

## Bound love 231

### Chapter 231:

Theo was in the midst of overtime work at the company when Elyse's call came through. Engrossed in reading an important document, he hesitated to answer, not wanting to be interrupted by the phone. Glancing at the caller ID nonchalantly, his anticipation heightened upon seeing it was Elyse. "What could she possibly want?" Theo's pulse quickened as he picked up his phone. Deliberately allowing it to ring thrice, he finally pressed the answer button slowly. "Why are you calling?" His tone betrayed no emotion.

Meanwhile, Elyse examined the ruby necklace in her hand and inquired casually, "I received a birthday gift. Did you give it to me?"

Theo was on the verge of confessing that it was indeed from him. Having purchased the ruby necklace at an auction, he had long intended to present it to her. Yet he harbored doubts about her acceptance, hence the delay. Suddenly, it dawned on Theo that she hadn't called to express gratitude but to ascertain whether it was his gift. Knowing Elyse's disposition, he speculated that if she learned it was from him, she might return it. He responded, "I don't know anything about a birthday gift. You must have mistaken."

Elyse was taken aback. Theo denied any involvement in the gift. As she pondered the possibility further, she heard Theo's derisive tone. "Why would I give you a birthday gift? Don't delude yourself."

Dispelling her doubts, she replied, "You're right. I must have been mistaken. My apologies for bothering you, Mr. Ward. I gotta go."

With that, she promptly ended the call. Theo exhaled deeply and tossed the phone back onto the desk. He should have realized he had missed the opportunity to present the gift openly.

Reflecting on this, a self-deprecating smile tugged at his lips. After concluding the call, Elyse placed her phone on the table, retrieved the ruby necklace once more, and inspected it closely. Ultimately, she stowed the necklace away, indifferent to its sender.

The following day, she headed to the rehearsal room. With the tour commencing the next day, they engaged in a brief rehearsal before proceeding to a concert hall. Boarding the bus en route to the

concert hall, the team's manager distributed their uniforms, each tailored for the upcoming performance.

"Wow, your dress is different from ours. It's a fishtail design. Absolutely stunning," Vicky, being the concertmaster, explained the distinction in attire.

"That's fantastic! I aspire to be a concertmaster someday," one of the girls exclaimed.

Vicky admired the performance attire in her grasp. Upon hearing the girls' praises, she cast a scornful glance at them. "Do you honestly believe just anyone can become the concertmaster?"

Realizing her blunder, the girl who spoke awkwardly lowered her head, avoiding Vicky's gaze. Vicky observed the girl closely. The girl possessed only average talent and would never rival her skill. Vicky wasn't one to coddle incompetence. With a hint of sarcasm, she remarked, "If you're not up to par, then practice diligently. Actions speak louder than words."

Elyse witnessed the exchange but remained silent. However, Vicky noticed her presence. Sneering at Elyse, Vicky taunted, "You're no different from her. Spare yourself the illusion. You'll never wear this dress."

Amused, Elyse retorted, "You make it sound like you'll surpass me for the rest of your life."

Proudly displaying the dress in her hand, Vicky replied, "I did this time, didn't I?"

Elyse's gaze sharpened as the manager approached. Loudly, she commanded, "Put away your attire. Rehearsal is about to commence."

The room buzzed with activity as everyone prepared. Elyse took her place among the others, stealing a glance at Vicky, who stood proudly as the concertmaster, her posture exuding arrogance.

As the rehearsal was set to begin, Vicky suddenly sneezed. Concerned, the manager advised, "Layer up. The air conditioning is being tested today. If you're underdressed, you'll catch a cold."

"No need. I'll be fine once we start moving," Vicky insisted, poised to begin the rehearsal.

The manager relented, allowing Vicky to proceed. After half a day of rehearsal, the orchestra was dismissed an hour early to ensure they were well-rested for the performance the following day. Elyse lingered behind, becoming the last to leave.

Standing alone on the dimly lit stage, she gazed at the empty auditorium, a sense of tranquility washing over her. As the lights began to dim, she seized the moment to experience what it felt like to be a concertmaster.

She stood resolute, playing the melody of “Viva La Vida.” Upon finishing, she was greeted by applause. Following the sound, she spotted Cody, clad in a casual black suit, with a smile on his lips.

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“Mr. Cody Tucker!” Elyse was taken aback. What was he doing here? Cody greeted her with a smile. “I haven’t seen you for a few days. Your skills have really improved. You’ve obviously been practicing hard.” Elyse scratched her head, feeling a bit shy. She had indeed been working hard ever since Cody encouraged her to dedicate more effort. “Let’s head out. The concert hall is about to close. If we don’t leave now, we might end up spending the night here,” Cody gestured to her warmly. Elyse nodded with enthusiasm, packed her violin into its case, and quickly followed Cody.

As they left the building, Cody glanced at his watch and suggested, “It’s still early. Would you like to join me for a coffee? We could chat for a bit.” Elyse smiled, thrilled by his invitation. She nodded without a second thought. Cody looked at her with a smile and led her to a nearby cafe.

The cafe, located next to the river and usually bustling with people, offered a view of the water from the windows. They chose a quiet corner and sat down. Cody handed her the menu, saying, “Order whatever you like. It’s on me.” Elyse chose a caramel latte and handed back the menu timidly. Noticing her choice, Cody’s usual composure wavered a bit. Elyse’s taste was exactly like his. He masked the emotion welling up inside him, ordered a cup of Americano, and asked, “How long have you been studying music?”

Elyse replied, “I started when I was fourteen.” In fact, she had been enchanted by the violin for much longer. As a little girl, she would imitate violin players and even try a few notes herself. She had once told Lanny she wanted to learn how to play the violin properly, but he dismissed her harshly every time it came up, discouraging her completely.

She didn't understand why, but with her parents' disapproval, she resorted to practicing secretly at school. She would tag along to friends' violin classes and ask them for help with problems. This way, she learned to play the violin and even searched the internet for music manuscripts to practice different pieces. However, Mabel eventually discovered the truth and informed Lanny. Enraged, he smashed the violin that a friend had gifted her, subjected her to violent abuse, and then confined her in the basement. After being locked up in the basement for a few days, she almost starved to death.

After that ordeal, Elyse was too frightened to touch the violin again. But later, Mabel decided she wanted to pursue music and aimed to carve out a career in the entertainment industry. Lanny and Glenda then reversed their decision, allowing Elyse to openly reclaim her violin and resume her lessons.

Cody's brow creased slightly when he learned she started at fourteen. "That's somewhat late, but you're talented. With extra effort, you can still excel." After a pause, Cody inquired, "How well can you play Erbkönig?"

Hearing the name of the composition made Elyse's mind go blank momentarily. She shook her head and admitted, "I haven't managed to play it smoothly yet." Cody said, "After the first stop of the tour, you need to master this one in three days. You can pause but must not play incorrectly."

Elyse looked confused. "Do I have to play that particular one?" Cody affirmed with a nod. "Do you think you can't manage it?" Though momentarily at a loss, Elyse chose to be honest. "I'm well aware of my limitations. I doubt I can master Erbkönig within three days."

Cody smiled. "I appreciate your honesty." Her honesty also reminded him of someone. Just then, a waiter approached with a tray and set two cups of coffee before them. Cody shifted the conversation. "Is your father still alive?" Elyse responded slightly bewildered, "Yes, he is still alive."

Cody asked again, "What's his name?" Elyse confirmed with a nod. Her father's surname was indeed Lloyd. Was there something amiss? Cody didn't say anything. He crossed his arms, lost in thought. Elyse sipped her coffee, unsure of what to discuss next. A few minutes passed before Cody asked another question. "Does your father have a sister?"

Elyse was even more baffled. She thought for a moment and replied, "No, he doesn't have any siblings. He's an only child." After receiving her answer, Cody didn't ask anything more. He simply said, "Three days from now, come show me your progress."

## Chapter 233:

After bidding Cody farewell, Elyse returned home with a troubled expression. Jayden glanced at her and asked, “Did someone pick on you again?” As Peyton heard her approaching, he turned and offered her a cupcake. “Feeling down? Have some cake, it might cheer you up.”

Elyse sat next to Jayden with a solemn look, accepted a warm towel from Driscoll, wiped her hands, and questioned, “What brings you here?” Peyton huffed and rolled his eyes. “Can’t I just drop by for dinner?” “Of course you can,” Elyse reassured him.

Jayden passed a cupcake to her and explained, “His vacation’s almost over. He’s here for one last free meal before returning to work.” Taking a bite of his cake, Peyton chimed in, “Actually, I came to share some juicy gossip with you.”

Intrigued, she leaned in. “What kind of gossip?” Peyton’s eyes lit up as he narrated, “Just a few days ago, I saw Corrie on a blind date while I was out for dinner. She’s been at the same restaurant for blind dates three days in a row.”

Jayden elaborated, “Her family owns a chain of restaurants, including a few upscale ones. It’s not surprising to see Corrie having dates at her family’s restaurant.” Peyton managed a smile and said, “Three blind dates in three days. Is Corrie that eager to tie the knot?”

Jayden replied nonchalantly, “Her grandfather’s seriously ill. He’s had three life-saving injections this month alone, costing 860 thousand each. Corrie’s got ambition. If she marries before her grandfather passes, she stands to inherit a lot more.”

“Is that a Bates family secret? How did you come by that information? They’ve never publicized anything, and I stumbled upon Corrie’s blind dates purely by chance,” Peyton remarked.

Elyse was just as shocked upon hearing this. She turned to Jayden with a puzzled look, wondering about his sources. Jayden smirked, “Of course, I know. I have my own network of informants. Doesn’t your family have one too?”

Peyton rolled his eyes at Jayden’s response. But Elyse remained silent, her gaze fixed on Jayden. She pondered the reach of Jayden’s network, possibly more extensive and efficient than Peyton’s family’s. Did it mean that Jayden wasn’t visible in the business circle but had his secret team?

Realizing the implications, Elyse inhaled sharply. If Jayden really had such a hidden talent, what would he plan to do with it? Was he truly content with being excluded from the Owen family, or was he plotting to reclaim his influence?

The more Elyse mulled it over, the more plausible it seemed. She had always sensed that Jayden was concealing something. After some reflection, she was convinced that this was his secret. But why hadn't he confided in her about his ambition to reclaim his influence? If he had plans to do so, she would stand by him. There was no reason for hiding.

She felt an urge to discuss this with Jayden but ultimately chose silence. If Jayden chose not to share, then so be it. As his wife, she could still support him quietly.

Their conversation drifted on for a while. When Peyton heard that Elyse was performing at the concert hall the next day, he exclaimed excitedly, "I want to see your performance tomorrow!"

"I'm afraid you might not catch me on stage. I'm not the concertmaster, just blending in with the crowd."

"That doesn't matter. I'll spot you even in a crowd. I've got sharp eyes," Peyton said, edging closer to Jayden.

Jayden eyed him suspiciously and asked, "What are you up to?"

Peyton looked at him with curiosity. "Are you going there tomorrow? Maybe I could tag along."

Jayden saw through his intentions. "Why don't you get your own ticket?"

Raising an eyebrow, Peyton countered, "Their performance starts tomorrow. What decent seats could I possibly get now? I bet I'd get a better one with you."

Elyse chimed in, glancing at Jayden. "You could give him a ticket. Didn't I give you three?"

Peyton's frustration was evident. "Three tickets? Why won't you take me?"

Jayden, feeling cornered, replied, "Alright, I'll give you a ticket."

With a sly grin, Peyton suggested, “There’s still one left. Why not give it to Clive? He’s always wanted to hear Elyse play the violin.”

Elyse looked surprised. “Really? He should come and tell me. I’d be happy to play for him.”

Peyton dismissed the idea with a wave of his hand. “How could he possibly ask? After all, you’re Jayden’s wife. How could he possibly let you perform for him?”

As Elyse and Peyton continued their conversation, they completely ignored Jayden. Jayden’s expression turned grim. Peyton knew Elyse was his wife, yet he still expressed a desire to hear her play.

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That evening, Elyse decided to hit the hay early. To ensure she wouldn’t be late, she left at the crack of dawn the next morning for the concert hall to slip into her performance attire. One by one, the orchestra members began to arrive. Spotting Darren, Elyse made her way over to say hello, only to find him staring intently at something, his brow creased with concern.

“What’s caught your eye?” Elyse inquired, her curiosity piqued. Darren glanced at her and nodded towards Vicky. “Doesn’t she seem a bit off to you?”

Elyse followed his gaze to where Vicky was standing with a group of orchestra members, engrossed in their chat. After observing for a moment, she shrugged and said, “She seems fine to me.”

Nevertheless, Darren wasn’t convinced. He walked up to Vicky, his steps brisk and purposeful. Grabbing her wrist, he demanded, “Vicky, cut the act. Are you out of your mind?”

“Let go!” Vicky retorted, her voice rising in anger as she yanked her hand away. Her sharp nasal tone echoed through the room, drawing everyone’s attention. Darren sneered, “You’re unwell and you hid it from us. What if you collapse during the performance and bring shame to our Celestial Sounds Symphony in front of everyone?”

Vicky shouted back, her voice raspy, “I’m not sick! Stop spreading lies!”

Darren turned to a girl standing nearby and instructed, "Ask the manager to come and have her check on Vicky's condition." The girl nodded and hurried off to find the manager. In a panic, Vicky tried to stop her, but dizziness overwhelmed her. She swayed, fighting the urge to faint.

Just then, Elyse hurried over and caught Vicky in her arms, steadying her. Feeling the heat radiating from Vicky, Elyse asked with concern, "Are you running a fever? Have you taken any medicine?"

Vicky steadied herself, pushed Elyse away, and snapped, "I told you I'm fine! Just leave me alone." Elyse looked over at Darren, her face a mix of frustration and resignation. Darren remained silent, his expression cold. With her fists clenched, Vicky couldn't resist shooting a glare at Darren.

Soon, the manager and a group of staff arrived, one of them holding a thermometer. They approached Vicky to check her temperature, but she dodged, clearly unwilling to cooperate. The manager, her patience wearing thin, fixed Vicky with a stern look. "Vicky, this is not the time for stubbornness. We can't risk any mishaps during our first tour stop. It would damage our orchestra's reputation. Are you ready to shoulder that responsibility?"

"You really can't afford to slip up now. If you're sick, it's better to rest instead of going onstage. We've practiced so hard for this. Please don't spoil our efforts. Can you handle the responsibility for everyone? And remember, even as concertmaster, you need to follow the rules," the manager added.

Vicky bit her lip, hesitating only a moment before relenting. "Fine, give me the thermometer." The manager handed it over, and Vicky tucked it under her armpit. Fifteen minutes later, she returned it. The manager checked the reading and exclaimed in frustration, "You have a high fever! Why are you so set on performing? Don't you care about your health at all?"

With her lips pressed tightly together, Vicky offered no response. After a brief discussion with the staff, the manager decided to appoint a new concertmaster, replacing Vicky. Feeling the crowd's eyes on her, Elyse took a step back, her voice tinged with nerves. "Is something wrong?"

The manager responded in a steady tone, "I need to inform the concert hall staff about the change in concertmaster. We'll take Vicky to the hospital later. Elyse, you'll step in for Vicky. I'll let the orchestra know and will handle any fallout from this decision."

Upon realizing she would be the new concertmaster, Elyse's eyes widened in shock as she looked over at Vicky. Vicky returned her gaze with a look of bitterness. Elyse opened her mouth to talk to Vicky, but the urgency of the moment meant she was hurried away by the staff. With particular responsibilities and stage manners for the concertmaster role, Elyse had to quickly adapt to them.



The backstage, once peaceful, grew tense and uneasy with the new concertmaster. Vicky sat alone in a lounge corner, feeling abandoned for the first time as she watched others bustling around. She sat there disheartened. Out of the blue, a bottle of water appeared before her.

Surprised, she lifted her head and saw Darren's indifferent expression. Frustration laced her words. "Are you pleased now? Now I'm unable to perform on stage, and Elyse is taking my place. You've truly gone out of your way to make sure Elyse becomes the concertmaster."

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Darren was very indifferent. He replied to Vicky's question, "If you had listened to me, you'd have retained your position as the concertmaster. But you just wouldn't listen. Bring your fever down first, okay?" He had earlier reminded Vicky to put on a jacket instead of a thin dress should the weather get cold. Yet, his thoughtful suggestion and help were seen as meddling in her affairs. Darren kept his opinion to himself; he shouldn't have meddled in her business.

Vicky was full of resentment. She sneered, "Am I wrong? You help Elyse because you like her." He gave a cold smile as he said, "Seems like you are no longer as awesome as you seemed to, right?" Darren was vexed. "Why would she say a thing like that?" he thought. "You are no different from normal people now. You are the concertmaster, and your health is paramount. But your stubbornness made you end up with a fever on our first date of the tour."

"You hold grudges against Elyse. You feel she stole your position as the concertmaster from you, didn't you? You should blame yourself instead of Elyse. You didn't value this tour, so you were replaced with someone who did." Vicky trembled; she was not willing to accept she was to blame. Furious, she retorted, "I'll deliver even if I'm sick. I've been in such a situation, and trust me, I delivered, of course."

Darren said with a nod, "Yes, I know you've had such an experience in the past, but you had only stood on the stage for three minutes. The case is different here; you will perform with a lot of people. Can you cope for two hours?" His eyes were full of disappointment. "Or do you intend to pass out in the course of the performance? Do you want to embarrass our orchestra before the media? Say you don't care; do you think we don't too?"

Those words switched off Vicky's arrogance. She leaned against the wall in physical weakness. She wasn't sure how long she could endure when she mounted the stage, especially in her condition. She was unhappy, coupled with the fact that the person she hated the most, Elyse, had replaced her.

Darren looked at the wall clock. "You'd better pray it goes well," he said. With her mouth twisted, she said, "Are you scared it won't go well? I thought you had so much confidence in Elyse."

Darren couldn't hold back his displeasure any longer. He said coldly, "Do you think Elyse would be happy to take up your role? Have you thought about the stress and inconvenience this must have caused her? She had to go through the troubles of memorizing the blocking and other etiquettes barely a quarter of an hour before the performance started."

Vicky was speechless. She shut everyone out from communicating with her. With anger surging in his heart, Darren picked up his violin and went to the backstage. Their performance was about to begin. He had hoped it went well.

Elyse glanced at the audience who walked in one after the other from the corner of the stage where the manager had led her to. The manager carefully explained every step, pointing to every position. She noticed Elyse was nervous. She said to her, "Don't be nervous, just enjoy the stage."

Elyse couldn't believe it. She looked at her in disbelief. Her heart beat faster every time she looked at the audience. She encouraged herself, "I'll enjoy it." The audience arrived one after another and made themselves comfortable. Clive and Peyton, who had come after Jayden, could not contain their excitement.

"Can you find your wife in the crowd?" Clive asked Jayden. In an assured tone, Jayden answered, "Of course." Clive sat straight and said, "I'm not interested in classical music, but since you invited me, I'll watch it this once."

Jayden couldn't stand the two friends he had. "Just go ahead and watch it. It really is a waste for someone like you that doesn't value it," he muttered. Clive retorted, "You don't like this kind of music either. Didn't you make a last-minute research so as to get relevant information on it?"

"Why exactly are you both here?" Jayden asked as he helplessly touched his forehead. "To watch your wife perform," they both chorused. Jayden wanted to ask them to leave when the performance began. They paused to watch the performance.

Clive noticed Elyse was not there, so he asked, "Where is your wife? I have not seen her; have you?" Peyton too searched. He added, "I can't see her too, Jayden, have you seen her?"

There was no sign of Elyse whatsoever. “Has something bad happened?” Jayden worried for her.

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Good evening, everyone. The performance of the Celestial Sounds Symphony is about to begin. Let’s all welcome the concertmaster, Elyse Lloyd.”

As soon as her name was announced by the host, Elyse glided gracefully onto the stage in a stunning fishtail dress, her violin in hand. Pausing at center stage, the spotlight focused on her, casting a glow on her radiant smile.

“Elyse Lloyd? Who’s that? Isn’t Vicky Aston supposed to be the concertmaster? I came here just to see her.”

“Vicky was replaced by some girl named Elyse. But why? I came all the way here tonight to see my idol Vicky. I don’t want to see some unknown violinist. Tell her to get out. Bring Vicky onstage.”

Being the youngest violinist, Vicky had garnered a substantial fan base. Many of these fans were eagerly anticipating her performances on this tour.

Hearing the audience growing increasingly restless, Peyton gulped anxiously. “Hey, what should we do? At this rate, your wife’s going to be kicked offstage.”

Jayden didn’t answer. Chin resting on his palm, he was too focused on the woman standing in the middle of the stage.

The fishtail dress accentuated Elyse’s beautiful figure, its hem adorned with shimmering crystals that twinkled under the lights.

Elyse, accustomed to styling her hair in a high ponytail, opted for a low ponytail tonight, with wisps of baby hairs delicately framing her youthful face. This subtle change, along with her ensemble, added a touch of maturity and elegance to her appearance.

Jayden stared at Elyse, wondering how his wife would react when faced with such harsh criticism. Would she consider asking him for help?

However, Elyse didn't even address the crowd. With a graceful wave of her hand, her bow connected with the violin strings, and harmonious music poured out.

The noisy crowd gradually quieted down upon hearing the beautiful tune.

Staring at Elyse onstage, Jayden fell into a trance, as though her music had put him under some sort of spell.

Her every move was full of grace and elegance, like that of a fairy.

An hour later, there was a fifteen-minute intermission.

Clive turned to Jayden and said in awe, "Wow, your wife played the violin for over an hour. She's got so much energy."

Jayden was about to respond when a familiar figure in the audience caught his eye—it was Cody, sitting nearby. But before Jayden could call out Cody's name, he saw that Richie, whom he hadn't seen in a long time, was sitting next to Cody. From the way they talked, they seemed to be well acquainted with each other.

Jayden's eyebrows shot up in surprise. How did these two know each other?

Backstage, Elyse took the bottle of water from the manager and thirstily gulped it down.

The manager nodded in satisfaction, her eyes twinkling with appreciation as she gazed at Elyse. "You did exceptionally well, Elyse."

Elyse smiled at her graciously, but her flushed cheeks betrayed just how honored she felt.

"There's still the second half. You can do this." The manager gave Elyse a reassuring squeeze on the shoulder.

Elyse nodded and waved goodbye as the manager left. The moment the manager disappeared from view, Elyse cupped her burning cheeks and muttered to herself excitedly, "I did it!"

The intermission soon ended, signaling the start of the second half of the concert. Upon her return to the stage, Elyse immersed herself in the music, her focus laser-sharp. As she played the final note, the entire audience erupted into a warm round of applause. Still lost in the music, Elyse was startled by the sudden noise. In a daze, she noticed the conductor gesturing at her and quickly snapped back to reality.

With a charming smile, Elyse took a few steps forward and gracefully bowed to the audience. She upheld the honor of the Celestial Sounds Symphony today.

After the curtains dropped, the audience began to disperse. As Elyse returned to the lounge, she noticed that all eyes were on her, followed by a burst of thunderous applause. "You did a wonderful job as the concertmaster, Elyse. Congratulations," the manager generously praised Elyse on her performance.

Moved by the touching atmosphere, Elyse wiped the tears from the corner of her eyes and said modestly, "It's all thanks to the whole orchestra. We did this together." The manager chuckled, said nothing more, and simply squeezed Elyse's hand to convey her feelings.

The whole team was supposed to celebrate the success of the first show over a lavish meal, but due to the temporary change in concertmasters, the manager and other staff members had to attend a meeting to plan and regroup. They decided to postpone the celebration, and they could go home to rest.

Elyse hastily got dressed and excitedly ran out to look for Jayden. When she arrived at the entrance of the concert hall, she spotted him amidst the crowd, her eyes lighting up happily. But before she could reunite with her husband, a man suddenly blocked her way.

Confused, Elyse raised her head and queried, "Er, do I know you?" The man just smiled at her and held out a bouquet of flowers to her. "Hi, I just watched your performance. You were stunning."

Seeing that Elyse didn't make a move to take the flowers, he took a step forward and said, "These are for you." Standing frozen in place, Elyse stared at the flowers helplessly, feeling at a loss.

Fortunately, she didn't have to say anything. "She doesn't need your flowers," a deep voice sounded. The man turned to glare at the person who had interrupted him. "Mind your own business, pal."

“This is my business,” Jayden said icily, pulling Elyse to his side. “She’s my wife.”

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Hearing that, the man flashed a smile and firmly thrust the bouquet into Elyse’s hand. He turned to Jayden, remarking, “Just a fan of hers, mate. No need to get all touchy being her husband and all.”

Peyton sauntered over, catching wind of the exchange. A snicker slipped past his lips involuntarily.

Elyse, feeling a flush of embarrassment, found herself at a loss with the bouquet of flowers in her grasp. The man doffed his hat, offered a courteous bow to Elyse, and made his exit with grace.

Jayden’s gaze bore into the retreating figure, a storm brewing behind his eyes. Elyse gently squeezed Jayden’s fingers and whispered, “Don’t let it get to you.”

Jayden’s cold inquiry cut through the tension, fixating on the bouquet she held. “What’s your plan with that?”

In a hushed tone, Elyse replied, “Your call.” Jayden’s anger seemed to ebb at her words. The man was just a fan; no reason for such intensity.

Clive stood rooted, his gaze trailing the departing man, uncertainty clouding his features. Could that man be a member of the Benson family? Clive racked his brain, then shook his head, dismissing the notion as he approached Jayden.

Little did Clive know, the man hadn’t strayed far, lingering beneath a towering tree, his eyes fixed on Elyse. He whipped out his phone, dialing a number. “Look into Elyse Lloyd from Celestial Sounds Symphony. She might be the one we’re after.”

Not far off, a shiver ran down Elyse’s spine. She glanced up and caught sight of the man who claimed to be her fan lurking in a corner, his gaze locked on her. “That man’s still around. He’s watching me,” Elyse fretted, drawing near Jayden.

Jayden followed her gaze, but the man was nowhere in sight. Elyse, too, noticed the absence. She scanned the surroundings, her brows furrowed. “Where’d he go?”

“Maybe you got spooked and mistook someone else,” Jayden attempted to soothe her.

Elyse hesitated, uncertain. “No sign of anyone suspicious. Let’s grab a bite,” Peyton intervened, leading the way to a reserved table at a nearby restaurant.

Meanwhile, clad in a black hooded sweatshirt, Mabel seized the opportunity presented by today’s orchestra performance and the relaxed security to blend into the orchestra’s rehearsal room seamlessly.

Recalling her way from memory, Mabel located Elyse’s locker. Ensuring the coast was clear, she deftly opened it and began rifling through the sheet music. At the bottom lay a folder. Extracting it, Mabel’s eyes widened as she realized it contained the coveted sheet music she had been yearning for.

Perusing the music, greed flashed in Mabel’s eyes. “Knew Elyse had new sheets, but she’s hoarding them like treasure. Petty much.”

“What’s going on here?” A voice pierced the silence.

Ah! Startled, Mabel tumbled to the floor, meeting the stern gaze of Rebekah.

Rebekah glanced at the locker, then at the sheet music in Mabel’s hand. Her lips curved into a knowing smile. “Recognize you, Elyse’s little sis, right? Two days ago, you popped by.”

Flushed with embarrassment, Mabel hastily stashed the sheet music, rising to her feet, eager to flee.

“Wait,” Rebekah intercepted Mabel’s exit.

With a pang of guilt, Mabel inquired, “What’s up?”

Rebekah gestured towards a corner, her tone admonishing. “You don’t take Celestial Sounds Symphony seriously, huh? Bold move pulling a heist in plain sight.”

Taken aback, Mabel's gaze followed Rebekah's finger, landing on a surveillance camera trained directly on her.

Nervous tension gripped Mabel. "I didn't steal it. My sister wanted me to fetch the sheet music for her."

"Sheet music?" Rebekah snatched the sheet music abruptly. A quick perusal revealed a mix of awe and envy in her eyes.

Struggling to maintain composure, Rebekah refrained from ripping the pages as she addressed Mabel coldly. "So, you're pilfering your sister's stash?"

Mabel vehemently shook her head. "No way. Elyse sent me for it."

Rebekah scoffed. "Remembers your last visit here causing a scene. Hard for anyone to buy your innocence now, isn't it?"

Gritting her teeth, Mabel reclaimed the sheet music, shooting Rebekah a resentful glare. "Stick to your lane. This is family business."

Rebekah's smile held a hint of mischief. "To make this go away, you've got to show some goodwill."

Mabel had more to say, but Rebekah's words struck a chord, bringing sudden clarity. Tension drained from Mabel's frame.

Masking her emotions, Mabel replied with a smile. "Name it, and it's yours."

A smirk played on Rebekah's lips. "Three scores for 200 grand each. Oh, and I can scrub that surveillance footage for you."

It would only cost Mabel six hundred thousand dollars to get back into show business. There was no more worthwhile deal than this.



Without hesitation, Mabel nodded in agreement. Rebekah extended her hand, a silent understanding passing between them as they shook on the deal. In that moment, their pact was sealed.

## Chapter 238:

In the restaurant, after the seventh blind date, Corrie couldn't muster a sweet smile as she had been forcing herself to do. She took a sip of coffee from the table, attempting to push down her depression. But ultimately, she failed and dialed her father's number.

"I've made it clear I want an outstanding and capable husband. Who are these guys you keep setting me up with? I don't like any of them," she vented to her father, Nicholas Bates, who bristled with anger on the other end of the line. Despite his ire, he managed to keep his tone subdued. "Are you still unsatisfied? I think your last date is great. His father is a shipbuilding magnate. Who else could you possibly want?"

Corrie continued, frustrated, "Yes, his father is super awesome, and yes, there are benefits if I marry him. But he lacks ambition entirely. He's content with a comfortable life and doing nothing. He expects me to settle for that."

Nicholas rubbed his temples, exasperated. "What nonsense are you spouting? All you should care about is acquiring more wealth through marriage. Why do you need to seek out a motivated and capable man who you love?"

"Dad, do you think I'm incapable of finding both love and wealth? You're insatiable," Corrie retorted.

Nicholas retorted, "I've arranged for you to meet Brook Owen tomorrow. You two are of similar age. You can see how you get along."

"Brook Owen?" Corrie furrowed her brow. "Have you forgotten I was involved with Jayden Owen before?"

"So what? Jayden's now disabled and married. Why can't you go on a blind date with Brook?" Nicholas's tone remained calm. "Brook is likely to take over the Owen Group in the future. He's more aligned with your ambitions."

After a moment's thought, Corrie relented. "Fine. Send me his number later."

Nicholas sounded pleased. "Behave yourself this time. If we gain the support of the Owen family, our family's position will be secure."

After ending the call, Corrie received a call from Tess. During her previous blind date, Tess had tried calling multiple times. Corrie, preoccupied, had missed each call. She had messaged Tess to inquire why she had been trying to reach her, but Tess didn't provide an answer.

Corrie hesitated for a moment as she stared at the ringing phone. After three rings, she finally answered. "Hello, what's up?" she inquired.

Corrie's recent blind date wasn't exactly a secret among their social circle. Tess would likely know about it soon enough. Without reservation, Corrie replied, "Yes, I'm at that age where marriage is on the horizon. Gotta start planning for the future." With a smile, Tess asked, "Ever thought about being my daughter-in-law?"

Corrie was taken aback. Did Tess want her to marry Bryce? Awkwardly, she responded, "Bryce just finished college, right? We're not exactly a match."

"It's not Bryce I'm talking about. Jayden. You used to date him, didn't you?" Tess chuckled.

Corrie was astonished. "Jayden? You want me to marry Jayden? He was a cripple." She refrained from voicing her disgust, maintaining her composure and manners. "Jayden and I are ancient history. Let's leave it at that. Besides, I think Elyse is perfect for him. They seem really in love."

As Corrie mentioned Elyse, she adopted a gentle tone, feigning admiration. However, a mocking smile played on her lips. "How could Elyse fall for a disabled man? She must be desperate." After a pause, Corrie added, "It's not easy for them. Please don't judge Elyse unfairly."

Tess's anger flared at Corrie's words. Elyse's family was a disappointment. The Lloyds even relied on the Owens for help. Tess entertained the thought of convincing Jayden to divorce Elyse and marry someone else. That was why she considered Corrie. Corrie and Jayden had a history. If Tess could offer Corrie more resources and be good to her, Corrie might agree to marry Jayden.

Tess misjudged Corrie's feelings towards Jayden. She failed to recognize that Corrie now held Jayden in disdain due to his disability. Tess even considered the possibility of Corrie marrying Jayden.

Disgusted by Tess's scheming, Corrie exchanged a few polite words before abruptly ending the call. "As if I couldn't find any man. Marry a cripple? Ridiculous." Muttering to herself, Corrie took a sip of her coffee. Just then, Jayden and his companions were ushered into an exclusive dining room by a waiter. Corrie was surprised, a creepy smile creeping onto her face. "What a coincidence. I must go say hello to them."

Chapter 239:

Elyse had just sat down and taken a sip of water when Corrie entered the private room, wine glass in hand and a smile on her face. As Corrie took a seat next to Jayden, Elyse couldn't help but frown. The scent of Corrie's perfume made Jayden grimace.

"Stay away from me."

Corrie tried to hide her embarrassment behind a smile. "This perfume was a gift from you, remember?" she replied, glancing subtly at Elyse.

Elyse's expression of disappointment didn't go unnoticed by Corrie, who felt a surge of satisfaction. That was the look she was hoping for.

Jayden cut her off sharply. "You're mistaken. I've never given you perfume."

Ha! Peyton couldn't hold back a snicker at Jayden's blunt denial. Embarrassed but quick to shift the focus, Corrie asked, "So what's the celebration tonight? Why is everyone here?"

Peyton cleared his throat, still suppressing his amusement. "Elyse just wrapped up her first performance as concertmaster. We're celebrating her success."

Elyse blushed under everyone's gaze. Corrie caught the look of admiration in Jayden's eyes and tightened her jaw. Having once played the role of Jayden's girlfriend, albeit falsely, she could sense the stark difference in how he now treated Elyse compared to her.

She studied Elyse critically. Beyond her violin skills, Corrie saw nothing extraordinary about her. Yet Jayden's eyes softened when they landed on Elyse. Could it really be love? With a scoff, Corrie doubted it internally. Could someone as detached as Jayden truly grasp the concept of love?

Meanwhile, Elyse received a congratulatory message from a friend, filling her with warmth. She excitedly shared the news with Jayden, and the two leaned close, whispering and laughing, oblivious to Corrie's growing irritation.

Corrie leaned forward, resting her chin on her hands with a sigh. "Today just isn't my day. I went on seven blind dates after coming home, and all seven were a bust." She glanced at Elyse with a hint of envy. "You and Jayden are so in love. I've never seen him this gentle and attentive with me." Turning to Jayden, she asked softly, "Why weren't you like that with me?"

Elyse, feeling a bit off by Corrie's remarks, glanced at Jayden, searching for his reaction.

"Do you really want to get married that badly?" Jayden asked Corrie, a serious tone in his voice.

Corrie responded with a pointed question, "Are you saying you don't want me to settle down yet?"

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Corrie responded with a pointed question: “Are you saying you don’t want me to settle down yet?”

Jayden met her gaze. “I hope you can make it and won’t die alone,” he teased.

As the conversation continued, Elyse felt increasingly left out, sitting quietly to the side, nursing her drink in frustration. Clive, sitting across from Elyse, noticed her discomfort and fixed Corrie with a displeased look. “This dinner wasn’t meant for you. Don’t you have other places to be?”

Corrie looked up, feigning innocence. “What’s the problem? I’m just trying to join the conversation.”

Elyse exchanged a surprised look with Clive, whose expression darkened further.

Peyton, sensing the tension, intervened. “Look, you weren’t really invited tonight. Maybe it’s best if you head home.”

Corrie stubbornly remained seated, eager to irk Elyse further and prove her dominance.

Peyton sighed, recalling Clive’s strong aversion to Corrie. Clive usually avoided these gatherings if Corrie was around.

Without another word, Clive stood abruptly, grabbed Corrie by the collar, and marched her out of the room.

Once the door shut, Peyton remarked to the rest, “Everyone knows Clive can’t stand Corrie. My mistake.”

Jayden frowned, concerned. “Go check on them. Make sure Clive doesn’t go too far.”

Peyton nodded and hurried out.

Jayden then turned to Elyse, who looked troubled. “Are you okay?”

Elyse met his gaze, a depth of emotion in her eyes. “Do you have any feelings left for Corrie?”

Jayden looked puzzled. “Why would you think that?”

Chapter 240:

“You say you have no feelings for Corrie, but your concern for her was evident the moment you encountered her. Why does her disastrous blind date matter to you?” Elyse challenged.

Hearing that, Jayden sensed her jealousy stirring once more. “I merely asked. You’re overthinking it,” he explained helplessly.

Elyse’s heart sank at his response. “What do you mean by overthinking? Corrie is clearly targeting me, trying to embarrass me. Didn’t you notice?”

Jayden remained silent, his thoughts a mystery. Elyse felt disheartened. She turned away, sadness clouding her eyes. “Forget it. It doesn’t matter.”

Her emotions were always dismissed, and he always remained indifferent. Observing her expression signaling a desire to end the conversation, Jayden felt a surge of frustration.

Outside the room, bystanders were unaware of the conflict brewing between Elyse and Jayden. After escorting Corrie from the room, Clive paid no heed to the curious onlookers as he dragged her out of the restaurant.

Corrie appeared in a mess, her high heels slipping from her feet as she was dragged away. She struggled to keep them on. The moment Clive released his grip, she hastily slipped on her shoes and snapped, “Are you out of your mind?”

Clive retrieved a tissue to cleanse his hands, his disgust evident. Pushing him away, Corrie demanded, “Say something.”

Clive met her gaze, discarding the tissue much like he had done with Corrie. “You’re repulsive. Stay away from us,” he declared before turning to leave.

Stung by the insult, Corrie reached out to grab him. Anticipating her move, Clive swiftly evaded her grasp. Peyton approached as they argued, exasperated. “Why are you both fighting?”

Corrie scoffed. “Ask him. I’ve done nothing.”

“Nothing, huh? We all know you’re a bitch.” Maintaining his composure, Clive questioned, “Have you forgotten Louis Walker?”

“Louis Walker?” Hearing the name, Corrie didn’t hesitate at all. She smiled and asked, “Who the hell is he? Why should I remember him?”

Clive’s anger was palpable, veins bulging on his forehead. At Clive’s words, Peyton’s expression darkened momentarily. Louis was also his good friend. With a solemn tone, Peyton remarked, “You’ve crossed a line this time, Corrie.”

Corrie shrugged nonchalantly. “Think what you will.”

“What a cold and heartless woman,” Clive’s accusation hung in the air as he turned on his heel, striding back into the restaurant without a backward glance. Peyton, his anger evident, offered no smile to Corrie as he trailed after Clive.

Though seething, Corrie’s mood lifted slightly when she recalled Elyse’s earlier frustration. As Peyton and Clive reentered the private room, they sensed the tension between Elyse and Jayden. Their eyes met, and they resumed their seats in silence.

“The dishes are ready. Let’s dig in,” Elyse declared and then took a bite. The others followed suit, but after Corrie’s spectacle, a heavy silence enveloped the room.

After the meal, everyone departed quietly. Elyse and Jayden returned home. Driscoll approached, ready to congratulate Elyse on her flawless performance, but as she silently retreated to her room, he noticed the disappointment etched on her face.

Confused, he inquired, “Sir, what’s wrong with her? Did you two have another disagreement?”

Jayden’s anger simmered. “She insisted on picking a fight.”

Driscoll sighed deeply. Lately, Jayden and Elyse seemed to argue more and more. What was going on with them? “Sir, aren’t you going to appease her?” Driscoll asked hesitantly.

“Appease her, huh?” Jayden responded unhappily. “Even though this is entirely her fault this time.” He had done nothing wrong. To him, Elyse was just being overly sensitive.

Driscoll felt uneasy. After a moment of hesitation, he ventured, “Should we still proceed with the birthday party?”

“Why not? Let’s go ahead with it,” Jayden declared, his tone laced with anger.

Driscoll was left speechless; he had worried that Jayden might impulsively cancel it out of anger. Jayden’s fists clenched. Hadn’t Elyse always accused him of not appreciating and caring for her? Well, he would show her just how much he cared for her.

Meanwhile, in the room, Elyse sat quietly, deep in thought. Eventually, she retrieved her violin and began to practice “Erlkönig.”