

Bound love 831

Chapter 831:

Edward saw his chance and chimed in, “You can’t just spend time with him. You need to stay with me too. You can’t leave me by myself.”

Elyse clenched her fists, her patience wearing thin. How long would she have to endure their incessant demands?

After she had changed, Jayden grasped her left hand again. “Let’s go. What do you want to eat? I’ll take you.”

Edward stood on her right, his words laced with sarcasm. “Why settle for a meal with your ex-husband? It would taste so much better if I, your future boyfriend, treated you.”

Sandwiched between the two, Elyse felt as though her head might just explode from the pressure.

In the hallway, Elyse’s heart skipped a beat as Gavin emerged from the elevator. She scrambled mentally for a way to explain the tense tableau before him.

Gavin, noting the two men flanking Elyse, furrowed his brow in confusion. He approached and asked, “Why are you all together?”

Gathering her nerves, Elyse responded, “We’re planning to have dinner.”

The simplicity of her answer only deepened Gavin’s bewilderment. Did their relationship really warrant such a coordinated dinner outing together?

Edward, seizing the moment, extended an invitation to Gavin. “Would you like to join us?”

“Thanks for asking, but I’ve got other commitments,” Gavin declined quickly, his instincts alert to the strained vibes among the group. He made a swift exit.

Elyse watched him go, a wave of envy washing over her. How she wished she could simply walk away too. Yet, despite her desires, she was bound to follow through with the dinner plans. They left the hotel and proceeded to a nearby restaurant.

Seated by the window, Elyse turned her gaze outside, determined to remain silent until their meals arrived.

However, Edward couldn't tolerate the quiet. "You missed yesterday's match. What were you up to?"

Elyse's eyes flickered towards Jayden momentarily before she quickly averted her gaze, resolving not to look his way again.

Jayden caught the brief look but remained silent. Instead, he calmly offered an excuse, "I had an unavoidable commitment."

"Was it related to someone? Aarya perhaps?" Edward pressed, his curiosity piqued by the eyebrow he raised.

Jayden nodded, confirming the connection to Aarya. "Yes, it concerns her."

Elyse felt a sting of hurt, though she scarcely admitted it to herself.

Edward, swirling his wine before taking a sip, leaned in with a sly smile. "So, to you, Aarya's issues take precedence over Elyse's, don't they?"

Jayden's gaze shifted to Elyse, noting her deliberate avoidance. He sighed, a mix of resignation and frustration in his voice. "Given everything that's happening, Aarya's situation demands my immediate attention."

Edward's tone turned taunting. "Oh, I see how it is." He then turned sharply to Elyse, his voice laced with provocation. "Did you catch that? In your ex's eyes, you rank below his current girlfriend. You surely wouldn't want someone like that again."

Chapter 832:

That was the last straw for Elyse. She spun around, her voice weary yet firm. “Why should I care who he values more? I am my own priority. I don’t need his validation to affirm my worth.”

Her gaze was piercing as she issued her ultimatum. “Let’s keep it quiet until the food arrives. Speak out of turn, and I’ll have both of you removed. Nobody will dine with me then.” With that, she turned away again, resolute in her silence.

Edward, sensing her anger, chose not to provoke further, though his disdain for Jayden simmered beneath the surface.

He despised Jayden for winning Elyse’s affection first. In his mind, he was just as worthy. He believed his own merits—his talent and his physique honed by regular exercise—put him on par with Jayden.

He was convinced that just one night with him would sway Elyse permanently.

Unaware of Edward’s thoughts and unsure of Jayden’s reticence, Elyse relished the temporary peace. Soon, the waiter arrived with their meals.

Ravenous, Elyse eagerly grasped her utensils and began to carve into her steak, welcoming the distraction.

After finishing her meal, she laid down her terms firmly. “Once you’re done eating, I want you both to leave immediately. Don’t linger around me.”

Edward, sipping water with a cunning grin, replied, “But we live in the same hotel. We’ll be heading the same way, remember?”

Realizing the situation, Elyse turned to Jayden. “You need to leave now. I need some rest.”

Jayden held her gaze, his reluctance to part evident. However, his phone rang at that moment. Glancing at the caller ID with a furrowed brow, he stepped away before answering, distancing himself from the table.

Edward didn't waste a moment to stir the pot further, leaning in towards Elyse. "I'll bet that call is from Aarya."

Elyse, caught off guard, questioned, "How can you be sure?"

"Because he made sure to move away before taking the call," Edward explained with a conspiratorial smirk. "He probably doesn't want us overhearing his sweet nothings to his girlfriend."

A shadow crossed Elyse's face as she pondered Edward's words, her doubts beginning to mount.

Elyse didn't challenge Edward's presumption. After all, she shared the same thought. Whose call could make Jayden step away before answering? Only Aarya's.

Suppressing her dismay, Elyse silently deepened the rift between herself and Jayden. The ambiguity that had defined their relationship was no longer bearable for her, as she recognized it served neither of them well.

When Jayden returned from the call, he hastened toward Elyse and quickly said, "I have an urgent matter to deal with." Then, turning to Edward, he added, "Please keep her safe for me."

Edward let out a sneer and replied, "Of course, I'll look after her."

Elyse, her eyes following Jayden, couldn't help but ask, "What's going on? Where are you headed?" Unbeknownst to her, her voice carried a blend of nervous curiosity and hopeful anticipation.

Chapter 833:

“It’s nothing for you to worry about. Don’t dwell on it. I’ll take care of this quickly and come back to you,” Jayden replied casually. With that, he left swiftly.

As Jayden disappeared from view, Elyse was overwhelmed by a swirl of conflicting feelings. Memories of countless moments, when Jayden had dismissed her with those same empty assurances, flooded her mind. He had promised to be open with her, yet time after time, he chose to keep his secrets hidden.

Elyse wrestled with finding any reasonable justification for his behavior other than a deep-seated mistrust. If Jayden couldn’t trust her, then who did he confide in? Aarya?

Elyse’s thoughts raced, desperately seeking answers that remained out of reach. All she knew was that this persistent doubt had transformed into an almost insurmountable mental hurdle, a relentless torment that haunted her mind.

At that moment, Edward noticed a flicker of discomfort in Elyse’s expression. He lowered himself to her level and, as if coaxing a child, gently asked, “Are you upset that your ex-husband cares about someone else now?”

Elyse looked away, her voice tinged with mild irritation. “Why would I be upset? Isn’t it the most natural thing to happen?”

“It is, but I don’t want to see you unhappy. Perhaps, you can give me a chance to bring some joy back into your life. What do you think?” Edward asked, his eyes shining with hopeful determination.

Elyse sighed and crossed her arms defensively. “Edward, don’t waste your energy on me. I know I’m not ready for a relationship, and I don’t want to use you to mend my heart.”

Smiling genuinely, Edward replied, “I understand your hesitation. But like I told you before, I’m fine with being your emotional bandage, even if you heal and move on with someone else.”

Despite her resolve, Elyse was moved by his sincerity. “Why must you be so humble? I mean, you can easily get someone better than me.”

Hearing this, Edward straightened up and raised an eyebrow. "I believe you're the best choice for me, and that's what counts. As for being humble, I don't think so. I feel I'm a bigger man, nothing short of handsome."

Elyse couldn't help but chuckle at his unexpected boldness. "You are rather handsome, yes."

"See, I knew it. Especially with this fearless pursuit of love, nothing can stop me!" Edward said with a grin. He tried to unbutton his shirt, eager to flaunt his physique, but Elyse quickly stopped him.

With a teasing glance, Edward playfully remarked, "You're single now, so why not give me a shot? I'd be more than honored to be your rebound, even if it leads nowhere."

Swallowing hard, Elyse hesitated, a touch of uncertainty crossing her face. After a moment of thought, she let out a reluctant breath. "Alright, I'll think about it."

A beaming smile lit up Edward's face. Eagerly, he gripped her shoulders and exclaimed, "You said it! You're considering me, so that's settled! No other guys allowed!"

Feeling slightly overwhelmed by his unrestrained enthusiasm, Elyse covered her face and exclaimed, "I heard you the first time! Stop it!"

Realizing his overzealous reaction, Edward quickly calmed down. "Okay, okay," he said, trying to compose himself. "I got a bit carried away. Sorry, don't hold it against me."

Chapter 834:

Understanding, Elyse nodded and said, "I get that you're excited, but try to tone it down a bit. I'm not going to think about anything romantic until after the competition. Let's talk about it then, alright?"

Edward nodded in agreement and replied, "That's fair. The competition is the focus, and afterward, we'll discuss the idea of dating."

Shaking her head, Elyse quickly said, “No rush. I just mentioned that I would consider the possibility between us.”

“Fine,” Edward conceded.

However, as his excitement faded, a new worry arose within him. He was determined to win first place in the Swan Cup, but if he did, Elyse wouldn’t be able to, and that would inevitably disappoint her, potentially ruining his chances of being with her. On the other hand, if he let her win, he would be left unsatisfied.

Realizing the weight of the situation, Edward knew sleep would evade him that night.

Elyse set out early the next morning, violin case in hand, for a practice session in the park. By midday, she took a break and walked to a nearby restaurant for lunch.

Just as she settled in to order, Aarya showed up in front of her. Elyse immediately noticed the hickeys scattered across her neck—a clear sign of a fervent evening. Elyse turned her gaze away, determined not to look at Aarya again, though Aarya seemed intent on keeping her attention.

“What a coincidence to see you here,” Aarya remarked, placing her purse on an adjacent chair and sitting opposite Elyse.

As Aarya fiddled with her hair, more hickeys became visible. Looking away, Elyse said tersely, “Don’t sit across from me. We aren’t friends.”

Aarya responded with a sneer. “What’s the matter? I’m merely greeting you. Why the hostility?” Elyse’s expression soured further.

Aarya cocked her head, musing aloud, “Is it because of the time I nearly drowned you? Or when I left you freezing outside? Or perhaps...” She paused, leaning forward with a wicked grin. “Is it because I was with your former husband?”

Elyse snapped at Aarya’s unreasonable behavior. “What do you really want? Are you so eager to parade yourself in front of me?”

Aarya's delight grew with Elyse's visible frustration. So what if Elyse had once been married to Jayden? Now Elyse was expected to be jealous and resentful towards her. Aarya had intentionally come to stir trouble, enjoying every moment of Elyse's anger.

Laughing heartily, Aarya exclaimed, "Your ex-husband, now my boyfriend, is a beast in bed. Despite my protests, he continues unabated. He even tells me to be more submissive."

With one hand propped under her chin, Aarya spoke in a tone laced with feigned curiosity. "Why do you think he is untamed now? Could it be that he prefers my company because he finds me more agreeable?"

Elyse, struggling to keep her composure, responded coolly, "Your intimate details don't interest me. If you're so inclined to share, why not broadcast it online for everyone to see?"

Aarya dismissed the idea with a wave of her hand. "That wouldn't suit him. He's too reserved. He's never around when morning comes."

Chapter 835:

She then cocked her head, her voice filled with false innocence. "Did he ever behave like that with you? Was he always this insatiable? Did he have a particular way he preferred?"

Elyse reached her limit. "Have you lost your mind? Why do you keep weaving me into your personal dramas? What's this obsession with my history? Is there an issue with you?"

Regretting her decision to order so soon, Elyse realized she could have avoided this distressing conversation.

Aarya's voice took on a whining tone as she prodded, "Why won't you share your stories about him with me?"

Annoyed, Elyse retorted, "Is it because you can't control Jayden that you keep pestering me?"

“No, of course not,” Aarya quickly replied, denying the suggestion.

Elyse laughed derisively upon hearing her adamant denial. If Aarya truly had Jayden in check, Elyse would not be enduring his advances.

Sitting amidst the tension, the thought of being ensnared in a love triangle with Jayden and Aarya disgusted Elyse. She stated firmly, with a stern look, “You’ve enjoyed yourself enough. Now, please let me eat in peace.”

Aarya gazed intently at Elyse, her expression shifting into a forced smile. “I hope you’ve truly let go of Jayden. If your affections are as misleading as your assertions, and it turns out you still harbor feelings for him, the consequences are on you.”

After saying this, Aarya began to walk away.

Elyse, determined not to let her leave this time, grasped Aarya’s arm and pulled her back to her seat. She leaned in, her hands pressing down on the table as she looked firmly at Aarya.

“My feelings about Jayden are irrelevant to you. Since you cannot grasp his affection, you attempt to dominate other women. It shows your frailty.”

Aarya’s face was a mix of anger and humiliation. She clenched her teeth. “Elyse, no one has ever dared to speak to me like this before!”

Elyse, unimpressed, raised an eyebrow and grabbed Aarya by the collar to get a closer look at the marks scattered from her neck to her chest.

Aarya, momentarily flustered, quickly recovered, puffing out her chest to display the marks proudly.

“You seem to care a lot,” she taunted, her voice laced with challenge. “Jayden can’t help himself around me. He marks me despite my protests. Why can’t he be gentle?”

Releasing her grip, Elyse stared coldly at her. “So, what are you trying to say?”

Aarya seized the moment, her voice dripping with faux annoyance. “Oh, Jayden really infuriated me last night. He promised to save our first time for our wedding night, but he just couldn’t hold back. And he was so rough, no tenderness at all.”

Elyse’s reply was frosty, “First time? Whose first time are we talking about? Yours? His? Do either of you even have a first time left to claim? Please, don’t degrade the term.”

Realizing she was being mocked, Aarya’s face turned crimson with rage. She slammed her hand down on the table and stood up sharply. “You’re just jealous! That’s what this is about, isn’t it? You’re trying to make me look bad because you can’t stand it.”

Elyse simply crossed her arms and smirked, amused by the outburst. “Jealous of you? Really now, what exactly is there to envy?”

Chapter 836:

Aarya, seething and outmaneuvered, scanned the room, plotting her next move. “Just wait, Elyse. I’ll make you regret this.”

Ignoring her, Elyse turned her attention to the waiter placing pizza on the table. She sat down and began eating, dismissing Aarya entirely.

Fifteen minutes after Aarya’s outburst, Jayden walked into the restaurant with an easy stride. Elyse’s heart skipped a beat when she saw him, a mix of emotions fluttering through her as she quickly looked away.

Jayden slid into the seat beside Aarya, his eyes catching the marks on her neck. He paused momentarily, then acted as if everything was normal.

Pouring himself a glass of water, he took a hearty sip before smiling at Aarya. “What’s up, babe? Did you miss me?”

Aarya tilted her head, gesturing to her neck with a playful pout. “How can you even ask? After what you did last night, leaving me all alone this morning felt so sad.” Jayden’s eyes lingered on the hickeys, his smile widening knowingly. “Sorry about that. You know how hectic work has been with your dad loading me up. I promise, once things settle, I’ll make it up to you.”

Her mood visibly improved, but Aarya pressed on. “You were so wild last night. I thought you were going to break me! And all that spanking... it was so embarrassing. Promise you won’t go that far again.”

After a brief silence, Jayden nodded. “No more rough stuff next time.” His eyes briefly met Elyse’s, who was intently focusing on her pizza, trying to ignore their conversation.

Feeling his gaze, Elyse shifted uncomfortably. Why was he looking at her? She was just trying to eat in peace. Aarya’s frustration was palpable. Despite Jayden’s dominance in their private encounters, his demeanor at the restaurant was noticeably subdued. While she outwardly rebuffed his roughness, inwardly she craved it. She gave his arm a gentle shake, her voice soft but playful. “Even though I said stop, I wouldn’t mind if it happened again. I love you, Jayden, and I want to make you happy, no matter what.”

Jayden met her gaze intensely, nodding slowly. “Alright, I understand.”

Aarya was puzzled by his cryptic response; it unsettled her. She wondered if this was simply part of his complex nature—guarded and reserved, only truly freeing himself from his constraints in the privacy of their intimacy.

Meanwhile, Elyse, lost in her meal, jerked in surprise as she felt an unexpected touch. Glancing downwards, she discovered Jayden’s leg stealthily caressing hers beneath the table, his actions as baffling as they were bold.

Elyse froze in place. She felt utterly uncomfortable. What was Jayden thinking? After spending a night filled with passionate encounters with his current girlfriend, was he now making advances on her, his ex-wife, right in front of his girlfriend? Elyse was shaking with rage. How had she failed to see Jayden’s true nature earlier?

Taking charge of the situation, Elyse stomped forcefully on his foot.

Then, acting as if nothing had occurred, she lowered her head and continued eating her pizza, only to hear a muffled groan from Jayden.

He asked for it! Elyse's heart grew even colder. She despised this type of relationship and was unwilling to continue it. If Jayden thought he could use her as a plaything, she was resolved not to let him succeed.

Chapter 837:

Jayden's groan drew Aarya's attention. Having spent the night with him, Aarya's defenses were down, and she inquired softly, "What's wrong?"

Jayden persisted. He audaciously extended his foot, pressing it against Elyse's thigh. The restaurant table was long but narrow, allowing his long leg to reach and press against a sensitive area between Elyse's legs.

He said calmly, "It's nothing. Are you hungry? This pizza looks good. Let's just go for pizza today. What do you say?"

Aarya, misunderstanding, assumed Jayden was really in the mood for pizza. After spending the night with him, her dependency on him grew, causing her to cling to him more. While they talked about the types of pizza, Jayden kept up his advances under the table.

Elyse was just beginning to feel victorious when Jayden's daring action froze her. She worried that Aarya might spot Jayden harassing her beneath the table. As time went on, Elyse became increasingly frightened. Seizing a moment when Aarya was distracted, she shoved Jayden's foot away and quickly stood up, heading straight for the restroom.

Watching Elyse leave so abruptly, Aarya took the chance to berate her. "Look at your ex-wife. She's so rude. You should really cut off all ties with her. Keeping her around only drags you down."

Jayden agreed and got up, saying, "I need to use the restroom too. Your dad will call soon; can you handle it?" Without pausing, Aarya responded, "Of course, go ahead. If he calls for something, I'll playfully complain to make sure he gives you a break." She added timidly, "After all, you must be worn out from last night, right?"

Jayden raised an eyebrow but remained silent, turning to head for the restroom.

Elyse stood in the restroom, cleaning the footprint from her pantyhose. As she scrubbed, she grumbled, “Jayden is such a maniac, doing something like that to me in broad daylight. I’m about to lose my mind over him.”

Seemingly by chance, Jayden appeared, leaning against the restroom door, observing her frustrated expression. “Is this what you say about me when I’m not here?” Elyse was taken aback. Upon seeing Jayden, she retorted irritably, “Am I not allowed to complain? You provoked this.”

Jayden laughed at her response and remarked, “I enjoy teasing you like this, making you angry but unable to protest in public.” Approaching Elyse, he smiled slightly and added, “Do you realize how cute you are? It just makes me want to tease you more.”

Elyse met his gaze coldly, unfazed. “Why don’t you go tease your girlfriend? It seems Aarya is quite receptive to it. After last night’s sex, she’s become very... attached.”

Jayden scratched his ear and remarked, “Oh? Could it be that you’re jealous of Aarya? You really think we had sex?”

Disgusted, Elyse shoved him away. “I despise scumbags the most. Keep your distance and never come near me again.”

She attempted to leave, but Jayden caught her, forcing her to spin around and lean against the wall, his eyes brimming with lust. He murmured, “You’re jealous. That’s actually good news for me.”

Elyse angrily retorted, “Get away from me, or I’ll scream for help.”

Jayden seized her chin and kissed her forcefully, his hand moving up to her chest and squeezing her breasts. After a fierce struggle, Elyse succumbed, becoming limp in his grasp.

Chapter 838:

As he continued kissing her until she weakened, he whispered in her ear, “Let me tell you something. Last night, I wasn’t with Aarya.”

Elyse was stunned for three seconds before she threw a punch at Jayden’s abdomen. He groaned in pain, looking at Elyse in confusion.

Elyse sneered, “If you’re going to lie, at least make it believable. Who else could have slept with Aarya if it wasn’t you?”

She took a deep breath, trying to calm herself down, and said, “You say you have your own plans, cooperating with the Hudson family. No matter what effort or sacrifice you’ve made, it has nothing to do with me.”

Jayden hung his head. He could tell that this time, Elyse was genuinely angry.

He scratched his head, his tone laced with frustration. “I already said this before—I’ll explain it to you when the time is right. Why can’t you understand? Can’t you just wait a little longer?”

With a furrow of her brow, Elyse retorted, “Why should I? Why should I be caught between you and Aarya? Have you ever considered my feelings? This might all be fun and games to you, but I find it disgusting and hate it. I don’t want to see you or your girlfriend ever again.”

Jayden stared at Elyse, a long silence stretching between them. Finally, he asked, “Do the things I do disgust you? Or is it me you find revolting?”

Confusion painted Elyse’s face at his question. “What do you mean?”

Jayden’s lips twisted into a wry smile. “I know I’m repugnant. I thought you liked this about me. What changed now?”

Elyse kept her face rigid and unyielding. “Just because you’re repugnant doesn’t mean I have to let myself get dragged down with you.”

Jayden stood there, his eyes fixed intently on her. At that moment, he wanted to seal her lips with his. That way, Elyse couldn't say such hurtful words.

Jayden's eyes turned red. "You're mine, and only mine. Whatever I say, you will go along with it."

"Get it straight. We divorced long ago. We have nothing to do with each other. Aarya is now your girlfriend."

With those words, Elyse pushed Jayden away and left the restroom with a dark expression. She had just returned to her seat at the dining table when Aarya impatiently began to show off.

Aarya said, "I'm really sorry. I know it's hard for you to see Jayden being nice to me, but there's nothing I can do. Jayden wants to eat pizza from this place, so I have to stay with him."

"I've never seen someone as shameless as you." Elyse glared at Aarya, then picked up the water glass in front of her, pouring it all over Aarya's face.

Caught off guard, Aarya screamed and cursed, "You bitch! Are you insane?"

Elyse looked at Aarya coldly. "What's with all the screaming? It's just a glass of water. It's not like I'm trying to kill you. You're overreacting."

Aarya fumed with anger. She reached out, trying to hit Elyse. But Elyse was faster, slapping Aarya across the face.

"How dare you? I'm going to kill you!" Aarya had never thought Elyse would hit her so hard. Her cheek throbbed, stinging with pain as the skin swelled up.

Chapter 839:

A chilling light flashed in Elyse's eyes. "Kill me? That's not a bad idea. Go ahead and try. After everything you've done to ruin my life, I'll make sure you're the one who'll end up dead. It's only fair, right?"

Aarya wanted to rush at Elyse in anger, but Elyse didn't hesitate to slap her several more times, knocking the last bits of her defiance and leaving her completely stunned. Aarya's lips trembled as she seethed in rage.

Elyse's cold gaze never left Aarya, not the least bit threatened by her.

At that moment, Jayden returned, having rushed back after hearing the commotion. Seeing Aarya's disheveled state, he turned to Elyse and asked with furrowed brows, "Did you do this?"

"Yes. And what of it?" She sat nonchalantly in her chair, eating her pizza and looking completely at ease.

"Jayden, do you see what she's done to me? Do something! You should cut off her hands and feet. This bitch dared to hit me. She's crazy!" Aarya was beside herself with rage, her mind filled with thoughts of tearing Elyse apart.

Jayden quickly thought it over, then with a cold expression, coaxed Aarya out of the restaurant. Elyse had no idea what he was up to, and Aarya understood even less.

As the two were leaving, Aarya looked at Jayden in confusion and disbelief. "Are we really just going like this? I don't want to leave. I want you to make her pay!"

After they had left, the atmosphere in the restaurant seemed much lighter, and Elyse savored her meal even more.

Just then, a waiter came over with the pizza Jayden had ordered and said, "Miss, your pizza is ready." Elyse glanced at it and replied indifferently, "This isn't mine. The person who ordered that just left."

The waiter said, "It's yours. The man who placed the order said it was your favorite and asked me to bring it to you."

Elyse was surprised by what the waiter said. She pointed to herself, her expression confused. "Are you sure this was for me?"

The waiter confidently nodded and replied, “The man who placed the order just now claimed the woman with the violin is his wife. He mentioned you would enjoy this flavor.”

After sharing this, the waiter gave Elyse a playful smile and walked away.

Still puzzled, Elyse looked down at the pizza on the table, lifted the lid of the box, and discovered a potato, cheese, and ham pizza—exactly her favorites.

However, she felt no hunger. Jayden was trying to win her back with trivial gestures while still with another woman. He must be dreaming.

As Elyse nibbled on her leftover pizza, Darren entered, clad in a thick coat. Spotting her, he approached with excitement. “What a coincidence!”

Elyse nodded and inquired, “Came to eat?”

Darren replied eagerly, “I’m starving. On a day as snowy as this, I crave calories. Pizza is perfect.”

Taking a seat opposite her, Darren watched as she slid the pizza Jayden had ordered toward him and offered, “You might as well have this one.”

Chapter 840:

Darren’s face lit up. “Why this kindness? I was craving pizza, and now you’re giving me one!”

Elyse responded calmly, “Don’t think too much into it. It wasn’t my doing. Jayden ordered it.”

“If he got it, it’s meant for you. I knew it,” Darren remarked, grabbing the pizza eagerly.

To him, it mattered little who made the purchase. The pizza was intended for Elyse, and as a close friend, he felt entitled to enjoy some as well.

Watching Darren savor his meal, Elyse felt more at ease and began to eat more slowly, keeping him company.

After finishing a slice of pizza, Darren noticed Elyse's frequent distractions. He inquired with curiosity, "What's bothering you? Was there a disagreement with Jayden? Why do you seem so distant?"

Elyse shook her head. "No, there wasn't a fight. You're reading too much into it."

Darren gave a dismissive snort. "You can't fool me. Something happened. I know you too well. What was the argument about? I feel like I should contribute something more than just eating and drinking here."

A smile broke on Elyse's face. She decided to open up to him, pausing briefly before asking, "What's your perspective on love?"

Caught off guard, Darren responded, "That's a hefty question. Hard to pin down."

"Just share what you can," Elyse urged, her eyes curious but patient.

"As far as I can tell, love doesn't come with a simple answer," Darren replied, continuing with his meal. He then reflected deeply and said, "I suppose love means deep understanding and acceptance."

Intrigued, Elyse supported her chin with her hand and probed further, "And how should we interpret that?"

Darren thoughtfully touched his chin and started, "It's hard to spell out completely, but I see love as accepting someone as they are."

Elyse persisted, "Could you elaborate?"

“It means my love for you is profound, accepting you in your entirety. You don’t need to display only your strengths like joy, ambition, or energy. It’s also about being open with your flaws, selfishness, and the darker aspects of your character.”

After a pause, Darren added, “I embrace all of you, not just the appealing parts. I love all that makes up who you are.”

Elyse was taken aback by his maturity. She covered her mouth in astonishment and exclaimed, “You’ve really thought this through. I’m genuinely taken aback.”

Darren placed his hands on his hips and said with pride, “Surprised, right? I’m a good catch. Anyone who ends up with me is indeed fortunate.”

Elyse, curious, posed a question. “If you’re such a good catch, why have I never seen you with someone?”

“It’s not from a lack of desire. Opportunities have just been scarce,” Darren explained, continuing to eat his pizza and smiling. “There is someone I’m interested in, but she’s already with someone else. I wouldn’t want to disrupt that.”

Elyse was taken aback. “I had no idea you felt that way. I’m sorry, did that upset you?”