayden is just a cripple and holds no sway in the Owen family. Besides, I only want to save Mabel. All you need to do is meet with Theo once. I'm not asking for anything more."

Infuriated by Glenda's dismissive tone, Elyse wanted to respond, but Glenda ended the call abruptly. Fuming, Elyse soon came to a decision and blacklisted Theo's number. Now that Mabel was safe and Glenda had agreed to Theo's demand, Elyse questioned why she should comply. It was Glenda who had agreed to the meeting, not her.

After that, Elyse exhaled deeply, picked up her violin, and resumed her practice.

Glenda, having hung up the phone, sighed deeply and muttered to herself, "She is so narrow-minded. She won't do even the smallest thing for me."

Mabel, who had been lying on the bed, opened her eyes, looking tired and pale. In truth, she wasn't sick. Though Theo had confined her in the basement, he had provided her meals regularly. Yet, the fear had overwhelmed her. She was terrified that he might harm her severely.

"Mom, who were you talking about?" Mabel asked weakly.

“Your elder sister, of course,” Glenda responded, her voice tinged with anger. “Theo wouldn’t let you go until I agreed to arrange a meeting with her. But I can’t believe she’s unwilling to help. She just gave me an earful over the phone.”

Glenda continued bitterly, “What an ingrate. She doesn’t care about you at all.”

Mabel remained silent, her thoughts drifting to what Kaelyn had told her in the basement. She clenched her fists in silence. “She doesn’t deserve to be my sister. She has always been selfish,” she said bitterly, her teeth gritted.

Nobody knew the extent of the mental strain she had endured in the basement. Yet, despite her plight, Elyse had refused to help.

Chapter 188:

Although Elyse missed out on the concertmaster position, she snagged a spot on the domestic concert tour. Now, she had to attend practice every day to hone her skills. As she stood amidst her fellow orchestra members, her gaze drifted to Vicky’s back, brimming with envy.

As they delved into their rehearsal, Merlin entered the room. He looked at everyone and said, “The tour begins in a month. Let’s strive for excellence and leave our audience awestruck.” After saying that, Merlin exited the rehearsal room, leaving the orchestra members abuzz with excitement.

Since Elyse had never gone on a concert tour, she couldn’t help but feel enthusiastic. “What a bunch of country bumpkins,” suddenly, Vicky’s voice pierced the air. Elyse raised her head and saw Vicky looking at everyone disdainfully. The room fell into a hush as Vicky’s words hung in the air. Did she just call them country bumpkins?

Elyse shot a helpless glance at Vicky before saying, “How irritating.” Annoyed, Vicky snapped, “What did you just say?”

“I said you are irritating,” Elyse replied unflinchingly. “What has our discussion got to do with you? We didn’t offend you. Yet, you label us as country bumpkins. Oh right, you are quite pleased with yourself.”

Vicky gritted her teeth, shooting Elyse a resentful glare. Never before had someone challenged her like this. Vicky's demeanor was always overbearing and arrogant. She liked asserting her dominance over other orchestra members, leaving them cowed and unwilling to challenge her. Not even Darren, her longtime rival since childhood, had ever mustered the courage to confront her in such a manner.

However, Elyse proved to be an exception. "What gives you the audacity to speak to me like this?" Vicky's laughter masked her simmering anger.

Elyse furrowed her brows. "Do you think you are outstanding? Are you above Merlin or more talented than Mr. Cody Tucker?"

Vicky retorted disdainfully, "I might not be on their level, but you lost to me."

Undeterred, Elyse chuckled, "Yes, I lost. But that doesn't mean I have to bow down to you, does it? I'll always be your competitor. You better step up your game because I might surpass you tomorrow."

Vicky was speechless with rage. Darren couldn't help but laugh. This caused Vicky to shoot him a glare. Unfazed, Darren smiled and looked at her fearlessly. "Vicky, have you forgotten Mr. Tucker's advice? He told you to be humble and curb your arrogance. Are you going against his words?"

Vicky was at a loss for words. She knew she needed to improve her reputation, especially if she wanted Cody to take her on as his apprentice. Reluctantly, Vicky held her tongue, choosing not to argue with Elyse. Seeing Darren's supportive nod, Elyse felt a surge of gratitude. He was standing up for her.

Turning back to her practice, Elyse received a message from Jayden saying he would be dining out with Peyton and wouldn't be home for dinner. Frowning, Elyse wondered why Jayden had been spending so much time with Peyton lately, always going out for meals. Without questioning their plans, she replied, "Okay."

Darren approached her and whispered, "We are planning to dine out tonight. Would you like to join us?"

Elyse was curious. "We? Who else is going besides you?"

“Bart, Grace, and Freddy,” Darren said with a smile. “The competition brought us together. Since we all play the violin, we turned from foes to friends.”

Intrigued, Elyse nodded. “Okay. Tonight, right?”

“Yeah, we are heading to Harvest Eatery. Bart’s booked us a private dining room,” Darren said, pulling out his phone. “Mind if I save your number? That way you can join our group chat.”

Elyse’s face lit up with delight as she swiftly added Darren to her contact list. Just as they were exchanging numbers, Vicky strolled over, eyeing them with an odd expression. “What’s going on? I heard you guys were about to join some chat group.”

Elyse gave her phone a playful shake. “Yeah, we were. Do you want to be friends with us?”

Vicky scoffed, her disdain evident. “Who would want to be friends with losers? I’m not interested in lowering my standards.”

Darren’s brows furrowed in irritation. “Can’t you change your attitude? It’s not like you have a lot of friends anyway.”

Vicky shot him a look of pure contempt. “Oh, and you think you are going to win anything by associating with these losers?”

Darren bristled, ready to retort, but Vicky simply brushed him off and turned away. Elyse let out a resigned sigh. “Forget it. You know Vicky. She is not going to change.”

Darren sighed deeply. “Sometimes I can’t help but feel sorry for her. She must be really lonely. Maybe I have been too nosy.”

Elyse nodded in understanding, offering him a comforting smile. Later, she discreetly messaged Driscoll, informing him that she wouldn’t be coming home for dinner tonight. Driscoll’s heart sank as he read her message. Knowing that Jayden and Elyse wouldn’t come home for dinner, he couldn’t help but feel lonely.

Chapter 189:

As evening descended, Elyse departed the rehearsal room clutching her violin case. Upon reaching the building's exit, she discovered Freddy standing there, the sole presence in sight. The two of them had just exchanged greetings when Rebekah emerged. Seeing Elyse and Freddy together, she became instantly furious.

She stormed over and demanded in a stern voice, "Why are you so close to Freddy? Have you forgotten you're married? Are you trying to seduce him?"

Elyse couldn't help but laugh. "Have you seen me seducing Freddy? Are you saying that just because we spoke a bit more today?"

Freddy pressed his hand against his forehead. "I was just having a normal conversation with Elyse. You're making it easy for people to misunderstand."

Rebekah's tone softened, but her discomfort was evident. "It's just that you two were standing so close. I'm worried you might be misled by her."

At this, Freddy's expression turned stern. "Enough, Rebekah. What do you take me for? Do you really think I'd flirt with a married woman?"

"No, that's not what I meant, Freddy. It's all her doing," Rebekah tried to clarify, but Freddy wasn't interested in listening.

Just then, Darren, Grace, and Bart arrived, each carrying their own violin cases.

"What's going on here?" Darren asked, curiosity piquing in his tone.

"Let's go," said Freddy, eager to end the conversation.

Grace nodded and approached Elyse. Both were girls who shared a lot in common, and neither gave up easily, making them fast friends. They spent the entire afternoon together, solidifying their bond.

Rebekah was aware of their plans to gather. Darren and the others were outstanding figures in the orchestra, and she knew that joining them could boost her status, reputation, and access to resources. She bit her lip and boldly asked Freddy, “Can you take me with you? I want to stay with you.”

At this, everyone exchanged knowing glances. Elyse watched Rebekah with a hint of amusement. It was clear that she wanted Freddy to be associated only with her, revealing a stark double standard.

“This is our gathering. You can’t attend,” Freddy replied firmly and without hesitation.

“Why not?” Rebekah challenged, unconvinced.

With a sly smile, Elyse gestured to the group and explained, “We’re sharing secrets today. You shouldn’t hear them.” They called themselves the Alliance of Defeated, a humorous nod to their shared experiences of failure. Today’s meeting was to swap stories of their setbacks and strategize on how to defeat Vicky in future competitions.

No one was keen on including an outsider who might learn of their weaknesses and failures. After all, each of them held their pride dear. Besides, Rebekah was particularly close to Vicky.

Rebekah fixed Elyse with a steely gaze and demanded angrily, “Do you look down on me?”

Grace, with a bright smile, placed her arm around Elyse’s shoulders. “We don’t look down on you. It’s just that you really couldn’t come with us.”

Rebekah bristled with anger, sensing that she and Vicky were being excluded from the group. As one of Vicky’s staunch supporters, she quickly reassessed the situation. “Then I won’t go. You can go,” she declared.

None of them pondered her reaction deeply except Freddy, who suspected Rebekah of harboring ulterior motives. However, lacking concrete proof, he decided to address the issue if and when it arose.

As the group departed, Rebekah hurried off to find Vicky, who was alone in the rehearsal room. Upon seeing Rebekah, Vicky asked with impatience, “Why are you bothering me?”

Rebekah responded anxiously, “I just saw Elyse leaving with Darren and the others. They’re planning to stick together and isolate you. I’m worried it will make things difficult for you.”

This news infuriated Vicky. “How dare Elyse rally people to isolate me? How dare she?”

Ever since Rebekah had become Vicky’s follower, she had frequently spoken ill of Elyse to Vicky, fueling Vicky’s disdain for her. Now Vicky’s animosity toward Elyse had reached a boiling point.

Smug with her influence, Rebekah quickly added, “Grace and Bart were there, and even Darren has joined them. If I were you, I wouldn’t be able to contain my anger. Elyse is too cunning. She’s plotting behind the scenes and might even trap you in the future.”

Vicky had had enough. She quickly packed up her case and asked, “Do you know where they are having dinner? I need to find Elyse.”

With her plan falling into place, Rebekah responded obsequiously, “I’ll need to ask around. Give me a sec.”

Chapter 190:

Elyse and her new friends settled into the private room and placed their orders, eagerly awaiting their meals. Bart ordered a bottle of wine, and after pouring himself a glass, looked around the table. “Don’t you want to try it? Am I drinking alone?”

Elyse responded, “We don’t drink. Go ahead by yourself.”

As Bart nibbled on an appetizer, he muttered, “I can’t really speak my mind without a drink. I’ve hardly ever lost in a competition.”

Grace snorted. “That’s true for all of us. Otherwise, why would we be here tonight?” Her remark cast a strange silence over the group.

Elyse chewed thoughtfully on some fruit, her mind wandering back to the few formal competitions she had participated in. Glenda had always instructed her to lose to Mabel, not wanting her to outshine publicly. Consequently, her experience was limited, which explained why she was so tense and made a mistake in her match against Vicky.

Reflecting on this, she sighed deeply, and soon, the others followed suit. Elyse looked around, noticing the exchanged glances. Despite their talent and pride, they bore the weight of recent defeats collectively. A somber atmosphere enveloped them as they reflected on their setbacks.

Feeling the need to lift the spirits, Elyse encouraged, "Cheer up, guys. We'll win in the future."

Darren had a resilient attitude. Due to his past experiences with mistakes during competitions, he understood the disappointment and reluctance others felt. Standing up, he raised a glass of soft drink. "We can learn from our failures. Cheer up. We will win next time."

Elyse nodded, raising her glass in agreement. They were about to toast when Vicky and Rebekah interrupted them.

"Elyse Lloyd, we need to talk privately," Vicky stated bluntly, her focus clearly on Elyse.

Elyse looked puzzled. "What do we need to talk about?"

Equally perplexed, Darren inquired, "Why are you here? Who tipped you off about our presence here?"

All eyes turned to Rebekah. With a smug smile, Rebekah raised her eyebrows at Elyse, seemingly indifferent to the accusatory stares. "This is what you get for rejecting me."

Feeling Rebekah's hostile gaze, Elyse furrowed her brow. "I don't need to talk to you in private. Whatever you have to say, you can say here."

Vicky crossed her arms, her tone arrogant. “Fine, I was trying to be considerate of your feelings. Don’t hold me responsible if you feel publicly humiliated.” She slammed her hand on the table. “Why have you teamed up with them to isolate me? Is it just because I’ve won against you?”

Elyse responded, “When have I ever isolated you? You called for this dinner and excluded me,” Vicky said aggressively. “You hate me because I’ve won against you, so you invited everyone else to plot against me.”

Elyse was taken aback. After catching Rebekah’s gloating smile, she quickly understood the situation. “I don’t mind you joining us as long as you’re willing to share your experiences with failure,” she replied, stressing “experiences with failure” pointedly. She then turned to Rebekah. “I refused to let you join our dinner, so you decided to sow discord among us. Are you stupid, Rebekah Bentley? You might offend me, but can you afford to offend everyone else here?”

Rebekah, anticipating a retort from Elyse, rolled her eyes. “Don’t try to pin this on me. I overheard you plotting to turn everyone against Vicky and sabotage her future performances.”

Elyse scoffed. “You truly are malicious. You even want to sabotage her future performances.”

Darren, having grasped the situation, addressed Vicky. “If you’re looking for the organizer of this dinner, talk to me. I arranged for it, and Bart reserved this table. Elyse was merely invited by us. You’re welcome to join our dinner if you’d like.”

He then turned to Rebekah. “But we won’t include you.”

Under his firm gaze, Rebekah tensed. Knowing Darren was backed by Merlin, she didn’t want to escalate the conflict.

Vicky scoffed. “Dine with a bunch of losers. Don’t make me laugh. You’re not even worthy of sharing a table with me.”

Elyse responded calmly. “If that’s how you feel, why are you here? To pick a fight?”

“You ask me why I’m here?” Without warning, Vicky approached Elyse and slapped her across the face.

Under the astonished gazes of everyone around, she snapped, “I don’t care if you really want to rally them against me. I’m here to make it clear that someone like you, a piece of garbage, will never surpass me.” Then she shook her stinging hand and turned to leave.

The next moment, Elyse grabbed Vicky and pulled her back, slapping her twice as others watched in shock.

Glaring icily at Vicky, Elyse bit out, “Thank you for coming to me. Consider this my repayment.”