

Bound love 761

Chapter 761:

“Focus on your competition. I’ll make time to come and cheer you on next time,” he said before turning to leave, like a fleeting shadow at dusk.

Watching his retreating back, Elyse felt a bittersweet ache in her heart.

When Jayden decided to stay, no power on earth could make him leave. But when he decided to leave, no amount of pleading could make him stay.

Elyse pursed her lips. Some things never change, she thought, even after divorce.

Lost in thought, she barely noticed Edward’s entrance, bearing steaming hot bread. “Breakfast is served. Care to join me?”

Snapping back to reality, Elyse nodded and instinctively picked up the remote, turning on the TV.

Coincidentally, the news was covering a shootout at the club from the previous night.

The grim report detailed a chaotic scene with over a dozen fatalities and multiple injuries.

The police had apprehended the ringleaders, putting them behind bars.

Elyse’s brow furrowed in thought. “Was the club situation really that intense yesterday?”

Edward, munching on his bread, mumbled through a mouthful, “Pretty standard. The governor’s been itching to shut that club down for ages. This shootout was like handing him the perfect opportunity on a silver platter.”

Elyse cast a sidelong glance at Edward, who seemed engrossed in the news. “What are you hiding from me?”

“Why do you think I’m hiding something? I’m your good friend,” Edward countered.

“Just a gut feeling. I have no proof,” Elyse replied, sipping her milk and letting the matter drop.

After breakfast, Edward patted his full stomach and eyed Elyse’s bed with a playful smirk. “Since I looked after you all night, can I take a nap in your bed? Seems only fair, doesn’t it?”

“Not a chance. Head back to your hotel room,” Elyse shot back without a second thought.

Unperturbed, Edward persisted, “Then how do you plan to compensate me for seeing my body?”

Elyse, her face a mask of indifference, retorted, “You can only blame your bad luck.”

Laughing in exasperation, Edward got up, put on his coat, and stormed out of the room.

Once outside, his demeanor changed instantly.

Humming a light-hearted tune, he sauntered out of the hotel and into a sleek luxury car waiting at the curb.

Inside, Jayden, cigarette dangling from his lips, looked up and inquired, “Did she have breakfast?”

“Yes, though she barely touched it, she did eat,” Edward said with a mischievous grin as he closed the car door and leaned back. “You really went all out last night, didn’t you?”

“Effort is the backbone of any successful plan,” Jayden said, taking a drag on his cigarette and typing on his phone without looking up.

“Has Charlie Hudson surfaced? You personally threw his daughter Aarya behind bars. He can’t stay under the radar forever,” Edward inquired nonchalantly, flicking Jayden’s cigarette lighter.

“That wily fox is still underground. I’m searching for him too, but he’s a master at evading capture,” Jayden replied with a hint of frustration.

Chapter 762:

Edward lit a cigarette, took a leisurely drag, and exhaled the smoke. His gaze drifted out the window, catching sight of Elyse leaving the hotel with her violin case.

Quickly closing the window to avoid detection, Edward observed her departure with a calm demeanor. “Should I say your ex-wife has nerves of steel or a heart of glass?” he mused with a smirk.

Jayden noticed Elyse as she walked past the car, violin case in hand, clearly heading off to practice somewhere. He clenched his cigarette between his teeth, keeping his thoughts to himself. He could never quite wrap his mind around her. Why would she trade the comforts of a plush, cushy life as a wealthy wife just to throw herself into some competition? In this bone-chilling weather, wouldn’t it be better to sip on some warm afternoon tea, snug inside?

As Jayden stared out the window, lost in thought, Edward’s voice cut through his reverie. “She’s long gone, and you’re still staring! If you’re still into her, just go after her.” Jayden pulled his gaze away, meeting Edward’s playful grin. With a deep, deliberate tone, he said, “I’m not that interested in her. Don’t read too much into it.” Edward blew out a puff of smoke, the white cloud dispersing into the cold air as he added, “You think I believe that?”

Jayden continued scrolling through his messages, replying nonchalantly, “Believe what you want.” He then looked up at Edward, his voice taking on a more serious tone, “I have to visit someone in jail. Are you heading out on your own?” Catching on immediately, Edward smirked, “Going to see your girl, huh? Tell her I said hi.”

After stubbing out his cigarette, Edward swung open the car door and walked away, not bothering to look back. “Drive,” Jayden ordered the driver. The car headed out to the outskirts of the city. The shootout at the club last night had turned into a major incident,

and a number of suspects were locked up here. Aarya, with the backing of the Hudson family, had managed to secure a private cell within the prison.

But when Jayden arrived, he found her in rough shape. It wasn't just that she hadn't slept well; it was something more. Jayden immediately noticed the dark circles under her eyes and her ghostly pale complexion. Concerned, he walked over and asked, "Aarya, are you okay?"

Aarya, who had been stirring up trouble all night, had finally worn herself out and was dozing off against the bed. But at the sound of Jayden's voice, she snapped awake. Rushing over to the bars with tears streaming down her face, she cried out, "You came to save me, Jayden? I knew you wouldn't leave me here!"

Jayden's voice was firm as he replied, "Of course, I wouldn't leave you, but we're in a tight spot. I can't get you out just yet." Panic flooded Aarya's face. "What do you mean? Doesn't everyone know I'm a Hudson? Who dares to lock me up?"

Jayden glanced at the nearby officers, then leaned in to whisper in Aarya's ear. "I can't reach your father. To get you out, we'll have to pull some serious strings." Aarya's fury flared up, "Who the hell is behind this? If I get my hands on them, I'll toss them into the crocodile pit and watch them squirm!"

Jayden tried to soothe her. "Don't worry. I'll find a way. You just need to hold on a little longer." Tears streaked down Aarya's face as she looked at him. "You have to get me out of here, and fast! This place is horrible—I can't stand it another minute!"

"Don't worry, you're the one I care about most. There's no way I'd leave you here," Jayden assured her. Just then, a police officer approached, indicating it was time for him to leave. Jayden glanced back several times, his expression filled with reluctant affection, bringing fresh tears to Aarya's eyes.

Covering her face, Aarya sobbed. "He really does love me! No one's ever loved me like this before. I want to be with him forever."

But as soon as Jayden stepped outside, his sorrowful demeanor vanished. He pulled out his phone and dialed a number again. The shootout had already made headlines. He had deliberately let someone snap a photo of Aarya during the chaos. There was no way Charlie could be unaware that his daughter was behind bars. So, where was Charlie? And what game was he playing?

Meanwhile, Elyse was practicing her violin in the park. She had been playing for a while when she heard footsteps approaching, the sound getting closer and closer. She turned around, cautious, and saw a girl standing nearby. The girl noticed Elyse's wariness and extended her hand, saying, "Let me introduce myself. I'm Geraldine Lawson."

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Elyse blinked in surprise, then innocently extended her hand to shake Geraldine's. "So, you're Geraldine," Elyse said. Geraldine chuckled. "Seems like I'm well-known. Is it because of my notorious reputation?"

Elyse thought for a moment before replying, "Not really. Everyone says you're the dark horse, the one who might just take first place."

"You said it yourself—'might', not 'definitely'." Geraldine laughed as she sat on a nearby bench. "Honestly, I was hoping for a year without any tough competition so I could win without breaking a sweat." She shrugged with a sigh. "But it looks like there are plenty of strong contenders this year—like Edward... and you!"

Elyse joined Geraldine on the bench and smiled. "Do you see me as a strong competitor too?" she asked.

Geraldine chuckled. "Absolutely," she exclaimed. "I've seen all your performances. You're an underrated contender. It's probably your modest fame that makes people underestimate you."

"You're giving me too much credit," Elyse responded, her smile widening. "Did you come here just to discuss this?"

"No, I was out for a walk and happened to see you. I thought I'd come over and say hi." Geraldine's smile turned confident as she added, "And, by the way, I'm here to challenge you. I intend to beat you in the next competition."

"I'll be ready to beat you as well," Elyse responded fearlessly.

Geraldine eyed Elyse intently and sneered, "I was curious to see if you had any spine. Thankfully, you do."

With that, she stood, brushed snow off her coat, and said, "See you at the competition."

Elyse watched Geraldine stride away, then turned her gaze back to the frozen lake before her, lost in thought. After a long pause, she pulled out her phone and dialed Gavin.

"What's wrong? Do you need something?" Gavin's soft voice came through.

Clutching her violin, Elyse could hardly contain her excitement. "Gavin, I think it's wonderful that I'm learning the violin!" she exclaimed.

Gavin paused, slightly taken aback. "What brought this on all of a sudden?" he asked.

"I'm just realizing how the violin lets me meet and compete with such incredible people. It's truly exhilarating," Elyse responded, her voice brimming with emotion.

Gavin, previously preoccupied with documents and visibly stressed, couldn't help but smile at her enthusiasm. "Then enjoy the competition. There's much more to the violin than just that," he advised.

"Absolutely!" Elyse agreed eagerly before ending the call.

Gavin set his phone aside, picked up a document again, and resumed reading. A frown creased his forehead as he delved back into his work.

Just then, a man wearing a work badge entered the office. He approached Gavin's desk and asked coldly, "After reviewing the documents, do you think we need to investigate Fiona, Geraldine, and Wendy?"

"I suggest we don't alert them yet. Let's monitor them discreetly for a while." Gavin's expression turned somber. "Your report lacks concrete evidence that any of them intentionally sabotaged the other competitors' violins."

The man paused, absorbing Gavin's response, and after a moment, responded, "The semifinals are approaching. We'll observe for now."

"Agreed." Gavin nodded, shut the document in his hand, and rubbed his temples wearily.

The man lingered, fixing Gavin with a steady look, "I recall Fiona was your junior. You're not planning to cover up for her, are you?" he asked.

Chapter 764:

Gavin met his gaze firmly. "As a Swan Cup jury member, I maintain impartiality," he said firmly. "Fiona was indeed my junior, but that relationship will not compromise my judgment on the competition stage."

The man whistled. "Wow. You're so impartial!" he exclaimed. "If I were Fiona, I might resent you for that."

"Perhaps, but my conscience is clear," Gavin responded dismissively.

The man then left the office.

Alone, Gavin pondered whether to approach Fiona, knowing they were both at the same hotel. After thinking for a while, he decided against it. Fiona probably didn't want him to bother her either.

After wrapping up his work, Gavin left to find Elyse. Her next match was against Geraldine, a competitor with hardly any vulnerabilities. Unlike Geraldine, Elyse shone in specific areas but wasn't universally adept. Elyse would need to put in a lot of effort to beat Geraldine.

Upon returning to the hotel to drop off his things, Gavin was intercepted at his door by Fiona.

“Can we talk?” she asked coldly.

Gavin’s eyes widened with surprise as he stared at Fiona, confusion etched on his face. “What are you up to?” he asked.

“In the next match, I’m up against Darren. I don’t think I stand a chance of beating him.” Fiona hesitated before speaking, her voice carrying a hint of resignation.

Gavin’s brow furrowed in puzzlement. “And what does that have to do with me?”

“I’ve got three days left,” Fiona replied, her voice stiff with discomfort. “I need your help. You know my weaknesses inside out.” A flicker of humiliation crossed her face as she finished.

She was all too aware of Darren’s prowess.

After three months of going it alone since parting ways with Cody, Fiona had come to realize just how much she lacked. Though she had made it this far in the competition, it had been more by luck than by facing truly tough opponents. But now, in the semifinals, she was up against a formidable adversary.

She had to take a hard look at her situation. The reality was stark—there was no one left to lean on; those who might have been able to help had already drifted away. To have any shot at victory, Fiona knew she had to swallow her pride and turn to Gavin for help.

Upon hearing Darren’s name, Gavin paused, piecing together who he was. Darren had some talent, sure, but he barely cracked the top ten in this competition. Even if he pulled off an extraordinary performance, he might squeeze into the top six, but the top three? Not a chance. Gavin had never considered Darren a serious contender for the top spots.

“If Elyse went up against Darren, she’d breeze her way into the semifinals,” Gavin remarked. “You’re trailing far behind Elyse now.”

Fiona’s pride took a hit at Gavin’s words, and she shot back angrily, “So, in your eyes, Elyse is the only one who matters, huh? The only one who can win, right?”

She practically shouted, “You’re so biased toward her, and you won’t even admit it! Back when I needed guidance, you and Irving only had eyes for her, never giving me a second thought. Now that I’ve left Mr. Tucker’s studio, you’re just waiting for me to fall on my face, aren’t you?”

Gavin looked at Fiona, who was clearly spiraling out of control, and sighed. “You have to understand, Fiona, Irving and I never abandoned you. It was you who gave up and chose to walk away.”

Fiona, seething with anger, snapped back, “That’s not true! I never gave up!”

“Enough already. Why are you wasting your breath?” Irving suddenly appeared behind Gavin, laden with shopping bags and a lollipop in hand. “Head over to the park and guide Elyse. She messaged me saying Geraldine challenged her. Go give her a hand.”

Chapter 765:

With a steady hand, he pointed at Fiona and declared, “I’ll take her under my wing.”

Gavin, fully aware of Irving’s aversion to Fiona, couldn’t help but feel uneasy. “You’re going to guide Fiona? You’re not planning anything funny, are you?”

Irving responded with a smirk, laced with scorn, “What could I possibly do to her? I’m just offering some assistance. Didn’t she accuse me of favoring Elyse? Well, I’ll give her the same treatment.”

Gavin mulled it over. He wasn’t exactly eager to guide Fiona himself. If Irving was willing, why not let him handle it? With a nod of approval, Gavin finally conceded. “Alright, she’s all yours. I’ll go check on Elyse.”

“Perfect. You go ahead.”

After Gavin left, Irving crunched down on his lollipop and turned to Fiona with a sly grin. “You think we’re biased? Fine, I’ll guide you just like I guide Elyse. But if you can’t keep up, that’s your problem.”

Fiona scoffed, defiant as ever. “Who says I can’t keep up?”

Three days later, in the semifinals, backstage.

Elyse stood behind the stage, dressed in a sleek black gown and high heels, watching the competition unfold. From the semifinals onward, the contestants would step onto the stage together, waiting for the performance pieces to be announced by the judges.

Since the competition pieces were still unknown, each contestant could only prepare passively and wait for their turn.

“Do I make you nervous?” Geraldine, exuding vibrant energy in a stunning red dress, approached Elyse.

Elyse glanced at her and replied softly, “Not really. I have a friend among the contestants, and I’m curious if he can make it to the finals.”

Geraldine scanned the stage, eyeing the three contestants. “Is it the man in the middle?”

“That’s right,” Elyse confirmed, her gaze heavy. She had just learned that Darren’s opponent was Fiona.

Although Darren was better in terms of skill, Fiona had been practicing intensively with Irving over the past three days.

Elyse wasn’t sure whether Darren could maintain his composure and secure the top spot in his group.

With a touch of arrogance, Geraldine crossed her arms and remarked, “You don’t need to worry too much. Contestants who lose in the semifinals will have a chance in the Comeback Competition. The last person standing will earn the only revival slot and advance to the finals.”

Elyse nodded, relief washing over her as she realized the eliminated contestants still had a shot.

She exhaled deeply, saying, "That's good. I was worried Darren might be out of options."

Geraldine's lips curled into a half-smile as she taunted, "I'm referring to you. Do you think you've already won against me?"

Elyse curled her lips into a smirk and let out a soft chuckle. She gave Geraldine a friendly pat on the shoulder and said, "I never bothered with the competition's mechanics. I didn't think I'd need to."

Geraldine's already sensitive pride flared at Elyse's confidence. Her teeth clenched as she resisted the urge to compete with Elyse on stage to determine the ultimate winner.

Elyse stepped out from backstage and made her way to her lounge, seeking a moment of solitude to focus her mind for the upcoming competition.

Suddenly, the door swung open, and she looked up to find Jayden standing there. She straightened, her voice tinged with nervousness. "What are you doing here?"

Chapter 766:

Jayden's gaze drifted to her waist, and he commented casually, "You haven't been eating well these past few days. You're looking even thinner."

Elyse's expression darkened, her voice edged with irritation. "Whether I'm thinner or not is none of your business. If you don't leave now, don't blame me for being rude."

"Don't be so uptight. Aarya is in prison now. Isn't this the perfect time for us to have an affair?" Jayden's eyes glinted with mischief as he spread his arms wide, pulling her into a tight, intrusive embrace.

Elyse wriggled against his hold, her frustration bubbling to the surface. “Jayden, how much longer will you keep humiliating me? I truly dislike this. Please, stop appearing in front of me.”

Jayden’s fingers brushed lightly over Elyse’s head in a condescending gesture, “Alright, alright, don’t be upset. I promise Aarya isn’t as important as you are. Are you satisfied now?”

Elyse’s patience finally snapped. “Are you crazy? Leave me alone.” Unable to contain her anger any longer, Elyse bit down hard on Jayden’s arm.

Jayden’s eyes sparkled with delight as he took in her fierce expression, his enjoyment growing with each moment. He pinched her cheek playfully, pressing his solid body against hers with no regard for personal space.

Elyse found herself trapped, her back pressed firmly against the wall as Jayden’s form loomed over her, making her feel sandwiched.

She struggled to lift her head, enduring his fervent kisses as they consumed her.

His lips, persistent and unrelenting, left smudges of lipstick at the corners of her mouth. With a smirk, Jayden pulled back slightly, his eyes gleaming with excitement. “I’ve messed up your lipstick. Let me help you fix it.”

Elyse wanted to refuse, but Jayden’s insistence overpowered her. He took the lipstick from her hand and, with determined precision, began reapplying it to her lips.

Once he had finished, she gazed at him with cold detachment and asked, “What exactly do you want? What’s your purpose in all of this?”

Jayden picked up a tissue and wiped away the lipstick that had smeared on his own mouth. Smiling, he said, “Did you think I came here for something specific?”

He paused, savoring her frustration before adding, “I just missed you, so I came over.”

Elyse sighed deeply, sinking into a nearby chair with resignation. “Do you really think having an affair feels good? I find it dreadful. I don’t want to play this game with you. Can you please just leave me alone?”

Jayden turned, his gaze drifting down to Elyse.

Her face, a canvas of sorrow and defiance, silently demanded an explanation that never came.

Jayden crumpled the tissue in his hand, launching it toward the bin with casual precision. He sidled closer to Elyse, his fingers brushing her cheek. “Play your heart out,” he murmured. “I’ll be watching, so don’t let me down.”

Still aching for an explanation, Elyse shoved his hand away, frustration bubbling over. “Just leave!” she snapped. “I don’t want you here.”

Jayden’s lips curled into a smirk. “Feisty, aren’t you?” He couldn’t resist giving her ear a playful tug, earning a glare as sharp as a dagger. But like a shadow, he slipped out of the room before Elyse could react.

Chapter 767:

Elyse was left bewildered by his behavior. A side of him she had never truly seen had emerged—petulant, stubborn, and maddeningly self-absorbed. While she’d caught glimpses of these traits before, they now stood out in stark relief, as if Jayden had finally shed all pretense.

A sudden jolt of clarity struck Elyse as she caught herself lost in thoughts of Jayden again. She shook her head, determined to sever the lingering threads of his influence.

Divorced meant divorced—no more wasting time on that no-good jerk. She needed to focus on herself, not let him derail her life any longer.

With renewed resolve, Elyse picked up her violin, tuning it with meticulous care before stepping out of the lounge. As she made her way backstage, a haunting sound reached her ears—the unmistakable cries of someone in deep distress. She followed the sorrowful echoes to their source and found Fiona.

Fiona was slumped on the floor, her head buried in her hands, sobbing uncontrollably. Crumpled tissues were strewn across the floor around her.

Darren stood over her, looking utterly helpless, while several other contestants hovered nearby, offering comforting words that seemed to fall on deaf ears.

Elyse stood silently for a moment, taking in the scene before her. Finally, her gaze fixed on Darren. “You actually beat her?” she asked, her voice carrying a hint of disbelief.

Darren nodded slowly, a wry smile tugging at his lips.

“Yeah, I won,” he admitted. “But it’s hard to feel good about it given the circumstances.”

“Don’t even get me started,” Geraldine chimed in, standing close to Darren. “She’s a sore loser. I have no idea why she thinks she even belongs in this contest. Her performance was absolutely dreadful!”

Darren was taken aback, eyes widening in surprise. He never expected Geraldine, the legendary dark horse, to be so blunt.

Elyse gently tugged Geraldine’s arm, urging her to hold her tongue. Then, she crouched beside Fiona. “Hey, don’t cry. You still have one more shot. The fighter who survives the Comeback Competition earns another slot.”

But Fiona didn’t seem to hear Elyse. Her sobs only grew louder.

With a sigh of exasperation, Elyse snapped, “Are you going to throw away this chance too? You forfeited the Champions Cup last time, and now you’re about to give up on the Swan Cup as well!”

“How could you ever understand?” Fiona burst out, her voice rising as she faced Elyse. “Do you seriously think that if I go through the Comeback Competition, I’ll actually win a slot?”

Elyse's expression hardened, her voice turning icy. "So you're just going to roll over and accept defeat? Fine, go ahead. Your skills are mediocre at best, and clearly, you lack any real competitive spirit!"

"Elyse Lloyd! How dare you—" Fiona shot to her feet, her hand raised to strike.

But the Elyse standing before her was no longer the timid girl she once knew. If anyone dared to attack her now, she'd meet them with equal force, ready to defend herself fiercely.

Fiona's strike never found its mark on Elyse. Instead, she was met with a sharp, stinging blow of her own.

"Did that slap finally knock some sense into you?" Elyse's voice cut through the air, cold and biting. "Fiona, you were once Mr. Tucker's student, and now, you're stuck in the semifinals. Doesn't that make you feel ashamed?"

"Remember the Champions Cup?" Elyse pressed on, her finger pointing at Darren. "Back then, his skills were nothing compared to yours, yet you lost. And despite that, Mr. Tucker got you a chance at this competition with his influence. How did you repay him?"

She drew a sharp breath, her gaze icy and unfeeling. "Darren has left you in the dust, along with other contestants from the Champions Cup. They've all surpassed you, yet all you can think about is throwing in the towel!"

Chapter 768:

Noticing Elyse's growing agitation, Darren quickly stepped in to hold her back. He knew about the bond Fiona and Elyse once shared, but rumors of a rift had reached his ears. While the cause remained a mystery, it was clear Elyse still harbored a desire to help Fiona.

Darren tried to encourage Fiona too. "Don't lose hope. You still have another chance in the Comeback Competition. You can still come out on top."

Fiona, clutching her stinging cheek, fled the backstage area without a word.

Embarrassed, Darren said, “She ran off. Do you think she’ll hold a grudge against you?”

Elyse glanced down at her palm, which felt a bit numb. She had really laid it on thick when she slapped Fiona. But, as usual, Fiona didn’t take her words to heart.

Elyse let out a sigh and said, “If she hates me, that’s fine. She’s always hated me anyway.”

Darren’s face tightened with concern. “You’re about to go on stage. Don’t let Fiona’s behavior throw you off.” Then he turned his gaze to Geraldine.

Sensing Darren’s scrutiny, Geraldine said indifferently, “It doesn’t matter how talented you are; I’ll try my best and defeat you.”

Elyse shot her a steely look. “And I’ll defeat you.”

Darren felt like a lone diplomat caught in a brewing storm, sandwiched between two rivals whose eyes already blazed with the fire of competition. Even before their first note had been struck, their resolve to vanquish one another was palpable. Whoever claimed that a music competition lacked edge clearly hadn’t witnessed this high-voltage showdown.

Ten minutes later, Elyse, Geraldine, and another competitor were summoned, and the three of them took the stage. As they took their positions under the spotlight, Elyse’s eyes immediately locked onto Jayden in the audience. Whether it was his prime seat or his magnetic presence, he was impossible to miss. Annoyed with herself for being so distracted, she quickly averted her gaze.

Meanwhile, the judge at the corner of the long table drew a slip from a large, mysterious box with an air of theatricality. Unfolding the slip, the judge’s voice rang out with authority. “The piece for today’s competition is ‘Fantasy on Carmen’!”

With the competition piece decided, the three competitors left the stage, each one disappearing into the wings in quiet succession. The semi-finals brought with them the addition of accompanying pianists, a change that, on the surface, seemed like an enhancement but was, in truth, a hidden gauntlet. The performers now faced the delicate

dance of synchronizing with an unfamiliar partner, where even the slightest misstep could spell disaster.

Elyse was the first to take the stage. As everything was set, she approached with poise and took her place next to the pianist. A silent exchange of understanding passed between them, and then the music began.

‘Fantasy on Carmen’ was a piece that demanded more than mere technical prowess; it required the performer to embody its biting satire while mastering its intricate demands.

Backstage, Geraldine kept her eyes locked on Elyse, hoping to find a chink in her armor. Darren, holding a violin case, sauntered over to Geraldine and asked, “Are you nervous? Worried Elyse might nail the piece?”

Geraldine responded calmly, “She might be playing perfectly now, but that doesn’t mean she won’t slip up at the end. The ending of this piece is key.”

Darren nodded gravely. “I’m confident she will perform perfectly. She won’t make any mistakes.”

Geraldine’s lips curled into a knowing smirk. The contest was far from decided, and the final victory was anyone’s to claim.

In contrast, Elyse was completely absorbed in the music, letting it envelop her. The melody was a rich tapestry of elegance and romance, woven with threads of fiery intensity, tender love, and a liberating sense of carefree abandon—the very freedom that eluded her. She yearned to dissolve into the music, to let it be the vehicle through which she could transcend her own boundaries and reach the heights of her aspirations.

Chapter 769:

As the last note hung in the air, a single bead of sweat traced a slow, deliberate path down Elyse’s forehead. She drew a deep breath, gently pulling herself back from the musical reverie that had momentarily carried her away.

The pianist gently nudged her. “Didn’t you hear that? The audience is applauding. It’s time for your curtain call!”

Snapped back to reality, Elyse swiftly bowed and exited the stage. Geraldine brushed past Elyse, whispering, "Watch closely. I'll make sure you admit defeat without question."

Elyse cast a final, unreadable glance at Geraldine's determined stride, said nothing, and hurried backstage.

As she came down, Darren said with a smile, "Congratulations! I knew you'd be the winner."

Taking a deep breath, Elyse teased, "I've just finished my performance. How can you be so sure I'll win?"

Darren chuckled. "You're always the winner in my heart, no matter what."

With a smile, Elyse turned around and focused intently on the stage.

Geraldine's rendition of 'Fantasy on Carmen' was a world apart from Elyse's interpretation. "What an exciting melody! It feels like this piece captures the carefree life of a playboy," Elyse whispered, having caught a snippet of Geraldine's performance.

Darren shrugged. "Love is just a passing fancy? Is that what you mean?"

As the final notes of her performance echoed in the hall, Geraldine gracefully acknowledged the thundering applause, her smile one of quiet triumph.

Behind the curtain, Elyse felt a flutter of unease in her chest. "Her interpretation is completely different from mine, but her performance is flawless too."

Darren, with arms folded and an air of seriousness, weighed in, "She certainly nailed it, but in my eyes, you outshine her by far."

Elyse's face was a canvas of conflicting emotions. "Cut it out. If you keep going like this, you'll definitely be my biggest fan."

With a playful arch of his brow, Darren retorted, "I'm just enjoying your music. I really know it well!"

Elyse nodded, a wry smile playing on her lips. "Got it. So, you're saying you're my soul mate."

As Geraldine descended the stage, her eyes gleamed with smug satisfaction. "See? This is what I can do with my talent."

Elyse, unfazed, rubbed her nose thoughtfully. "Yeah, I saw it, but I'm not any worse than you."

Geraldine's composure cracked, irritation flaring in her eyes as she spat, "Don't get too comfortable. When the scores are revealed, it might be you shedding tears, not me!"

"Alright, alright, I'll cry. I really hope things turn out like you said," Elyse replied, her voice calm, her mind elsewhere. She had left it all on the stage; now, she could only wait.

As the third contestant took her place in the spotlight, Elyse and Geraldine lingered in the wings, each silently bracing for the judgment that loomed ahead.

With all three performances concluded, the rivals stepped into the spotlight, their fates hanging by a thread as they awaited the verdict.

Five minutes dragged by, the tension thick as the judges leaned in, exchanging murmurs that hinted at the decision just beyond their lips.

Sensing the undercurrent, Geraldine leaned closer to Elyse, her voice low and sharp. "I bet the judges are discussing whether to eliminate you or the other contestant."

Chapter 770:

“Don’t forget, you’re in the same boat,” Elyse replied with a cool glance, her voice slicing through the tension.

Three minutes later, the judges emerged from their huddle, their decision finally crystallized.

“For ‘Fantasy on Carmen,’ we have three contestants. Elyse Lloyd scores 9.63, Geraldine Lawson 9.61...” The host’s voice boomed, “Congratulations to Elyse for advancing to the next round!”

For a heartbeat, Geraldine stood frozen, disbelief washing over her. “I lost? By just 0.02 points?”

Elyse exhaled slowly, the weight of the contest clear in her words. “I’m only 0.02 points ahead of you. You’re really tough to beat. I definitely don’t want to face you again in the next competition.”

Geraldine’s gaze was a tempest of frustration and fierce determination, her teeth clenched like a steel trap. “As expected, it gets tougher toward the end. It’s not a bad idea to see how strong you are in the semi-finals.”

Elyse accepted the applause with grace, then turned to Geraldine, her expression resolute, whispering, “This time, I edged you out by 0.02 points. Next time, I’ll aim to widen that gap. But don’t think you’ll be the only one sharpening your edge. I’m eager to see how you challenge me next.”

Once offstage, Elyse approached Darren, weariness etched in her features. “I’m happy I won, but I’m about to pass out.”

Darren, ever the steady pillar, gave her a reassuring pat on the shoulder. “I knew you’d win. The next group is Vicky’s turn. She asked if you could stay backstage and watch her performance.”

Following Darren’s gaze, Elyse spotted Vicky, violin in hand, poised and ready on stage.

“Why didn’t she ask me herself?” Elyse asked, a puzzled frown creasing her brow.

“Because she’s too shy to speak for herself,” Darren replied simply.

Elyse watched as Vicky stood poised and ready, determination shining in her eyes. But then, a sense of unease crept in. Something was off.

Pointing toward the stage, Elyse asked, her voice tinged with suspicion, “Isn’t each group supposed to have three contestants? Why are there only two?”

Darren scratched his head, equally perplexed. “I’m not sure. I remember there were supposed to be three contestants.”

Elyse shrugged it off, assuming that another contestant had perhaps withdrawn from the competition.

Vicky’s performance was flawless, securing her the top spot with ease. However, the moment was interrupted by a sudden uproar in the corridor.

Curious, Elyse left the backstage area to investigate and found a girl in tears, clutching her violin tightly. The girl’s voice, thick with anger and despair, echoed through the hallway. “Someone trapped me in the lounge! I tried to escape, but there was no one to help! They sabotaged my chance! I missed my performance! Years of hard work, gone! This can’t go unpunished! If this isn’t made right, I’ll take this to the authorities!”

The girl’s cries quickly drew a crowd of onlookers, each trying to grasp the situation.

Perplexed, Elyse asked someone nearby what had happened. It soon became clear that the girl was Vicky’s missing competitor, the one everyone had assumed had withdrawn from the competition. But instead, she had been locked away, trapped in a room where no one could hear her pleas.

The girl sobbed uncontrollably, her cries drawing sympathy from the other contestants. But the outcome was set in stone, and there was no way for her to turn back time and undo the mistake that had cost her the competition. Elyse watched the scene unfold, feeling a pang of empathy for the distraught girl.

