

Bound love 431

Chapter 431:

Fiona contemplated leaving soon but recollected encountering her savior around ten o'clock last night. She figured that if she waited until ten o'clock today, she might come across him again. After pondering for a moment, she responded, "Around ten o'clock."

Gavin was somewhat taken aback, as Fiona had been practicing with a casual and careless demeanor of late. He nodded reassuringly, remarking, "Then I shall accompany you to assess your progress."

Fiona hastily interjected, "No, I prefer to practice alone. Your presence would unsettle me."

Upon hearing this, Irving approached, perturbed. "What's the matter with you? Tomorrow is a big day. Do you not desire our guidance to address your deficiencies?"

Fiona considered herself not as unsettled as Elyse and thus not in need of their guidance. Nevertheless, she simply stated, "You're both aware of my shortcomings. Rest assured, I won't impede your progress."

After a moment of silence, Gavin ultimately opted to honor Fiona's wishes. Following half an hour of companionship, he departed. Irving trailed him outside.

Fiona remained the sole occupant of the studio. Enjoying her newfound freedom, Fiona gently set aside the violin and commenced brewing coffee. Amidst days filled with rigorous practice, she yearned for the simple pleasure of savoring a finely brewed cup.

Upon returning home, Elyse enjoyed dinner before retiring to her room for the evening. Tracy had intended to inform Elyse of her decision to watch her performance the next day, only to discover Elyse was already fast asleep. Thus, Tracy sought out Jayden in the living room and inquired, "Will you watch Elyse's performance tomorrow?"

Jayden furrowed his brow, replying, "No, I have a meeting scheduled at the Owen Group."

Perplexed, Tracy questioned, “You’re still involved with Owen Group? I thought you had severed ties with them.”

Jayden remained silent, knowing the upcoming meeting would pose challenges for him. His countenance darkened, and after prolonged silence, he instructed, “Can you send her flowers for me tomorrow?”

Tracy nodded. Contemplating Shaun’s recent proximity, she hesitated momentarily before requesting, “Could you arrange for two bodyguards to accompany me tomorrow? I fear Shaun.”

Jayden assented with a nod. “Of course.”

Tracy breathed a sigh of relief. She had refrained from leaving the villa to avoid encountering Shaun in recent days. However, she could no longer contain herself. Coincidentally, Elyse had a competition scheduled for the following day, and Tracy intended to attend.

At one o’clock in the morning, Glenda arrived at a hospital’s inpatient department, clad in a black windbreaker, hat, and mask. Ever since Elyse embraced her true identity, Glenda and Lanny had refrained from causing any disruptions. Upon learning of Elyse’s upcoming competition and her complete dedication to it, Glenda recognized the opportune moment she had been anticipating.

Lanny harbored a persistent desire to eliminate Dorothy. Even if she was now still in a coma, he still yearned for her departure from this world. Only by eliminating her could he effectively bury the secrets of the past. As a direct beneficiary of past events, Glenda readily concurred with Lanny’s sentiments.

Under the cloak of night, Glenda clandestinely infiltrated the hospital with the intent to terminate Dorothy.

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The inpatient department was nearly empty at that hour. Even the nurse on duty had nodded off, failing to notice Glenda's presence. Glenda's mind replayed Lanny's words: "Just take off the oxygen mask."

The act would leave Dorothy lifeless within minutes. However, it still amounted to murder. The realization that she was about to take a life made Glenda's conscience writhe in turmoil.

She tiptoed into Dorothy's VIP ward and approached her bed slowly. Dorothy appeared frail and skeletal, her life prolonged only by the nutrients flowing through her IV, her body lying in a prolonged coma. Glenda reached out her fingers, nearly grazing the mask, but she paused, her hand suspended midair.

She found herself unable to follow through. The thought of actually killing someone was unbearable. Frustration welled up inside her. It was a simple act of removing an oxygen mask—why couldn't she bring herself to do it?

Glenda inhaled deeply, attempting to steady her nerves. Her thoughts drifted to Mabel, her young daughter who had just lost her most cherished career. If she didn't step in to help, who would? Perhaps Lanny?

They had shared many years together, and Glenda felt she understood him completely. Self-love governed him. If Mabel ever became a burden to his personal goals, he would abandon her without a second thought.

With Mabel in mind, Glenda's resolve hardened. She meticulously removed the oxygen mask from Dorothy's face. Initially, Dorothy breathed evenly, showing no signs of distress. But then, her breathing became erratic, her heart's rhythm faltered, and soon, the heart monitor started blaring its warning frantically.

That was when Dorothy's eyes snapped open, fixing Glenda with a terrifying stare. Glenda recoiled in horror. Dorothy seemed like a demon emerging from the depths of hell itself. She reached out with a gaunt hand, aiming to grasp Glenda.

Startled, Glenda screamed, shoved Dorothy away, spun on her heels, and dashed for the door. However, the alarming sounds had already drawn the attention of the hospital staff and the bodyguards Jayden had posted. Glenda collided with Jayden's bodyguard just as she exited the ward.

He seized her arm, glancing back at the chaos inside where the medical team was frantically trying to save Dorothy. Then his gaze hardened as he turned to face a visibly shaken Glenda and said icily, “Mrs. Lloyd, you need to come with me.”

Bewildered and alarmed, Glenda sputtered, “Why are you detaining me? I was just visiting Dorothy. I haven’t done anything wrong! Why must I go with you?”

Lanny had assured her there were no cameras in the VIP ward. Even if she had tampered with the oxygen mask, no one would find any evidence. She couldn’t be blamed for anything.

With a steely look, the bodyguard replied, “You need to explain to my boss why you took off the oxygen mask. I need to clear this up to do my job.”

Fury overtook Glenda, and she retorted loudly, losing her composure, “I didn’t do anything! Stop accusing me of such things. How could I harm anyone? I just wanted to check on her recovery.”

The bodyguard smirked. Though there were no official cameras in the VIP ward, Jayden had installed his own. He had clear footage of Glenda’s actions.

Ignoring her protests, he forcefully led her out of the hospital. Panicking, Glenda began to cry as she rummaged through her bag for her phone, desperately dialing Lanny for help, but he didn’t answer.

A sinking feeling overwhelmed her; she feared she might have been abandoned.

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Glenda’s complexion turned ghostly pale. As the bodyguard took her to Jayden, she could barely keep herself upright. Seeing her in such a state, Jayden, seated in his wheelchair, looked at her curiously and inquired, “What do you have to say?”

Inside, Glenda was filled with terror, but realizing there were no cameras in the ward gave her a bit of bravery. She straightened her back defiantly and declared, “I have

nothing to say to you. You're holding me here against my will. Let me go, or I'll call the cops."

Seeing Glenda's disregard for the situation, Jayden responded in a surprisingly good mood. "Funny, I was about to call the police myself. Who do you think they'll side with?"

Glenda's eyes widened as she asked, "Why are you calling the police?"

Jayden stroked his chin while a sly smile played on his lips. "You're a murder suspect. Why wouldn't I call them?"

Between clenched teeth, Glenda retorted, "You're just throwing accusations at me. Do you have any proof? Can you prove I killed anyone?"

Jayden nodded confidently. "Yes, I have proof. The footage of you removing Dorothy's oxygen mask was sent directly to my computer. I can turn you over to the police whenever I choose."

Glenda, shocked, stammered, "How... how could you?"

Jayden, recalling how Elyse would speak to him, adopted her typical tone and said innocently, "If you don't believe me, feel free to call the police."

A shiver ran down Glenda's spine. Something about Jayden's tone made him seem utterly mysterious.

Jayden grabbed a pen from the table and briefly scanned a document. "You're staying at my place tonight. If Dorothy dies, you could face life in prison."

Overwhelmed, Glenda's legs gave out, and she collapsed to the floor. She dug her hand into her pocket, clutching her phone tightly, wondering if Jayden really had evidence linking her to a murder. Glenda wanted to verify it, yet fear held her back. She remained seated on the floor as her body shook.

Jayden regarded Glenda with disdain, as if she were mere garbage. He pressed the bell to summon Driscoll. He instructed Driscoll, "Take her to the basement. Keep me updated on any news about Dorothy."

Driscoll nodded, grabbed Glenda by the shoulders, and hauled her out of the room. Terrified, Glenda cried out, "You can't do this to me! I'm Elyse's aunt! Elyse Lloyd! Come and save me! Your husband is trying to take my life!"

Driscoll frowned and, with visible annoyance, covered Glenda's mouth. Elyse had an important competition the next day and had gone to bed early. He couldn't allow Glenda to bother her.

Once Glenda was taken away, Jayden finally found some quiet. He collected the documents and resumed his work, patiently awaiting news on Dorothy's rescue. Four hours later, news arrived that Dorothy had been successfully rescued and returned to her ward.

Jayden stared at his phone, lost in thought. It appeared his suspicions were correct—Dorothy knew something that had prompted Lanny and Glenda to try silencing her. But what exactly did she know?

After a moment of contemplation, Jayden rubbed his tired eyes and decided to head back to his room for some rest.

In the early morning, Elyse woke up to find Jayden still deeply asleep. She carefully got out of bed, slipped out of the house quietly, and made her way to the competition venue without disturbing anyone.

Elyse reached the venue early, but she wasn't the earliest. When she arrived, she saw Mariana sitting by the entrance of the building. Her fingers were moving gracefully over the strings of her violin.

Elyse walked over, pulled out the breakfast she had just bought, and watched Mariana. Mariana was the one who had accused Rebekah of cheating, though she had no proof. Rebekah had also defeated her in the previous competition.

Mariana glanced at Elyse and immediately recognized her. "Do you know Rebekah?" she inquired.

Elyse, surprised that Mariana spoke to her, nodded. "I've met her. Why do you ask?"

With one hand on her hip, Mariana laughed boldly. "I've seen your scores. You're much better than Rebekah, but that woman is trouble. She will come after you."

Elyse was taken aback. "How do you know that? Do you have any information?"

Mariana shook her head. "I don't know her exact plans. It's just a gut feeling," she responded.

Mariana's smile was so bright that Elyse found herself at a loss for words.

About thirty minutes later, the entrance of the concert hall began to fill with contestants. The previously calm atmosphere now buzzed with palpable tension. Just then, Fiona appeared, looking exhausted with dark circles under her eyes. Noticing this, Elyse asked in surprise, "Didn't you get enough rest?"

Fiona shook her head, frustration etched across her face. She had waited for that man until midnight, but he never appeared. It made her feel utterly foolish.

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Fiona held back her words, and Elyse chose not to pry. Ten minutes later, the concert hall's doors swung open. One by one, the contestants entered, each holding their instruments. Their faces were etched with determination. Amid the crowd, Elyse stood with her head high, unshaken. The rankings from the previous round determined the grouping and performance order for the contestants in this semifinal round.

Elyse was assigned to Group A alongside Rebekah. Upon realizing Elyse was her competition, Rebekah's face registered shock, which was quickly followed by a fierce glint in her eyes. "It seems you just keep showing up."

Elyse pressed her lips together and responded, "The feeling is mutual. I'd rather we weren't grouped together either."

Memories of Mariana's warnings from that morning made Elyse's frown deepen. Could Rebekah really stoop to underhanded tactics?

Lost in thought, Elyse was startled when Rebekah approached and inquired, "What piece have you chosen to perform?"

Elyse eyed her warily and asked, "Why do you want to know?"

Rebekah's smile didn't reach her eyes as she replied, "Just looking out for you."

Stepping back, Elyse retorted, "That's not your business."

Elyse walked off and soon bumped into Darren. Curious, she inquired, "What group are you in?"

"Group B," Darren replied.

This took Elyse by surprise; Darren was grouped with Fiona. Observing that Darren's fingers were steady, she inquired with some concern, "Are you feeling nervous?"

Darren shook his head and admitted, "I think you were right. I didn't know myself that well. I'm more excited than nervous."

Elyse almost confessed that she had made it up, but reconsidering, she decided it was better that Darren wasn't feeling nervous.

Then, with a smile, she teased, "We'll get to see your true skills this time."

Darren flashed a confident grin and declared, "Of course, it's time I showed you what I am capable of."

Feeling reassured, Elyse was about to relax when she heard the host call her name. She then hurried toward the stage. Alongside her and Rebekah, there were three other contestants. Their eyes flickered nervously toward the judges. Elyse, having put in ample practice recently, was confident her performance would hold up well.

The judge in the center picked up the microphone, glanced over the contestants, and announced, “Group A, your piece is The Czardas. First contestant, please get set.”

Elyse and her fellow contestants exchanged shocked looks. They had submitted their chosen tunes well in advance. When had it changed to a predetermined selection?

Backstage, other contestants getting ready were also taken aback and murmured among themselves about why the organizers had suddenly changed the rule.

In the audience, Irving, equally puzzled, turned to Gavin and asked, “When did they change the rules? Why wasn’t I informed? Are you aware of this?”

Gavin looked just as bewildered. “I’ve never heard about this either.”

“Do you think she can make it? I have never heard her play The Czardas,” said Irving, his expression fraught with concern.

Gavin shook his head and added, “If she’s not familiar with the piece, we can pretty much guess the outcome.”

Irving’s expression grew grim. He pursed his lips and was at a loss for words.

Onstage, the host checked the schedule and said to Elyse, “You’re up first. Please begin whenever you’re ready.”

Elyse nodded, drew her violin from its case, and prepared to play. Just then, she caught a glimpse of Rebekah’s smug expression. Confusion washed over her. It was unfair for the contestants to learn about the change in the piece at the last moment—unless Rebekah had already prepared for The Czardas. But what were the odds of such a coincidence?

A sudden realization struck Elyse. She was taken aback by the thought, but she quickly shook it off. Right now, her priority was to perform.

She positioned her violin, took a deep breath, and began to play. In the auditorium, Gavin and Irving held their breath. Their attention was laser-focused as they dreaded that Elyse might falter.

Surprisingly, Elyse excelled in both the technical skills and the emotional depth of the piece. Midway through her performance, Irving's tension melted away. Gavin, now relaxed, touched his chin and smiled. "Her steady performance really caught me by surprise."

Onstage, Rebekah watched, taken aback by the flawlessness of Elyse's performance. She wondered how she had improved so quickly.

Rebekah's nerves only flared briefly. After all, she had an ace up her sleeve. No matter how well Elyse performed, Rebekah was confident she would outshine her.

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Elyse delivered a solid performance and moved aside after her turn. Rebekah, donning a silver dress that sparkled with diamonds, confidently strode to the center of the stage in her high heels.

As Rebekah started her routine, Elyse paid close attention to her playing. While Rebekah executed flawlessly, her performance lacked emotional depth. Quietly, Elyse reassured herself of her own skills, comparing favorably with Rebekah as she awaited the results.

After the initial five contestants of Group A completed their performances, it was time for Group B. Passing by Elyse, Fiona and Darren hurried to the stage. Stepping down, Elyse watched, hoping both would succeed; the thought of either being eliminated troubled her.

"The piece for Group B is 'Contemplation.' Please, the first contestant, prepare," the host announced.

Darren positioned himself at center stage, and with the first note, Elyse's face lit up with a smile. There wasn't a flicker of worry in him. Dressed not in his usual black but in a

pristine white suit, Darren resembled a refined prince bathed in the spotlight. In that moment, he seemed transformed, his talent shining through, captivating the audience.

“He’s incredible, isn’t he? He’s performing so well,” Vicky whispered, her makeup flawless as Elyse turned to look at her.

Elyse corrected her gently, “Darren has always been talented. He’s just been battling his nerves.”

Vicky shot her a dismissive look and sneered, “You’re too naive. Frankly, it’d be better if Darren were eliminated now. It seems more fitting for him.”

Elyse snapped, “How can you say that?”

Vicky chuckled, “Have you ever considered how devastating it would be for him if he were to make mistakes on the international stage?” She flipped her long hair back and smirked. “I’m just looking out for him. It’s better he embarrass himself here than on a global stage, don’t you think?”

Elyse frowned. “I think you just don’t want to see Darren succeed.”

Vicky erupted in laughter. “Exactly. I don’t want to see you succeed either. I hope both you and Darren are knocked out of the competition.”

Elyse retorted, “Well, you might end up disappointed.”

“We’ll see about that,” Vicky said with a mischievous glint in her eyes as she lifted the hem of her dress and walked away.

Elyse felt a sting from Vicky’s last look, sensing her malicious intent. Just then, Darren completed his performance, and it was Fiona’s turn to step up. Knowing Fiona’s capabilities, Elyse remained unruffled as Fiona began.

The competition was fierce, primarily between Fiona and Darren for the top spot. However, during her performance, Fiona slipped up!

Elyse's heart skipped a beat when she heard the error. She looked up, anxiety written across her face. In the audience, Irving clenched his fist, his voice tinged with disbelief. "How could Fiona falter? She's familiar with the piece. She should have nailed it."

Gavin's face was etched with deep lines of concern, his expression somber. "She shouldn't have made that mistake," he muttered.

The Champions Cup this year brimmed with exceptional talent, heightening the stakes for each contestant. Elyse, haunted by the fear of not advancing, diligently tackled her shortcomings, while Fiona stumbled in her strongest area. It was not a lapse of skill but of focus.

In a steady tone, Gavin suggested, "Speak with her after her performance. Ensure she understands the importance of this competition. There should be no mistake next time."

Irving scoffed dismissively. "Next time? Do you genuinely believe she has another chance? I seriously doubt she'll break into the top ten this year."

Gavin's silence was a tacit agreement with Irving's harsh assessment. Fiona's future in the competition hinged on the impending results.

As Group B concluded their rendition, it was Group C's turn to perform. Noticing Fiona's withdrawn demeanor, Elyse hesitated to express her own elation to Darren. She approached Fiona instead and gently asked, "Fiona, are you alright?"

Fiona briskly shook off Elyse's hand and strode away, wordless. As Elyse watched her depart, she felt a pang of helplessness, unsure how to offer solace. She remained rooted to the spot, shocked.

Darren approached, noting the tension. "She seemed upset. She just ignored you, didn't she?"

Elyse managed a weak smile. "It seems so."

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Elyse, concerned for Fiona, turned to Darren and said, "I'm going to check on her."

"Go ahead," Darren replied, exhaling heavily but making no move to stop her.

Quickly, Elyse followed Fiona, who was just ahead, disappearing into a dimly lit corridor. The sparse light cast a ghostly glow on Fiona's pale face. Approaching cautiously, Elyse tried to offer comfort. "Fiona, please, don't be upset."

"Get lost! Just stop bothering me!" Fiona snapped back, her hands covering her face as she doubled over in pain. Her voice, sharp and cutting, reverberated through the empty corridor.

Elyse, rooted to the spot, struggled to find the right words. After a pause, she ventured, "Try not to look on the dark side. Perhaps you'll move on to the next round."

"Get the hell out of my face! I don't want to see you. You're just making it worse!" Fiona's voice was thick with irritation, her agitation growing at the mere sight of Elyse.

Fiona pointed toward the corridor's exit door and shouted, "Just go! I can't stand to look at you."

Elyse quietly exited the corridor, realizing Fiona's distress was deeper than she'd anticipated. She sighed and turned to head back, but as she passed the restroom, someone emerged and collided with her.

Elyse nearly lost her balance but caught herself in time. "Sorry, I was lost in thought and didn't see you." Noticing a piece of paper on the floor, Elyse picked it up and handed it back to the man.

He smiled in gratitude. "Thanks."

Elyse shrugged off the incident and continued backstage to find Darren already there, seated and relaxed. He casually inquired about Fiona's condition, though he didn't delve too deep. After all, they were competitors, and his concern didn't run as deep as Elyse's.

They exchanged a few words, and as the competition drew to a close, they both waited anxiously for the results. Suddenly, a scandal erupted. A contestant was accused of conspiring with a judge to obtain their predetermined music piece ahead of time.

The rumor quickly spread among the contestants, sparking curiosity and whispers about who could be involved in such deceit.

From the crowd, Mariana's voice rose sharply. "Who else could it be but Rebekah Bentley? She was in my group during the first round. She messed up twice in one piece yet still scored higher than me. Who else but she could have cheated?"

Rebekah clenched her jaw and fired back, "Don't throw accusations without proof. I can sue you for defamation!"

Mariana just smirked, undeterred. "Then explain how else you could have done better than me?"

Caught in the middle, Rebekah shot a glance at Elyse, who stood bewildered by the exchange.

Elyse was baffled, catching Rebekah's stare. Was she being accused of cheating? Had Rebekah gone insane?

Backstage was bustling, yet the judges seemed unaffected as they continued scoring. Eventually, the results were in. The host summoned ten contestants to the stage for the final round, vying for the last eight spots for an international competition.

From below the stage, Elyse watched as Vicky, Darren, and Rebekah, along with Fiona, who had slipped up earlier, were called. Her name, however, was conspicuously absent. She stood, dumbfounded.

Onstage, Darren noticed Elyse was missing and saw Rebekah smirking. He was well aware of Rebekah's usual performance level. Rebekah had never even passed the internal competition at the Celestial Sounds Symphony, so how could she have outperformed Elyse?

Puzzled, Darren stepped forward and challenged, “Is this ranking truly reflective of our skills?”

Vicky rolled her eyes. “What else would it be based on?”

Darren, undeterred, gestured toward Rebekah and pressed, “If skill is the criterion, does Rebekah Bentley’s presence here seem justified to you?”

Vicky glanced at Rebekah. Though she found it odd, it didn’t personally affect her standings.

Rebekah defensively retorted, “What are you implying? That I don’t deserve to be here? My performance was flawless!”

Darren scowled. “But there were rumors of a contestant bribing judges to obtain the piece name early. Knowing your usual level, it’s plausible you’re involved.”

Rebekah, indignant, countered, “That’s absurd! I earned my place here honestly.”

Darren shot back, “Then how did you manage to outdo Elyse? You’re the least skilled among us in our orchestral group.”

The argument escalated until a judge finally slammed his hand down on the table, demanding, “Silence!”

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The judge fixed his gaze on Darren and inquired, “Are you questioning the authenticity and fairness of this competition?”

Darren nodded. “Yes, I believe there’s someone else who truly deserves to be here on this stage.”

After his response, he glanced at Elyse, feeling compelled to seek justice for her.

“Are you referring to the contestant named Elyse Lloyd?” the judge pressed.

Darren nodded again.

The judge picked up another document, briefly reviewed it, and announced, “Elyse’s performance was flawless. She is, without a doubt, the rightful winner.”

Vicky, who stood in the first-place position, was momentarily stunned. Her expression then shifted to one of cold disbelief. If Elyse was declared the winner, she would be relegated to second place.

The judge set down the document. “However, it appears this ranking was achieved through dishonest means. It’s regrettable, but we must disqualify her for violating the principles of fair competition.”

“What? This is absolutely impossible!” Gavin erupted, rising swiftly with an air of authority that enveloped him.

Irving stood and followed Gavin toward the judge’s panel. Unable to remain seated, Elyse rose as well. She had neither cheated nor bribed any judge for the competition.

With urgency, she approached the stage. “I demand a full investigation. I did not engage in any wrongdoing, and I categorically deny any accusations of cheating!”

The judge’s frown deepened, a look of displeasure crossing his features. “Initially, I was inclined to protect your reputation. However, you seem ungrateful for my discretion. Present the evidence of her bribery!”

A staff member promptly handed a photograph to Elyse.

Elyse gasped upon seeing the photo. Wasn’t this the man she had accidentally encountered outside the restroom earlier? The photo depicted her handing a note to the man, suggesting a clandestine exchange.

After examining the photo, Elyse protested, “I don’t know this man. We simply bumped into each other outside the restroom, and I helped him pick up something he dropped.”

With a stern expression, the judge declared, “He has confessed to everything. He claims you approached him to bribe him. Bring him here! Let’s see if you can maintain your denial with him present.”

When the man was brought in, Elyse crossed her arms and asked coldly, “You claim I bribed you, right? Then, show the evidence of our private conversation. And if I bribed you, what benefits did you receive? How much?”

The man, visibly unsettled by Elyse’s direct questioning, instinctively looked toward Rebekah on the stage, but she averted her eyes.

He hesitated before responding, “You contacted me. I don’t have any proof, but I’m sure it was you!”

Elyse, seeing the man’s determination to implicate her, lost her patience. She addressed the judge, “He can’t produce any solid evidence. A single photo isn’t sufficient. I reject the results of this competition.”

The judge’s panel descended into chaos. Without concrete evidence from the man, they couldn’t conclusively prove Elyse had cheated.

Gavin stepped forward and addressed the panel. “I demand a reevaluation of the competition results. Elyse is an apprentice under my instructor. It’s absurd to suspect her of cheating.”

The man scoffed loudly. “And who is your instructor that his apprentice should be above suspicion?”

Gavin replied calmly, “Cody Tucker. Do you really think a disciple of his would stoop to cheating? How absurd.”

Upon hearing Cody’s name, the man fell silent and turned his pleading gaze back to Rebekah.

Rebekah, however, continued to ignore him.

Irving, catching this interaction, jumped onto the stage and confronted Rebekah, “You’re the real cheater, aren’t you? He can’t take his eyes off you. Won’t you help him? If you don’t, he might be blacklisted from the industry.”

Rebekah shook her head. “Bullshit! I don’t even know him. Why are you accusing me? This is absurd.”

Panicking, the man blurted out, “Didn’t you promise to be my friend if I helped you frame her? I helped you reach the semifinal, and this is how you repay me?”

Rebekah clenched her teeth, frustrated by his foolish admission. Why confess their scheme now?

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Rebekah firmly denied knowing the man, but the tension in the room was palpable. Unable to remain seated, Mariana stormed onto the stage, exclaiming, “She stole my spot! She lacks the skill I possess, yet she advanced to the semifinal. I demand a reassessment!”

The judge, overwhelmed by the disruption, massaged his temples and announced, “Anyone questioning the results, step forward.”

Elyse and Mariana moved forward together, while Rebekah hesitated but eventually remained where she was.

Observing her reluctance, one judge inquired, “Are you satisfied with the results?”

As a finalist, Rebekah had no grievances. She replied flatly, “I did not cheat. My presence here is proof of my capability.”

The judge instructed, “Step forward. You cannot remain unaffected when you are the center of suspicion.”

Rebekah’s gaze hardened with anger and disdain as she looked at Mariana and Elyse. After a brief phone call, the judge declared, “We will have a rematch. Prove your skills, and we may adjust the rankings accordingly.”

Rebekah protested, “The results are final. I oppose a rematch.”

The judge’s stern reply came quickly, “Refusal means you reject the rules, and I will have to disqualify you.”

With clenched fists and a heavy heart, Rebekah had no option but to comply, as the judges wielded ultimate authority. Reluctant, she joined Elyse and Mariana.

Elyse regarded Rebekah coolly, remarking, “I underestimated you.”

Rebekah sneered in response, “Your accusations are baseless. You’re the true troublemaker here.”

Elyse’s sneer was her only reply, showing her persistent defiance.

The judge deliberated briefly and then commanded, “For this skill competition, you have to perform Erlkönig.”

At this, not just the contestants but also the spectators were taken aback. Elyse knew this was her weakest area. Wasn’t this setting her up for certain defeat?

Elyse initially felt shocked but soon felt a surge of adrenaline at the challenge. The piece she had been secretly perfecting was Erlkönig.

Mariana hesitated, looking uncertain when she heard the judge’s words. She didn’t speak but took out her violin to familiarize herself with the piece again. It was a risky choice; she hadn’t played this piece in a long time.

“I’ll play first,” Elyse declared, taking out her violin.

The judge nodded in agreement. “Then let’s begin.”

On stage, Darren and Vicky stepped aside, giving Elyse the spotlight. Vicky wore a look of disdain, doubting Elyse could master this piece. She anticipated a public embarrassment. Conversely, Darren was fraught with concern. He had witnessed Elyse’s previous attempts at this piece, which were riddled with errors. Internally, he rooted for her success, eager to pursue international competitions together.

Oblivious to the mixed emotions around her, Elyse positioned herself, calmed her nerves, and commenced playing.

From below the stage, Irving remarked, “She’s steady. She knows this piece well.”

The piece, Erlkönig, challenged the violinist’s left-hand independence, required stretching into extended positions, and demanded precise bow control. Elyse executed it flawlessly, maintaining both the piece’s integrity and its musicality. Following her performance, it was clear Elyse was genuinely talented.

Mariana followed, taking center stage to perform second. During this time, Fiona returned from a brief respite outside. She sensed the heightened tension in the hall. Upon inquiring, she discovered she had placed ninth out of ten, a disappointing outcome.

She watched Mariana play, acknowledging her competence. Mariana’s rendition was impressive, displaying the finesse that had brought her this far.

Then it was Rebekah’s turn. Standing on stage, Rebekah looked visibly nervous. She wasn’t prepared for this piece. Under the audience’s insistent prompting, she hesitantly performed a segment. However, her rendition was riddled with errors, prompting the judge to intervene and halt her performance.

Chapter 439:

The judge furrowed his brows slightly and asked, “Is that your level? Tell me, do you really think you’re worthy enough to be in the top ten, competing in the final, and heading abroad with this performance of yours?”

Gritting her teeth, Rebekah stubbornly replied, “Of course, I’m worthy! Just because my rendition of Erlkönig isn’t perfect doesn’t mean that my other pieces can’t get me into the top ten. Those pieces are nothing short of phenomenal!”

Unable to stand Rebekah’s insolence anymore, the judge pointed a finger at the man and asked, “Did Rebekah make a deal with you to help her cheat in the competitions?”

The man swallowed hard and looked hesitant, unsure if he should tell the judge the truth.

“If you tell me the truth, I won’t hand you over to the police, and I will ensure that you will be able to keep your job,” the judge said firmly.

Hearing this, the man widened his eyes in surprise and immediately told the judge about his dealings with Rebekah. After all, for Rebekah to have denied their relationship, it was rather clear that she would most likely not stick to their agreement in the future and leave him empty-handed. Betraying Rebekah to save his job sounded like a fair exchange.

On the other hand, Rebekah couldn’t believe that the man had acted so selfishly and betrayed her just because he wanted to keep his job. Everywhere she looked, Rebekah was met with hostile and disgusted looks from the audience, which made her feel even more like she was the victim of gross injustice. She angrily pointed an accusing finger at the man and yelled, “You damn imbecile! How dare you betray me? How could you be so self-centered? Did I wrong you in some way?”

The man shrugged and replied casually, “You failed to acknowledge our relationship just now, and yet you’re expecting me to help you! Just who do you think you are?”

With that, the man turned around and was escorted off by other staff members. As he was being led away, Rebekah continued to scream obscenities at him while cursing other individuals. Most of Rebekah’s insults to others were directed at both Elyse and Darren, as she blamed them for revealing her secret, thereby ruining her chance to get into the final.

Getting fed up with Rebekah's arrogance, the judge slammed his hand on the table and roared, "That's enough! You are hereby disqualified from this competition and barred from engaging in any future qualifications. You should go back home and reflect on how to be a better human being!"

Looking stunned, Rebekah paused for a moment, then yelled, "No! I'm innocent! You are all just siding against me because you have all managed to deceive yourselves into thinking that Elyse is great since she's Cody Tucker's apprentice! I swear, I'm going to expose how much of a scumbag all of you are! And I'll do it on TV!"

Elyse widened her eyes in surprise when she heard this. Rebekah had definitely gone out of her mind.

At long last, two staff members walked up to Rebekah and forcefully dragged her out of the venue through the backstage door as she continued to curse everyone.

With a sigh, the judge looked at Mariana and Elyse, saying, "Since Rebekah's scores have been nullified, the rankings shall be redone. You will have to wait before you know the final decision."

"Alright, sir," Elyse said and left the stage politely together with Mariana, followed by Darren and other contestants, whose rankings were also going to be re-evaluated.

After taking a moment to calm herself, Fiona walked up to Elyse and said, "I got word about what happened. I'm so sorry you had to go through such a terrible experience."

Elyse smiled softly and replied, "It's alright. I'm just glad that I've been able to prove myself. So, how are you? I've always known from the start that you'd make the top ten."

Fiona smiled and said quietly, "Thank you, Elyse. I acted irrationally with you earlier and snapped at you. You aren't mad at me, right?"

Elyse shook her head and replied softly, "Of course not, Fiona. I know you were just upset. Let's forget about it and wait for the new rankings together, okay?"

At that moment, Darren walked up to the duo and teased Elyse, saying, “You will surely be first, and that will surely make me fall from second place to third.”

Worried that Darren was going to get somewhat upset, Elyse quickly said, “Your performance was quite phenomenal, Darren. In fact, I’d say that you were far better than Vicky.”

The moment she finished speaking, Elyse gave Darren a playful wink.

Amused by Elyse’s cuteness, Darren whispered to her, “I’ll ask the judges to explain why on earth they think Vicky is better than me.”

Elyse eagerly agreed and said, “That’s a brilliant idea! We can’t possibly let Vicky finish above you.”

As she watched Elyse and Darren interact with each other, Fiona bit her lip, slightly jealous of their good scores.

Chapter 440:

Fiona stood next to Elyse, her expression fraught with emotion. Half an hour later, the announcements for the final round qualifiers began.

“First place, Elyse Lloyd!” The host spoke gently into the microphone, holding the list in hand.

Darren beamed at Elyse. Elyse returned a modest smile and gracefully walked up to the stage.

“Second place, Vicky Aston, and third place, Darren Reynolds.”

As Darren was about to step forward, he paused, turned, and looked at Vicky, who had not moved from her spot.

“You secured second place. Why aren’t you coming up?” Darren asked pointedly, raising an eyebrow.

“Are you trying to provoke me?” Vicky retorted coldly, her expression hardening.

“I don’t understand. I’m third, and honestly, I envy you for placing second,” Darren said with a shrug. He then proceeded onto the stage while Vicky took several deep breaths before finally joining him.

“Eighth place, Mariana Dury; ninth place, Cassidy Lipson; and tenth place, Fiona Evans,” the host continued with the announcements.

“Come on, Fiona!” Elyse excitedly waved to Fiona from the stage.

Fiona mustered a forced smile and gracefully walked onto the stage. Instead of standing beside Elyse, she chose a spot away from her.

“Congratulations to all the qualifiers!” the host exclaimed with a smile. “The grand final will take place in three days. Two contestants will be eliminated, and the final spots for the international competition will be determined.”

As the ceremony concluded, the audience began to disperse, and the contestants made their way backstage. Elyse went after Fiona, but Fiona barely acknowledged her and strode off the stage without a glance.

“Fiona! Hey!” Elyse called out, hurrying after her.

Suddenly, Vicky bumped into her forcefully. Losing her balance, Elyse stepped on her dress and stumbled forward.

“Watch out!” Darren quickly intervened, catching Elyse just in time to prevent a fall.

“Stop pretending. Do you really think you’re all that?” Vicky sneered, crossing her arms as she glared at Elyse.

“What’s gotten into you?” Elyse asked, finding Vicky’s attitude baffling. “Are you upset because I won first place and you’re jealous?”

“Jealous of you? Are you kidding me?” Vicky snapped back. “You just got lucky this time. Next time, you’re going down!”

“I’ll be waiting for you to try and surpass me,” Elyse retorted without flinching.

Vicky clenched her teeth and stormed off, visibly angry.

“That’s just Vicky for you. She can’t stand being outshined,” Darren remarked with a sigh.

“Whether she can handle it or not, I’m keeping my top spot,” Elyse shrugged.

“Well, you better hold onto it tight because I’m coming for it too.” Darren chuckled.

“Alright, bring on your challenge,” Elyse responded, laughing heartily.