

Bound love 251

Chapter 251:

Elyse stood at the entrance of the banquet hall, her body trembling, and a look of isolation on her face. Curious glances from the guests swept over Elyse as she stood alone at the entrance. The guests watched in silence as Jayden left his wife to care for his ex-girlfriend. The scene was a stark contrast to the praise they had just lavished on Jayden and Elyse for their seemingly perfect relationship. In an instant, public opinion flipped.

Despite his physical limitations, his charisma remained as captivating as ever, effortlessly entwining two women in his web of charm. He was a consummate master of winning hearts, a true virtuoso of allure. “My heart goes out to Elyse. It’s devastating to see her husband’s affections shift towards another woman,” one guest whispered.

“I couldn’t help but notice the irony in her earlier fervent defense of Jayden,” another guest remarked. “Which woman has truly captured his heart? His wife Elyse or his ex-girlfriend Corrie?” The guests’ whispers turned to open murmurs, their speculative glances piercing through Elyse like daggers as they openly debated the scandalous affair.

Tracy swiftly intervened, positioning herself as a protective barrier between Elyse and the intrusive gazes and cruel whispers of the onlookers. She was appalled by their callous speculation about Elyse being merely a placeholder in Jayden’s heart. With unwavering loyalty, Tracy stood firmly by Elyse’s side, offering a steady stream of gentle reassurances and comforting words, shielding her from the harsh judgment of the crowd.

“Are you fine?” Theo quickly came over and put his suit jacket around Elyse’s shoulders, offering a comforting gesture.

Elyse turned to face him, her eyes cold and angry. “Are you here to make fun of me?” she asked bitterly.

Theo shook his head. “No.” He couldn’t quite put his finger on why he felt drawn to Elyse’s side, but the sight of Jayden deserting her stirred up a painful memory from his own past – the day his own wedding failed. He wondered if Elyse had felt as lost and heartbroken on their wedding day as she did at that moment. Had she faced the same mocking glances and cruel comments from others? Back then, when he walked away and left her alone, she had no one by her side. He guessed she probably hated him to the core for what he did.

Theo's eyes were finally opened to the devastating consequences of his selfish abandonment, and the weight of his guilt crushed him. His actions had thrown Elyse into deep despair. With eyes filled with remorse, he held Elyse's hand and said, "Does Jayden always treat you like this? Come on, let's get out of here."

Elyse pulled her hand away, her voice disbelieving. "Theo Ward, are you crazy?" His anger flared the second he saw Elyse upset. "Jayden hurts you like this, and you still want to be with him?"

Elyse's tone was laced with frustration as she firmly declared, "Jayden and I will work this out. I am his wife, and I'm waiting for his explanation. And as for you, Mr. Ward, what's motivated this sudden desire to assist me?"

Tracy's eyes filled with a mix of concern and warning as she stepped in front of Elyse, forming a protective shield between her and Theo. With a heavy heart, she addressed Theo in a firm yet gentle tone, "Theo, you've crossed a boundary. Remember, you're no longer a part of Elyse's life. It's time to respect her boundaries and let go. Your involvement can only lead to more hurt."

Theo's face fell, and he went silent, unable to respond to Tracy's words. Elyse looked down and followed Tracy back into the hall. With the argument now over, the spectators began to disperse, each one drifting away into the background.

Fists clenched, Theo pivoted with the intent to locate Elyse, but his quest was derailed by the unexpected sight of Freda. Unwittingly locked in a tacit stare, he felt the weight of her gaze upon him, an expression imbued with layers of meaning yet to be deciphered. He considered explaining to Freda but decided against it and remained silent. Ignoring Freda's hopeful gaze, he pursed his lips and walked away in silence.

Freda was surprised when he brushed her off. She stared at him in disbelief. She hoped to hear an explanation from Theo that his concern for Elyse was out of kindness, not lingering feelings. However, he said nothing to her. She couldn't kick those thoughts away, and she hoped that was what they were, just thoughts. Freda's mind and heart were caught in a tempestuous storm, her feelings buffeted by a whirlwind of questions and conjectures.

Suddenly, the memory of the Owen family's invitation received just two days earlier came flooding back to her, and with it, the recollection of how she had eagerly asked Theo to be her escort for the evening's festivities. She recalled the sparkle of enthusiasm in his eyes as he eagerly accepted her invitation, his face illuminating with a warm smile that hinted at his genuine delight. Was it because he was aware that the party was being thrown in Elyse's honor?

Freda's lips pursed, her expression souring as a suspicion took root. Did Theo exploit her invitation as a pretext to meet Elyse? As the suspicions swirled in her mind, her indignation ignited, fueling a determination to confront Elyse.

Tracy led Elyse away from the banquet hall and into the garden. The fountain's gentle undulations seemed to harmonize with the melody, creating a mesmerizing spectacle that Elyse gazed at with a vacant expression, her eyes reflecting profound sadness, her loneliness so tangible.

Tracy drew close, her voice barely audible as she whispered words of reassurance, "It's possible there's been a miscommunication, Elyse. Try not to let it consume you. Jayden will surely clarify everything when he gets back."

Elyse closed her eyes and shook her head. "Jayden doesn't explain things to me. He never has, and I don't expect him to start now."

Chapter 252:

Sadness clouded Elyse's eyes as she spoke, "Jayden's affection for me isn't as deep as you think." Before Tracy could respond, a cutting voice interrupted, dripping with sarcasm. "Is that why you find solace in pursuing others' partners?" Turning, Elyse saw Freda striding over, her presence exuding an aura of icy superiority. Draped in a sleek black gown with her hair elegantly pinned up, Freda approached with a gaze that bore the weight of noble disdain.

Tracy, unfamiliar with Freda, felt a surge of anger. Stepping forward, she confronted Freda. "How dare you speak so rudely!"

With a scornful sneer, Freda countered sharply, "I am simply denouncing Elyse's audacious conduct. Married to another yet clinging to Theo. What a slut."

Elyse met Freda's gaze with a frigid stare before responding coldly, "If you have grievances, take them up with Theo. I am not your target for misplaced anger."

With haughty resolve, Freda raised her chin. "Do you even comprehend who I am? I am a member of the esteemed Jimenez family."

Elyse sniffed dismissively at Freda's assertion. "You are but Theo's arranged date, not his betrothed. What gives you the right to cast judgment? Do you possess any evidence to support your claim of my seduction? If anything, it's Theo whose actions have crossed boundaries with me."

Freda seethed with anger. "How dare you accuse Theo of misconduct! You, who are married to Jayden, should steer clear of Theo, you wretch."

Developing feelings for Theo, Freda believed him to be honorable. Later on, Freda learned that Theo had a former fiancée who had come close to marrying him. Despite Elyse's commitment to Jayden in marriage, Freda couldn't shake off a persistent feeling of unease and an impending sense of crisis. So when Freda noticed Theo's peculiar demeanor around Elyse, her possessive instincts surged, fueling her anger.

"I see you're too timid to confront Theo, opting instead to direct your fury at me. Is that it, you coward?" Elyse's words dripped with disdain as a sneer curled her lip.

Freda's pride stung sharply, prompting her to swiftly extend her hand and push Elyse. Behind Elyse, a grand fountain stood tall, its cascading waters shimmering in the lights. Elyse, catching a glimpse of the water's edge, recognized the impending embarrassment of a potential tumble before the remaining guests. She understood she couldn't afford to succumb to the looming fall. With graceful determination, she steadied herself, instinctively clutching onto Freda for support. While Elyse managed to maintain her balance, Freda lost hers, tumbling beside the fountain with a thud.

As Elyse's delicate pearl crown descended into the water, a chill enveloped her heart. Tracy's voice erupted with fury as she confronted Freda, her words sharp, "What is wrong with you? It was Theo who incessantly pursued Elyse, yet you dare to blame her. You are truly out of your mind."

Freda stood, her cheeks ablaze with anger as she directed her words at Elyse, "Elyse Lloyd, whatever history you and Theo share is of no consequence to me. But mark my words, I am destined to marry him in the future."

Elyse's eyes lingered on the pearl crown, memories of Kaelyn's face flooding her thoughts. With a smile that belied her inner turmoil, she responded, "I certainly hope your aspirations come to fruition."

With a scowl etched upon her features, Freda turned abruptly and stormed away, her elegant dress trailing behind her. As Elyse glanced around, her gaze fell upon Theo standing near the window. His countenance was grave, his eyes holding depths of inscrutable emotion that evaded her grasp.

Despite the ambiguity surrounding Theo's thoughts, it was evident that he had caught wind of their heated exchange. Nevertheless, Theo refrained from intervening in their argument.

A wistful curve danced at the edges of Elyse's lips. Theo remained stoic as ever. In times of trouble, he'd effortlessly blend into the background, sidestepping any confrontation. Had Theo offered even a glimpse of an explanation, perhaps Freda's ire wouldn't have found its target in Elyse. Yet Theo's choice of silence only fueled the flames, allowing the tension to swell.

Tracy, ever the solace, extended her support to Elyse. "Worry not about the crown. I'll arrange for its retrieval."

Grateful, Elyse nodded and turned towards the banquet hall. "Where is the crown that was on your head?"

As soon as Elyse returned, Brook intercepted her with swift precision. "Brook inquired, his smile bearing an unbearable weight upon Elyse."

Suspicion prickled at Elyse's senses, believing Brook had likely witnessed the altercation and was now purposefully seeking her out to stoke further discord. "It's far too precious. I've entrusted it to safekeeping," Elyse replied with a dismissive wave.

Then, voicing the confusion within her, Elyse inquired, "Corrie has fainted. Shouldn't you be concerned for her wellbeing?"

A peculiar smirk danced upon Brook's lips. "Why should I be?"

Chapter 253:

Elyse couldn't make sense of what Brook said. "But I thought you were crazy about Corrie," she said.

As Brook sipped his red wine, his smile disappeared, replaced by a chilly expression. "I was only interested in her because of her status, not because I really liked her."

Elyse was at a loss for words. Brook, typically aloof and detached, watched the scene unfold with an uncharacteristic sense of compassion. Seeing Elyse's struggle, he found himself moved to offer some sage advice.

"I think you're setting yourself up for heartbreak. All Owen men aren't suited for love, not even Jayden," he said.

Elyse was even more lost than before. Brook continued, his voice tinged with a note of resignation. "We're all driven by ambition. We're only interested in gaining power and taking charge of the company. Love and relationships are not our priorities."

Brook then skillfully steered the conversation, drawing Elyse's attention elsewhere. "Do you think Jayden's parents love each other?" he queried, the question lingering in the air.

Elyse's first instinct was to say yes, but memories of Bryce's birthday celebration surfaced, clouding her certainty. Tess had been there alone; Andrew had supposedly been away on business. Though Tess had tried to dispel any doubt, Elyse was left with a lingering unease.

A poignant silence stretched between them, revealing the answer Brook had been seeking. "That's just the way the Owens are. We can produce children without feelings. You'll only experience pain if you are deeply in love with Jayden. There's no guarantee that one day he won't abandon you for his own gain," Brook stated, his hand settling on Elyse's shoulder, the gesture a heavy pause in the conversation.

"He doesn't know love," he intoned, his voice layered with understanding. "He only knows ambition."

Removing his hand, Brook set his glass down with finality. He turned, striding towards the door, his figure receding as Elyse stood rooted in place. The playful spirit that had animated her earlier had vanished, her eyes downcast.

Worried about Elyse's well-being, Tracy opted to stay over, her concern bolstered by Jayden's absence. After their evening routines, Elyse found herself at the guest room door, pillow in hand. "Can I sleep with you tonight?" she asked softly.

Tracy, already half-asleep, looked up in confusion. "You can, but what if Jayden comes home?" she asked, drowsiness lacing her voice.

Elyse was silent. After a pause, she finally spoke, her tone laced with bitterness. “He won’t come back tonight.”

Tracy’s surprise was evident in her voice. “Are you sure? Did he tell you he wouldn’t be home?”

Elyse’s smile was wan, strained. The silence from Jayden’s end had stretched on throughout the day, her messages met with a blank space where a reply should have been.

In Elyse’s mind, the image of Corrie’s faint played out, painting a picture of Jayden by her bedside all night, consumed by worry. Tracy’s perceptive gaze didn’t miss the sadness that Elyse tried to hide. She pulled her friend into the room, her voice bright. “Forget about Jayden. It’s been so long since we’ve had a sleepover.”

Elyse gave in to Tracy’s gentle coaxing and slipped into bed. Her friend’s embrace was warm and comforting, and soon sleep claimed her. Tracy felt her friend’s body relax into sleep, her breath even and deep. As she held Elyse, she couldn’t help but feel an ache in her heart, compassion for her friend’s plight blossoming within her.

Tracy’s heart was heavy with disappointment, not only for her own heartache but for Elyse’s as well. It seemed that both of their lives had been full of struggles in the search for happiness, with heartbreak and frustration as constant companions. “Why did Elyse and I have so much difficulty finding love?” Tracy wondered to herself, her thoughts circling, searching for answers that remained just out of reach.

Jayden emerged from Corrie’s ward, Peyton at his heels. As they left, Peyton removed his surgical mask. “I’ve conducted a thorough examination. There’s nothing wrong with Corrie physically.”

Peyton continued in a clinical tone. “If I must offer a cause, I would have to say that seeing you happy with Elyse broke her heart and triggered her fainting spell.”

He pressed on with a question that exposed his doubt. “Do you really believe Corrie was heartbroken?”

Jayden, his expression unfazed, shook his head, dismissing the idea outright. Peyton could sense the futility of his efforts, and his tone softened. “I understand your reasons, but you can’t show Corrie too much kindness,” he urged.

Jayden's silence stretched like a chasm before he finally spoke, his voice filled with a steely determination. "I know what I'm doing."

Peyton's exasperation mounted. "You still think you know what you're doing. How about Elyse's feelings? Have you considered them?" He paused, trying to gauge Jayden's reaction. "Where were you all day? Nobody could reach you, and everyone was worried. Did you realize how much Elyse needed you?" Peyton's questions were like a verbal wave.

Jayden raised his left hand. "I was in a car accident on my way back. I fractured my left arm."

Stunned, Peyton was silent. After a long pause, he asked, "Then why didn't you tell us?"

Jayden sighed. "While my injuries weren't severe, I am certain that the individuals behind today's car accident are the same as a year ago. I chose not to inform Elyse because I wanted to shield her from involvement and harm."

Peyton was speechless and lost in thought. "You need to tell Elyse. She deserves to know."

Jayden shook his head, resolute in his decision. "I don't think so. She just needs to be protected by me," he declared.

Chapter 254:

Peyton felt a headache coming on and said, "Don't you think you owe Elyse an explanation? She really cares about you."

Jayden's expression remained unreadable, showing little emotion. "You know the dangers I constantly face. I can't selfishly involve her in that."

Elyse was delicate, and Jayden felt it was his duty to protect her from the risks of his world, prioritizing her safety above everything. Realizing Jayden's firm stance, Peyton stopped trying to change his mind and suggested, "I'll take care of Corrie. You should head home."

Jayden looked like he was about to argue, but Peyton cut him off, saying, “You’re hurt as well, and you’ve neglected Elyse today.”

Jayden fell silent, confronting the fact that he had indeed let Elyse down. Thus, he decided to go home. Peyton saw Jayden off, showing no concern for Corrie’s well-being.

As soon as Corrie was alone, she opened her eyes, a self-satisfied smile spreading across her face. On the other hand, when Elyse woke up, she felt something was off and reached out for a hand, expecting to find Tracy’s familiar touch. To her surprise, the hand she touched was not as soft as Tracy’s. Startled, Elyse’s eyes snapped open to see Jayden beside her, causing her to quickly suppress her swirling emotions.

Jayden checked his watch, his brow creased. “You’re not going for rehearsal today. Wouldn’t you like to sleep a little more?”

Silently, Elyse turned away, choosing to sleep further. Jayden sensed her lingering anger. He pulled her closer and gently said, “Are you still mad? I’m sorry about yesterday.”

Elyse’s voice was heavy with fatigue as she answered, “It doesn’t matter anymore. I’m no longer interested in your business.”

Jayden was disturbed by her words. “Are you serious?”

Elyse replied with impatience, “Yes, I’m staying out of your business from now on. I’d prefer it if you stayed out of mine as well.”

Elyse had spent much of the previous day deep in thought, only to be overcome by exhaustion. She grappled with understanding why her relationships consistently culminated in being abandoned by men. First it had been Theo, and now Jayden. She had thought Jayden would be different. However, Jayden had succumbed to Corrie’s manipulative tactics.

After reflecting, Elyse realized that Jayden’s lack of genuine love for her was the root cause. His lack of true affection meant he didn’t value their relationship. With a new perspective on her situation with Jayden, Elyse decided to let go of any false hopes she had harbored. It was foolish to cling to those fantasies.

Jayden, feeling her pull away, became slightly agitated when he didn't get the reaction he expected. He drew Elyse closer, demanding her attention. "Are you this upset just because I wasn't there for you yesterday?" Jayden questioned, his voice tinged with irritation.

Recalling Brook's remarks about the previous day's events made Elyse reflect. Jayden really was clueless about love. Elyse looked him directly in the eyes, unflinching. "As I said earlier, Corrie's fainting was a deliberate ploy. She planned it to disrupt my birthday celebration, but you didn't see it that way. Instead, you rushed her to the hospital, prioritizing her first."

Jayden felt a mix of frustration and helplessness wash over him. "I've already told you I have no intentions of being with Corrie. Why can't you move past this?"

Elyse's tone was cold. "I want to know why, despite your assurances, you're still so attentive to Corrie. You never really answered that."

"You're never going to drop this, are you?" Jayden retorted, annoyed by her continuous questioning. He wondered why she couldn't just trust his commitment to her. Why did she always feel the need to question everything?

Suddenly, Elyse noticed the bandage on Jayden's left arm. Surprised, she asked, "What happened to your arm?"

Jayden looked down at his injury, realizing he couldn't hide it and decided to be truthful. Yet he couldn't reveal the real reason behind yesterday's car accident as it was linked to a past event. With a heavy voice, Jayden explained, "I got hurt. There was a car accident on my way back yesterday, and I broke my arm."

Elyse was visibly upset as she asked, "Then why didn't you tell me? Why didn't you respond to my calls?"

"My phone was destroyed," Jayden admitted honestly.

Elyse scoffed, continuing her questioning. "Then why didn't you let me know once you got back?"

Jayden massaged his temples, overwhelmed by her relentless questioning. Annoyed, he retorted, "Why should I have told you? It wouldn't change anything. You couldn't help find the driver who struck me or fix my arm. I knew it would only make you worry."

After a brief silence, Elyse asked, “So you think my concern is pointless?”

Chapter 255:

Jayden’s face was impassive as he said, “I didn’t mean it like that. Why do you always take it the wrong way?”

Elyse managed a tight smile. “Oh, so you didn’t mean any of it?” She got up quickly, changed into another outfit, and was ready to leave. Jayden tried to follow her, but his struggle to get into his wheelchair slowed him down. Elyse didn’t wait around; she walked out of the room, violin case in hand.

As she reached the bottom of the stairs, Driscoll approached her with an update. “Just so you know, Miss Tracy Bernard left early. Would you like to grab some breakfast now?”

She gave a listless shake of her head. “No thanks, I’ll skip breakfast.” Driscoll caught the frostiness in her demeanor and concluded that Jayden had yet to smooth things over.

After departing from the house, Elyse took a taxi to a secluded park, dedicating her morning to practice. Later, she made her way to a university practice room for a planned meeting with Cody.

Inside, Cody was engaging with two students. Noticing Elyse, he quickly dismissed them with a nod. “Your students?” Elyse asked, a hint of curiosity coloring her tone.

“Not quite,” Cody answered, his eyes briefly scanning a document before him. “I’m just subbing for a friend this week. Those two were here to pepper me with questions.”

Elyse nodded, a pang of envy for the students able to seek Cody’s advice—a privilege she wished for herself.

“How’s your practice of Erlknig?” Cody inquired, setting aside the document and fixing his gaze on her, full of genuine interest.

Elyse's nerves spiked as she cradled her violin. "I've put everything into this. Today I'm here to let you hear the results."

Cody nodded approvingly. "Alright, let's get started." He wasted no time, gesturing for her to begin without further preamble.

Her hands trembled slightly as she took the violin out, drew in a deep breath, and commenced playing. The piece Erlknig was notoriously challenging, known for tripping up even seasoned professionals with its complexity. Despite her talent, Elyse had never before tackled a piece so demanding.

As the last note faded, she bit her lip and looked at Cody with a mix of hope and guilt. With a teasing smile, Cody asked, "Did you notice your mistakes?"

She nodded, more embarrassed than before. It wasn't just one error; there were several. Cody gently took the violin from her, ready to demonstrate.

"Let me show you something," he said, explaining every detail. Invigorated by his instruction, Elyse immediately attempted the piece again, this time with a marked improvement in her performance.

"I'm getting better!" she exclaimed, surprised and elated at her own progress. Her natural aptitude was undeniable, reminiscent of someone Cody once knew well. For a moment, seeing his old friend's reflection in Elyse's talent left him momentarily dazed.

Elyse's prompt brought him back to reality, and he cleared his throat to mask his momentary lapse. "Good, you did a great job. But..." He hesitated, then shifted the conversation, sensing a weight in her previous performance. "Are you in a bad mood? Your music sounded so heavy, almost like it wasn't meant to lift spirits."

Recalling the previous day's events, Elyse reflexively denied any distress. "No, nothing's been bothering me."

Cody's gaze pierced through her facade as he spoke with an understanding tone. "You don't have to lie to me. I know your music; your emotions are woven into it. I can hear the pain and sadness."

Elyse was taken aback. She hadn't expected Cody to discern her emotional state simply through her violin playing. His insight affirmed his mastery, yet it left her uneasy. She hesitated to share her troubles. The issues between her and Jayden were theirs to resolve; outside interference wouldn't mend their rift.

Cody, recognizing her reluctance to divulge more, didn't press further. Instead, he made a single request for her to perform "Erlkönig" for him again in a week. The invitation left Elyse puzzled and intrigued. Was Cody subtly offering her tutelage? She recalled hearing about Cody's decision to choose an apprentice during the last selection period; he hadn't taken anyone on then.

The thought of asking outright if she was being considered as his apprentice flitted through her mind, but embarrassment restrained her. She worried that such a question might seem presumptuous, as if she were flattering herself.

With these thoughts swirling in her mind, she bid Cody farewell. Carrying her violin case, Elyse wandered aimlessly across the campus. She wasn't ready to go home and face Jayden, preferring instead to while away the hours in solitude.

Just as she was about to exit the campus grounds, a car pulled up in front of her, and the window slowly rolled down to reveal a familiar face. She recognized the man instantly—he was the enthusiastic fan who had sent her flowers.

Elyse glanced around nervously, hoping someone might be nearby to offer assistance. Noticing her apprehension, the man quickly introduced himself, hoping to ease her fears. "Don't be nervous, Miss Lloyd. My name is Pearce Benson, and I'm a big fan of your work."

Elyse eyed him warily. "How did you know where to find me?"

Pearce offered a gentle smile, hoping to appear nonthreatening. "I'm an honored professor here at the university. I just happened to be here for some work today and was surprised to see you."

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Elyse stepped back, clearly skeptical of Pearce's words. Exiting the car, Pearce asked her, "Ms. Lloyd, are you free now? If so, I can verify my identity for you. I'm headed to the university office to deal with something."

Elyse gave him a peculiar look. “Why should I accompany you? I don’t even know you.”

Pearce’s grin widened. “Your music has deeply moved me. I’d like to befriend you.” His genuine compliment touched Elyse, fulfilling her desire for recognition in music, something Pearce was the first to offer. After some hesitation, Elyse reluctantly agreed, “I’ll trust you this time.”

Pearce breathed a sigh of relief. “I won’t ask you to ride in my car to avoid scaring you. Let’s walk there.”

Elyse nodded in agreement, hesitant to accept a ride, fearing potential danger. Pearce was considerate, engaging in conversation to ease Elyse’s unease. Elyse also noticed that Pearce seemed both physically and mentally well-off. His calm and steady demeanor reminded her of her husband.

Pearce continued chatting, noticing Elyse’s distraction. He candidly said, “Ms. Lloyd, talking to you feels like speaking to family. I can’t help but keep talking.”

Elyse was momentarily taken aback but didn’t fully grasp his meaning. “Have you played the violin since childhood?” Pearce asked.

Elyse pondered briefly. “Somewhat.”

Pearce praised her talent. “Your parents must be music enthusiasts, right?”

Without hesitation, Elyse replied, “Nope. My parents have no knowledge of music whatsoever.” In fact, Lanny and Glenda had no interest in music, let alone classical music.

Pearce was surprised. “Really? Could I see a photo of your parents, please?”

Startled by Pearce’s request, Elyse became wary once more. She wondered if he was being a pervert, probing into her family background so soon. Realizing she might have misjudged, Pearce clarified, “I’m simply curious about what your parents look like since they’ve raised such a talented individual like yourself.”

After a moment of hesitation, Elyse decided to trust him. Odd as he may seem, she doubted he would pose any threat to Lanny and Glenda. She showed Pearce a photo before promptly putting her phone away.

Pearce studied her for a moment before speaking thoughtfully. “Forgive me if this comes off as rude, but I’m curious. Why do you bear no resemblance to your parents?”

Elyse was taken aback, as Jayden had once made a similar observation. In a resigned tone, she replied, “They are indeed my biological parents.”

Pearce didn’t respond immediately. Instead, he walked over the fallen golden leaves, emotions flickering in his eyes. Suddenly, he said, “You don’t resemble your parents at all, but you remind me of a family member.”

Confused, Elyse asked, “What did you say?”

Pearce masked his emotions behind a smile. “I said that you resemble someone I know. That’s why you give me a sense of family.”

Elyse breathed a sigh of relief once she grasped his meaning. Accompanying Pearce to the university, she discovered that he was indeed a professor set to hold a seminar the following week. Once they completed his tasks, Pearce turned to her. “See, I’ve been honest with you, haven’t I?”

Elyse nodded in agreement. “Yes, you have.”

Glancing at his watch, Pearce suggested, “It’s lunchtime. I believe there was a misunderstanding earlier. Would you join me for lunch to make amends?”

After a brief consideration, Elyse nodded. “Certainly. My treat.”

Pearce shook his head. “No, I never allow a woman to pay for my meal.”

They settled into a restaurant close to the university and placed their orders. Pearce’s gaze remained fixed on Elyse, unnoticed by her initially. After some time passed, she couldn’t ignore it any longer and asked, “Why are you staring at me like that?”

The longer Pearce looked, the more he saw a resemblance to that person. With controlled enthusiasm, Pearce offered a gentle smile. “Oh, it’s nothing. You’re quite captivating, Ms. Lloyd. I find it hard to look away. Have I offended you?”

Elyse didn’t mince words. “Yes, you have, Mr. Benson. I’m married, and my husband and I are deeply in love.”

“Deeply in love? I heard rumors that you two don’t get along. That he chose his ex-girlfriend over you. Is that true?” His words drained the color from Elyse’s face.

The upper-class social circle was unforgivingly small. Just the night before, she had hosted a birthday party with many guests, none of whom were oblivious to her discomfort. She hadn’t anticipated the news spreading so quickly, leaving her utterly unprepared.

Chapter 257:

Noticing Elyse’s discomfort, Pearce said, “Ms. Lloyd, please don’t feel down. Getting to know you has convinced me you’re truly remarkable. It’s your husband’s loss if he doesn’t see your value.”

Elyse chose not to respond. In her opinion, while Jayden had his flaws and had hurt her, their issues were personal. She didn’t think it appropriate for others to judge him. Elyse shifted their conversation in another direction. “You seem quite keen on learning about me. What’s your intention?”

Pearce didn’t hesitate in his reply. “I find you intriguing.”

Elyse gaped at him. She nearly thought he was a creep. His blunt admission surprised her. Elyse reiterated, “As I’ve mentioned, I’m married. I have a husband.”

Pearce responded candidly, “I’ve heard things aren’t going well between you two.”

Elyse sounded even more disheartened. “I have no intentions of divorcing him.”

After a moment’s thought, Pearce said, “Ms. Lloyd, as someone who admires you, I believe you deserve someone far better. You shouldn’t have to suffer through a poor marriage.”

His comment infuriated her. “And so? If it’s alright with you, I’d like to meet your parents and see what sort of family raised such an exceptional person.”

While Pearce spoke, his face showed a hint of mischief, and he emphasized the last part of his statement. Elyse, however, failed to notice it. Massaging her forehead, she felt a headache coming on.

“Forget about it. There’s no way we can be together. And please stop making those comments. If my husband finds out...” Elyse paused briefly, then continued in a somber tone. “He wouldn’t let you off easily.”

Pearce was well aware of Jayden. The Owen family held significant influence, but Pearce pondered the chance if the Owen family were to clash with his family. He kept these thoughts to himself, realizing Elyse might have misunderstood him. It wasn’t a significant concern. As long as he could uncover the relationship between Elyse and that person, he planned to take her away at the first opportunity.

Pearce remained silent, smiling, which unsettled Elyse. Pearce expressed that he saw her as part of his family. However, Elyse was horrified by his presence, sensing an overpowering aura about him. She resolved to keep her distance from him in the future.

After an uncomfortable lunch, Elyse quickly made up an excuse and hurried away from him. Pearce let her go without protest. Watching her leave, a smile crept across his face. He lingered at the table for a short while before standing and exiting the restaurant. Outside, he unexpectedly ran into Cody.

Cody seemed momentarily taken aback upon seeing him but soon composed himself and greeted Pearce warmly. “It’s been a while, Pearce. How is your father doing?”

“Thank you for asking,” Pearce replied, driven by curiosity. “Mr. Tucker, have you taken on any new apprentices?”

Cody thought of Elyse momentarily and then answered, “I have someone in mind. Still need to observe.”

Pearce nodded in understanding. “I see. Would you mind introducing your apprentice to me sometime?”

Cody agreed and then continued on his way into the restaurant. After Cody left, Pearce took out his phone and started scrolling through photos of Elyse and Cody performing together. He stared at the screen for a while and whispered to himself, “Is it fate?”

After leaving the restaurant, Elyse received a call from Jayden. She was about to answer but abruptly hung up, remembering the incident from the night before.

Meanwhile, Theo was sitting at the table facing Zandra calmly. Zandra crossed her arms and stared at him for a moment before slamming her hand on the table in frustration.

“What did you promise me before? You assured me you wouldn’t give Miss Jimenez any reason to complain about you and you’d proceed with the wedding. This morning, her father called to tell me you’ve upset her.”

Zandra, well-connected in high society, had already heard about the mess at Elyse’s birthday party. She said firmly, “You’re still hung up on Elyse Lloyd, aren’t you? Trying to rekindle your relationship with her?”

Theo listened to her accusations without reacting initially. After a brief pause, he admitted, “You’re right. I haven’t gotten over Elyse. Seeing her mistreated at the party and neglected by Jayden Owen made me feel distressed.”

Zandra was expecting a lame excuse from Theo and was taken aback by his blunt admission. Frowning deeply, she asked, “Do you know what you mean by saying that?”

Chapter 258:

Without any hesitation, Theo nodded, “Yes, I know what I’m talking about.” This response aggravated Zandra, her breathing becoming heavy. She questioned, “You promised to marry Miss Jimenez. What made you change your mind?”

Theo paused for a moment before responding casually, “I must confess, I’m in love with Elyse. She’s the one who has my heart, and I can’t see myself with anyone else.”

Zandra, irked by his declaration, snapped back sharply, "You love Elyse Lloyd? If that were true, you wouldn't have gotten involved with another woman. What's her name, Kaelyn Bennett, right?" She continued with increased frustration, "If you really loved Elyse, why did you leave her on your wedding day for Kaelyn? My silly son, do you even understand what you're doing?"

Theo opened his mouth but said nothing. He knew his mother was right; that was exactly how he had treated Elyse before. He had neglected her, hurt her, and let her down time and again. And now he was facing the consequences of his actions. With a bitter smile, Theo admitted, "You think I'm stupid, don't you? I should have realized sooner. But it's only now that I truly understand how much I love her."

Zandra snorted and commented dismissively, "Yes, it's ridiculous. Elyse is now Jayden's wife. You need to apologize to Miss Jimenez, win her back, and make her fall for you again."

Theo remained silent, meeting Zandra's gaze quietly. Zandra, sensing his thoughts, slammed her hand on the table again, insisting, "How many times do I need to tell you? Elyse is married. There's no future for you two."

"She may be married, but she can get a divorce," Theo said firmly. "Jayden is disabled. Elyse won't find happiness with him. I'm the only one who can truly make her happy."

Zandra's eyes widened in shock at his words. "You abandoned Miss Jimenez to chase after a married woman? I can't believe you're my son. How foolish!"

Theo had made up his mind, deeply regretting how he saw Elyse being mistreated by Jayden.

Theo expressed his regret, realizing his love for her too late and pushing her into the arms of another man. "I will personally visit Freda's family and explain everything. As for Elyse, please don't try to stop me, Mom. I am serious about this," he said firmly.

Zandra was outraged. She couldn't believe that her son would reject a single woman from a prestigious family in favor of pursuing a married one. Zandra attempted to persuade him, saying, "Theo, you're too young to understand what true love is. I doubt your feelings for Elyse are real; it seems more like a case of possessiveness. Perhaps I've been too pushy about your dating life. Alright, I won't pressure you to find a girlfriend anymore. Just take some time to calm down."

Zandra was about to leave, but Theo called out to her. "Mom, it's you who doesn't understand what love is," he said firmly.

Zandra froze, looking back in disbelief. “What did you just say?”

Theo remained silent for a moment. Initially, he suspected his feelings were just possessive. Seeing Elyse quickly marry someone else had left him feeling uncomfortable and wanting her back. However, over time he realized his feelings were genuine, particularly when Elyse shared intimate details about her life with Jayden. Theo became consumed by jealousy whenever he heard Elyse speak fondly of Jayden, confirming his true feelings. He understood he truly loved Elyse; her influence on his emotions was undeniable.

Looking earnestly into Zandra’s eyes, Theo continued, “When I was in school, you asked me to select my friends based on their family backgrounds and characters, and I complied. You advised me to associate with wealthy relatives and disregard the poorer ones, and I did just that. I picked my friends and acquaintances to meet your expectations because you prioritized benefits above all, ignoring anyone who couldn’t offer you any advantage. But now I can’t marry just for financial interests.”

With a cold expression, Zandra responded sharply, “Don’t forget you come from a wealthy family. Financial interests will never betray you.”

Theo smiled wryly, his eyes reflecting a deep sadness. “Exactly. That’s why I treated her carelessly when we dated. I knew she didn’t meet your standards and would never be approved as my wife. I ignored my love for her, letting her bear the weight of my frustrations and disappointments.”

Chapter 259:

Zandra found Theo’s perspective ridiculous. “You’re too young to realize that love is the most delicate thing in the world. It cannot withstand any real trials. You’re merely being blinded by the idea of love.”

Theo responded calmly, “Life is far too long. The thought of spending decades with a woman I don’t love, having children with her, and raising them together until we’re old fills me with dread.”

Zandra couldn’t understand why he found this so appalling. To her, these were the necessary sacrifices to uphold family alliances. She scoffed, “Dreadful? That’s exactly how your dad and I have lived our lives. Do you think that’s terrible?”

Theo answered, “Dad would rather spend years in the forest than come home. He finds more joy in watching a plant grow than in living with you. Can you honestly say there’s love in your marriage?”

Hearing that, Zandra’s eyes widened with anger. She stormed over to Theo and slapped him across the face. The slap left a clear mark on Theo’s cheek. Zandra was visibly shaking with anger and bitterness as she glared at Theo. Her son’s words had deeply wounded her, the pain evident and fresh.

Zandra couldn’t confidently argue that Theo was wrong, fully aware that her husband didn’t love her and that their marriage was a matter of convenience. Thankfully, her husband remained faithful. Despite not loving the woman he married, he never sought comfort in the arms of another. But he didn’t like to be close to her.

After Theo was born, he took his equipment and went to a distant mountain forest for research. For years, Zandra had never acknowledged that her husband didn’t love her. She preserved her self-respect. Anyone who dared to gossip about her situation faced her anger. So, no one had brought it up in recent years. She had almost managed to convince herself that she was cherished in her marriage. Night after night, she would wait, hoping her husband would return home after completing his research.

But now, with Theo confronting the truth so bluntly, she felt deep shame. She could no longer hide her embarrassment. Theo was unfazed by the slap; he had anticipated it from Zandra after his comments. Feeling the numbness in his cheek, he said, “Mom, you know living in a marriage without love is miserable. Why can’t you understand and let me be with the one I truly love?”

Zandra, masking her embarrassment with stubbornness, replied, “I’m doing this for your own good. You’ve always followed my advice and had a successful life because of it. Your friends and relatives have been there to support you. Freda is the best wife you can have.” She clenched her teeth and added, “Don’t choose a path that leads to suffering.”

Theo realized Zandra was unable to see his point of view. At that moment, he stopped trying to convince her. He had initially planned to persuade his mom before reaching out to Elyse. After all, when he was in love with Elyse, Zandra had treated Elyse harshly. Now Theo decided it was time to set aside his efforts with his mother. He would handle things with Elyse first, then try to persuade his mother afterward.

Seeing Theo didn’t listen to her, Zandra sneered, “Why do you insist on making your life difficult? Are you tired of living comfortably? Don’t say I didn’t warn you; true love is hard to get. Everyone weighs the pros and cons of marriage. Do you really think you’ll be the lucky one?”

Theo stood up and said, "I don't know if I can find true love again. I once had it but didn't value it. Now, I deeply regret it." Stubborn, Zandra realized she couldn't sway him despite her efforts. She grabbed her purse, ready to leave but paused at the door to add, "You owe Freda an explanation. You can't afford to lose the partnership with her family. I don't care who you end up with, but if you jeopardize our cooperation, you'll be the one to make amends." With that, Zandra stormed out in anger.

Theo thought he was ridiculous. He regretted not understanding his feelings for Elyse sooner. Why hadn't he realized it earlier? If he had, perhaps Elyse wouldn't be married to another man now. But it wasn't too late; he believed he could still make things right. He then took out his phone and dialed Freda's number.

Chapter 260:

Freda received Theo's call and quickly arranged a meeting place before ending the conversation. Theo, wearing a mask, arrived at the designated spot. Freda was already there, dressed in a light-colored floral-patterned dress, her hair neatly done up, and her makeup subtly applied.

For a moment, Theo mistook her for Elyse. Elyse liked dressing up that way, but it didn't quite fit Freda. Elyse, with her gentle and easygoing nature, suited such soft styles. Freda, on the other hand, was vibrant and chatty, her usual look more bold and captivating. This subdued style didn't reflect her true personality.

Looking at Freda, Theo said indifferently, "Miss Jimenez, this outfit doesn't seem like you. Please change to your usual style."

Freda felt a wave of embarrassment. She had researched Elyse's favorite styles and dressed accordingly to impress Theo. However, Theo noticed it immediately and pointed it out directly. Embarrassed and annoyed, Freda forced a smile and asked, "You used to call me Freda. Why have you suddenly started calling me Miss Jimenez?"

After a brief silence, Theo decided to be honest. "I've reconsidered everything. I think it's best we end things and go back to how things were before."

Surprised, Freda inquired, "Why? Didn't we agree to date more and see how things go?"

Theo nodded. “Yes, we did agree, but I’ve realized we’re not compatible. If I’ve hurt you, I’m ready to make it up to you.”

Freda’s smile vanished, and her voice turned cold. “Give me a reason. I won’t accept this without one.”

Theo replied, “I’ve realized who I truly love. The woman I love is Elyse Lloyd. As a psychology major, you understand the concept of exclusivity. I don’t want to be with anyone but Elyse.”

Freda stared at him in disbelief. “Elyse Lloyd? You’re dumping me because of her?” Her tone made Theo frown. He clarified, “We were never officially together. It’s not fair to say I’m dumping you. Elyse is married. You can’t be with her. And you are still choosing to love her.”

Freda tried to confirm with him again.

Theo’s patience was wearing thin, puzzled why everyone was so surprised that he wanted to win Elyse back. Jayden, Elyse’s husband, was disabled. Theo couldn’t understand how Elyse could settle for someone in such a condition. Though Elyse often spoke highly of how well Jayden treated her, Theo suspected she felt compelled to say that because she was married to him. Surely she wouldn’t criticize her husband openly. Elyse was too considerate to ever publicly embarrass her husband, whether it was Jayden or any other man.

Theo’s words disheartened Freda. She had feelings for him, which was the only reason she had entertained the idea of a relationship with him. To move their relationship forward, she even wore a dress she disliked just to impress him. She would have gone to great lengths for him, yet she felt let down by the outcome. Freda bit her lip, struggling to come to terms with the situation. Being from a wealthy background, she was unaccustomed to such rejection.

Seeing her silence, Theo assumed she had come to accept the reality. He stood up and said, “Miss Jimenez, take care.”

Freda hesitantly asked, “Aren’t you interested in my family’s resources?”

Theo paused for a moment. “I’m sorry for any inconvenience. Your family is free to terminate our partnership. I won’t oppose.”

Freda's anger flared. "What's so special about Elyse Lloyd that you'd cancel a project worth 100 billion dollars? Don't you want to make money? That's profit. That's money."

Freda's focus on financial gain reminded Theo of Zandra, who also prioritized wealth above all. Freda scoffed, "You're sacrificing a fortune for a married woman, Theo Ward. Are you so lovestruck?"

Theo sighed and said, "Miss Jimenez, perhaps you've never been in love, but love can make even the richest sums seem trivial."

A sarcastic smile appeared on the corner of Freda's mouth. She thought Theo was hopelessly in love. However, she remembered that he had left Elyse at the altar. Otherwise, why would Elyse have ended up with Jayden?

Theo could read her mind. He understood that others might not grasp or even ridicule his feelings. He even despised himself at times. Regardless of whether Elyse would reciprocate, he was determined to try winning her back. Surely, he couldn't lose out to a "cripple" like Jayden, could he?