

Bound love 851

Chapter 851:

At last, Elyse positioned herself in the center of the stage, showcasing her talent under the spotlight with both grace and precision. As the performance concluded, the audience broke into enthusiastic applause. Elyse bowed elegantly before leaving the stage from the other side.

Darren loosened his tie, his face lighting up with a smile. "Finally, my moment has arrived. Time to add some excitement."

He looked back at Fiona, who was now seated on the floor, looking dazed.

Darren felt no compassion toward her. He cast her one final indifferent glance before redirecting his focus to the stage.

Darren took the stage for the final performance. Fiona's gaze was fixed on him, yet her mind was adrift. Wasn't she supposed to be the one up there? How had she become the one left behind, forgotten in the shadows?

Footsteps echoed behind her, snapping her from her daze. She turned slowly, her movements heavy, to see Elyse approaching in a fiery red dress. Elyse looked down at Fiona with an air of superiority.

Fiona forced a smile, though it barely touched her lips. "How did you get back? You shouldn't have come. Did you pull some strings? Otherwise, how could you possibly be here?"

Elyse's eyes narrowed, her voice sharp as a blade. "Are you indirectly admitting that you tried to sabotage me and steal my place in the competition?"

Fiona's jaw tightened, her pride refusing to let her admit anything. She glared at Elyse, her silence speaking volumes.

Elyse moved closer, circling Fiona like a predator sizing up its prey. She crouched down to meet Fiona's eyes, her tone curious yet laced with venom. "I've always wondered, what does the violin really mean to you? Do you truly love it, or is it just a tool for you to climb the social ladder?"

Fiona's expression turned icy. "What are you getting at?"

Elyse tilted her head, her gaze unyielding. "It's just that when you used to practice, you were never serious. You even quit Mr. Tucker's studio for some man. And now, here you are, fighting tooth and nail to get into the Swan Cup. What's your reason for all of this? Do you regret leaving Mr. Tucker's studio? Are you trying to prove yourself, hoping he'll take you back?"

Fiona let out a cold laugh, her eyes flashing with defiance. "Why should I explain myself to you? What right do you have to question me? Let me make one thing clear—I don't give a damn about Cody Tucker. I only care about myself."

Elyse nodded, her face an unreadable mask as she rose to her feet. She looked down at Fiona, her gaze cold and distant. "If that's how you feel, then there's nothing more to discuss. Stay backstage and watch me take the stage."

With that, Elyse's lips curved into a knowing smile, a silent victory, as she turned and strode confidently out of the backstage area, leaving Fiona in her wake.

Fiona remained where she was, sinking slowly to the floor as if the weight of her own despair was too much to bear.

She glanced down at her diamond-encrusted dress, which still glittered with the promise of victory that now seemed so far out of reach.

She had poured everything into this moment, sacrificed so much to stand in the spotlight, but Elyse had returned. She was the ghost that refused to be banished.

Chapter 852:

Time seemed to blur as Fiona sat there, her mind spiraling into a dark, empty void. Then, the announcer's voice cut through her thoughts, clear and sharp. "The final piece of the competition is Paganini's Caprice No. 24."

Fiona let out a bitter laugh, a sound tinged with irony and regret. It was a piece she had never mastered, not because she couldn't, but because she hadn't cared enough to try. She had let laziness rob her of this moment.

The laugh bubbled up from deep within her, spilling out uncontrollably until tears mixed with it, streaming down her face, etching a path of sorrow across her cheeks.

She laughed until the sound of it became a desperate, hollow echo. Then, amidst her despair, she heard the unmistakable rhythm of approaching footsteps, the heavy yet steady click of leather shoes against the floor.

Fiona's heart skipped a beat. Was it Gavin, coming to find her?

She hastily wiped away her tears, but resentment still burned in her eyes. When she turned around, she froze. It wasn't Gavin. It was Cody.

Panic seized her, her breath catching in her throat. Of all people, Cody was the last person she had expected to see.

Cody had been lurking in the shadows of the backstage, his eyes scanning the audience until they landed on a familiar figure—Fiona.

Fiona knew Cody had come to watch Elyse perform.

Annoyance flared within her, and she hastily wiped the tears from her face. She pushed herself up, forcing a composed demeanor as she faced him. "Mr. Tucker, why are you backstage? Shouldn't you be in the audience?" Her voice was steady, but there was an edge to it, a hint of the turmoil she was trying to suppress.

Cody looked at her for a long moment, his expression unreadable. Then, with a slow sigh, he spoke, his voice heavy with disappointment. "Do you realize your mistakes?"

His words hit Fiona like a slap, and her composure shattered. Her face twisted with anger as she snapped back at him, “Mistakes? What mistakes? Where did I go wrong? I haven’t done anything wrong!”

Cody watched as Fiona’s defenses crumbled, her anger and shame spilling over. He sighed again, the weight of regret pressing down on him. “I was genuinely pleased to see you enter the Swan Cup, but I know your abilities better than anyone. I knew you wouldn’t make it to the final.”

“So what? What are you trying to say? Don’t forget, luck is also a part of strength. And my luck has been incredibly good.” She pounded her chest, forcing a smile that didn’t reach her eyes, trying desperately to prove something to him, perhaps even to herself.

Cody’s heart ached as he looked at the woman before him. Fiona had once been a promising student, but now she seemed so lost, so unrecognizable.

What had changed her? Was this who she had always been, or had something darker, something desperate, taken root in her soul?

He didn’t have the answers, but he knew he couldn’t just stand by and watch her continue down this path. “I don’t know what you’ve done,” he said gently, “But I hope you’ll turn yourself in. Listen, don’t keep making mistakes. Otherwise, there’s really no turning back.”

Chapter 853:

His words hung in the air, heavy and final, as if he were offering her one last chance to redeem herself, to find the person she had once been before it was too late.

Fiona tilted her head, her chin raised proudly as she regarded Cody with a dismissive look. “You think I’m guilty? Then let the authorities judge me. You don’t get to decide based on mere assumptions.”

Cody, his brow furrowed in frustration, attempted to reach her. “Don’t let bitterness cloud your judgment. You’ve lost sight of who you really are.”

Fiona responded with a defiant sneer, “So what? I’m happy and fulfilled. I have everything I need.”

Cody opened his mouth to speak, but Fiona cut him off. “Enough. You’re not my mentor anymore, so drop the act. In your eyes, the only worthy disciples are Gavin, Irving, and Elyse—not me.”

She paused, her voice bitter. “I could never fit into your esteemed circle. My presence would only tarnish your reputation.”

Cody’s face registered shock, his earlier attempts to interject halted by her words, leaving him mute.

“What?” Fiona challenged, reading his silence. “You think I don’t belong. So save your breath. I stopped seeing you as my mentor long ago.” Her stance was unyielding, a complete rejection of Cody.

Silence fell between them. Finally, Cody found his voice, though it carried a note of defeat. “To play the violin beautifully, your soul must be pure. If it’s clouded, the music will reflect that.”

Fiona scoffed. “What’s that supposed to mean? Are you suggesting my soul is tainted? Yours might be pristine, but mine certainly isn’t.”

Just then, Gavin appeared backstage, his gaze piercing. “Are you lashing out because you believe Mr. Tucker shouldn’t have ousted you from his studio?”

Fiona nonchalantly flicked her ear. “What are you implying? I’m not harboring any resentment towards him. I’m merely speaking the truth.”

Gavin laughed, his smile tinged with scorn. “Truth? You know exactly why you were expelled. It wasn’t your actions but your attitude. You haven’t changed at all.”

Fiona’s smirk was self-satisfied. “You admit I did wrong, then? Let the law judge me. You’re not qualified.” With that, she turned sharply, her shoulder brushing Gavin’s as she stormed off without a backward glance.

Cody sighed deeply, his spirit dampened by his unsuccessful attempt to persuade Fiona. "Maybe I'm just getting old."

Gavin tried to offer some comfort. "Mr. Tucker, don't dwell on it. Fiona's beyond listening to reason now. It's not worth your energy."

Chapter 854:

After a moment's gloom, Cody managed a weak nod. "I suppose you're right. I can't change her mind. Just let it be."

Gavin nodded in approval. "That's the spirit. Let's head back to the audience. We might still catch Elyse's performance."

Cody murmured an agreement, his shoulders slumped as they made their way back. Meanwhile, Elyse was backstage, her eyes fixed nervously on the performers.

Geraldine approached quietly. "Where have you been? You vanished for a while!"

Caught off guard, Elyse quickly fabricated an excuse. "I was practicing alone."

Geraldine's frown deepened. "Practicing today? You're really pushing yourself too hard."

Elyse gave a small smile. "I'm just trying to do my best."

Though Geraldine pouted, slightly upset, she decided not to press further. She then gestured towards Edward and asked, "What's with him? Why does he look so worried?"

Following Geraldine's gaze, Elyse noticed Edward clasping his hands together, his demeanor one of deep prayer. Geraldine remarked with a hint of concern, "I've never seen him look so serious before. It's actually making me a bit anxious."

Elyse responded thoughtfully, “Well, it’s the last competition. Everyone’s eager to win. It’d be odd if he weren’t serious.”

Geraldine agreed wholeheartedly, “Absolutely! With the last competition on the line, Edward is bound to give his best.”

Elyse clutched her chest and gave a wry smile. “Please, don’t remind me. My heart’s pounding like it’s going to burst. It wasn’t this intense even when I was on stage earlier.”

Hearing this, Geraldine raised an eyebrow and teased, “I hope you get so nervous that you mess up your performance. It’d be nice to have one less tough competitor.”

Elyse chuckled heartily and said, “That won’t happen. I’m going to nail my performance and snag first place.”

“In your dreams!” Geraldine shot back with a playful stare. Knowing she needed to step away to manage her own jitters, she thought it best to find a quiet corner to regain her composure.

Once the others had dispersed from her vicinity, Elyse laid a hand on her chest, trying to calm her racing heart. That was when Darren approached her.

Whispering close to her ear, he mentioned, “I bumped into Jayden this morning. He was by himself and seemed really isolated, but he actually responded nicely when I said hello. Can you believe it?”

Elyse looked confused. “He’s always polite. What’s so shocking about that?”

Darren said helplessly, “But his politeness is usually reserved just for you. It’s so obvious; anyone could tell he favors you immensely.”

Chapter 855:

Elyse blinked, at a loss for words. Her relationship with Jayden had been strained for some time. She knew better than anyone that Jayden had never fully favored her; his heart seemed sealed off.

Darren, recalling something, flashed a smile. "Oh! Jayden had a message for you."

Curious, Elyse inquired, "What did he say?"

"He wanted me to tell you not to worry. He's in the audience, cheering you on. No matter your final ranking, he sees you as the best," Darren said, visibly touched by his own relay of the message.

He then sighed sentimentally. "It seems he's softened a bit."

Elyse opened her mouth, but no words came out. How could Jayden say something like that? Wasn't he always keen on reining her in and opposed to her competing? It dawned on her that her time apart from Jayden had left her unable to gauge his true feelings.

"Are you so moved that you're speechless? What's got you so quiet?" Darren waved his hand before Elyse's face. Elyse came to her senses and offered a smile. "Alright, I get it now. Thanks for that encouragement."

Pleased, Darren nodded. "I thought as much. Love has a way of calming the nerves. You can always rely on Jayden's support."

After relishing the exchange, Darren walked away, content.

Left behind, Elyse remained standing there, feeling somewhat adrift. Jayden was no longer the pillar she could lean on; that role had shifted to Aarya.

With a resigned smile, Elyse cleared her mind of distractions and focused solely on the competition.

Exiting backstage, Fiona made a beeline for the lounge, quickly pulling out her phone to call Kaelyn.

Kaelyn, expecting to hear cheerful updates, teased her with a smile, “So, has the competition wrapped up? What place did you get?”

“Competition? Elyse is back,” Fiona blurted out, her voice laden with fury and desperation. “Didn’t you assure me that she wouldn’t return? How did she manage to come back right before the competition? You’re useless. You’ve ruined everything.”

Kaelyn was taken aback by the news of Elyse’s return but was quickly stung by Fiona’s biting remarks.

Kaelyn retorted sharply, “What’s gotten into you? After everything I’ve done for you, you throw insults at me? Have you lost your senses?”

“Yes! I’m out of my mind, and it’s your fault!” Fiona retorted, her frustration pouring out. “You promised me Elyse wouldn’t return. You said my path in the competition would be clear. And now? You’re nothing but a liar, and I’m a fool to trust you.”

Unmoved by Fiona’s distress, Kaelyn focused on the implications. “Are you implying you want to back out of our agreement? You’re refusing to uphold your end of the deal?”

Fiona scoffed disdainfully. “Deal? You failed to deliver on your end. How can you even ask for my help? What makes you think you’re entitled? My dreams have been shattered, so don’t expect to gain anything from me.”

Chapter 856:

Kaelyn found Fiona’s remarks so absurd that she laughed in frustration.

Straightening up, she lost interest in her nails and responded coldly, “I’ll ask you one last time. Are you going to back out?”

Fiona had been blinded by desire and had forsaken the rationality she should have upheld when she agreed to collaborate with Kaelyn back then.

And now, she had to grasp the precariousness of her position. She didn't fully understand the consequences of crossing Kaelyn after everything she had done.

At that moment, Kaelyn's demeanor turned icy.

Her expression grew stern, and her voice deepened as she asked, each word deliberate, "Are you prepared to own up to your words today?"

Already aggravated by Kaelyn's tone, Fiona felt her irritation mount as Kaelyn kept pressing.

Angrily, she retorted, "What are you getting at? Either get rid of Elyse for me and ensure I win, or you're useless to me. How dare you demand anything from me? You're utterly shameless."

After her tirade, Fiona hung up abruptly. She scratched her head, somewhat unhinged. She yelled in the lounge, "Why on earth has Elyse returned? Is someone helping her secretly?"

This was the exact question troubling Kaelyn. How had Elyse managed to return? Was it possible someone had helped her? But why would they help her? And how could they have done it?

Kaelyn bit her nails, visibly annoyed. Who was assisting Elyse from the shadows? She pondered hard but couldn't solve the mystery, so she decided to make a call to investigate. But the person on the line advised her to stay out of it.

Kaelyn ended the call in frustration, but a thought struck her. If that person advised her not to inquire, it meant the one helping Elyse was no ordinary individual.

A flicker of realization sparked in Kaelyn's eyes, but it soon darkened. She clenched her teeth and muttered angrily, "Elyse, you're incredibly fortunate. Wherever you are, someone's always there to help you. But I refuse to believe your luck will hold forever."

Far backstage, Elyse suddenly sneezed, surprising Edward, who looked up and exclaimed, "My prayers worked!"

Elyse rubbed her nose, puzzled. “Prayers?”

Edward smiled mischievously and said, “I prayed that the most formidable contestant would suffer an accident and withdraw from the contest.”

Elyse playfully punched Edward, causing him to flinch.

She scolded, “You crafty scoundrel! It was just a tickle in my nose.”

Edward responded playfully, “I was only joking. Don’t take it too seriously!”

Elyse gave him a stern look, then followed the host’s instructions and stepped onto the stage to face the audience.

For some reason, she immediately noticed Jayden sitting in the audience.

They had last parted on unpleasant terms, and his presence now stirred some unexpected feelings within her.

Chapter 857:

Elyse didn’t have the time or energy to delve into these emotions. She picked up her violin and started to play.

From his seat, Jayden watched Elyse on stage, thinking she looked radiant.

He had always recognized her immense talent and believed that her brilliance would eventually captivate the world with her skills.

This made him fear that he might not be able to keep up with her.

He knew she was even more extraordinary than she realized.

Meanwhile, in the audience, conversations buzzed.

“The Charles family has started a betting pool. I’ve placed bets on several contenders. How much did you bet?”

“Not a lot. The finalists in this Swan Cup are all strong contenders. I couldn’t make up my mind.”

“The Charles family offered you an opportunity, and you didn’t grab it. You’re such a coward! If you picked the right one, you could strike it rich in no time.”

“So, who did you bet on to win?”

“Edward. He’s clearly the top contender here.”

Jayden, with his legs crossed, half-listened to the gamblers chatting next to him. He wasn’t interested in gambling. His interest was piqued by the mention of the Charles family.

The Charles family was another influential force in the state, though they steered clear of arms dealing. Their focus was on investing in various competitions and setting up betting pools.

They had maintained a low profile at major competitions over the years, never meddling but discreetly establishing betting markets.

In this operation, the governor had focused solely on the Hudson family, overlooking the Charles family.

While Jayden was deep in thought, Elyse finished her performance. Watching her gracefully bow, Jayden felt a surge of warmth.

No matter how harsh the world seemed, just seeing Elyse made everything feel beautiful.

After Elyse took her bow, she left the stage, where Darren was waiting, looking somewhat troubled. He said, “You were too good—how can I possibly top that?”

Elyse replied playfully, “If you can’t beat it, it just means I’ll be the one winning first place.”

Darren immediately shook his head in disagreement. “No way. I still have a shot at beating you.” With that, Darren stepped onto the stage as the final contestant.

After Darren’s performance, it was time for the judges to score. All the contestants who had finished waited nervously. Elyse was no different. After carefully storing her violin, she stood off to the side, watching Darren’s performance intently, showing no signs of easing up.

When Darren completed his performance, all the contestants returned to the stage, anxiously awaiting the judges’ decision, wondering who among them would be declared the winner.

The scoring process seemed to take longer than usual this time. Some judges even appeared to be debating, each with a favorite contestant, yet unable to persuade the others.

Chapter 858:

Edward sneakily glanced over at Elyse, who was standing quietly. He gently poked her and whispered, “Who do you think will win first place?”

Elyse wasn’t sure but hoped it would be her. So she responded candidly, “Me.”

Edward chuckled and said, “You’re not very modest, are you?”

Elyse snorted. “I’ve given it my all to outperform everyone. Being modest would just seem dishonest.”

Edward blushed and responded softly, "I admire your honesty."

Elyse looked at Edward, speechless.

Edward cleared his throat and gently reminded her, "Remember, you promised to consider our relationship after the competition."

Elyse instantly felt annoyed and sighed heavily.

Seeing her reaction, Edward quickly asked, "What does that sigh mean? Is my affection really that bothersome to you?"

Elyse hesitated, then shook her head. "Just be patient and wait for the results. I'm not in the mood to discuss this now."

Edward touched his lips thoughtfully, a dark look crossing his eyes, but he remained silent, standing tall and avoiding further conversation with Elyse.

Finally, the judges made their decision and returned to their seats.

The host glanced at the results, looking surprised, then walked onto the stage and approached the microphone. "In this year's Swan Cup Grand Final, three contestants have tied for third place. They are Darren and Geraldine."

At this announcement, some in the audience expressed disappointment, appearing more upset than the contestants themselves.

Elyse stood still for a moment, taking in the news, then realized the battle for first place was now between her and Edward.

Elyse instinctively glanced at Edward and could see his nerves. He even swallowed hard. Elyse tightened her hands into fists, just as anxious, her heart racing as though it might leap from her chest.

Darren whispered, "This is so tense. After this competition, will you and Edward become rivals?"

Elyse snapped back quietly, "It's tense enough as it is. Don't make it worse."

Darren quickly nodded and kept quiet.

Edward said helplessly, "I used to joke that you'd be up against me for first place. I never imagined it would actually come to that."

Elyse quipped, "Looks like your prayers were answered. What more could you ask for?"

Edward's lips twitched.

As the tension reached its peak, the host finally announced the second-place winner. He looked at Elyse and Edward and curiously inquired, "Who do you think got first place?"

Then, handing the microphone to Elyse, she responded, "I think I did."

Chapter 859:

"An ambitious young lady. And you, what do you think?" the host asked Edward.

Edward cleared his throat and replied, "First place is mine."

The host chuckled and then said, "You both have great confidence, but only one can be in first place. The difference between you two is just 0.1 points."

Elyse's expression grew concerned upon hearing this. Just 0.1 points? Their scores were nearly the same, separated by the slightest gap.

Impatient, Edward urged, "So, who is in first place?"

The host playfully dragged out the suspense, replying slowly, “I know you’re eager, but hold on. I’m about to reveal the results now...”

The host picked up the microphone and said, “The contestant who battled through and claimed first place is...” His gaze shifted towards Edward, who was brimming with anticipation.

As Edward caught his eye, his expression brightened. He was sure the first place was his.

“Let’s give a round of applause to Elyse! With just a 0.1-point difference, she triumphed as the first-place winner,” the announcement rang out.

Edward’s expression turned sour instantly. He wondered why the host had misled him.

Darren was the first to react with joy. He cheered and hugged the bewildered Elyse, exclaiming, “You’re the winner! You’re the champion of the Swan Cup.”

Geraldine approached too, placing her hand on Elyse’s shoulder with a forced smile. “Even though I didn’t win, I genuinely congratulate you on taking first place.”

Elyse was still processing. She hesitantly asked, “Am I really first? Did I secure first place?”

Seeing her disbelief, Darren chuckled. “You don’t think the host was kidding, do you? You’re the champion! You defeated competitors from across the globe!”

The host added softly from the side, “You’ve always been a strong contender for first place in this year’s Swan Cup. You have a lot of supporters.”

Gradually, Elyse embraced the truth. A smile emerged as she exclaimed, “I actually won first place. I’m the champion!”

Nearby, Edward was clenching his teeth tightly. With tears welling up, he murmured, “No wonder you caught my eye. Congratulations on outperforming me and clinching first place.”

Elyse, visibly annoyed, retorted, “Your face says you’re not really happy for me. You don’t sound sincere in your congratulations.”

Edward retorted, “I only lost by 0.1 points. How could I be content? You’re expecting too much, wanting me to wholeheartedly congratulate you.”

Elyse frowned. “What I’m saying is, if you can’t be genuine, then it’s better not to say anything at all. Don’t force it and make it seem like I’m forcing you.”

Edward sighed, choosing not to respond.

Darren teased, “Don’t mind him. He’s always so full of himself, bragging about being the best. Now that you’ve beaten him by just 0.1 points, of course he’s upset.”

Geraldine crossed her arms and nodded in agreement. “Exactly. He needs a reality check, or he’ll never stop being unbearably arrogant.”

Chapter 860:

Geraldine wasn’t fond of Edward. When she won the Comeback Competition and made it to the Grand Final, Edward had scoffed at her, suggesting she could never win first place. This scorn left her quite resentful.

So, seeing Elyse win first place actually made her feel somewhat better because she held Elyse in high regard as a competitor.

Soon, the time came for the awards ceremony. Unexpectedly, three contestants had tied for third place, so they initially had to share one trophy. The organizers assured them that two additional trophies would be provided soon.

When Elyse received the trophy from the judges, she was filled with immense joy. She looked at the engraving on it and saw her name proudly etched into the surface. Looking around, she scanned the audience for Cody. Spotting him, she waved excitedly and called out, “Mr. Tucker, I got first place. I didn’t let you down!”

Cody smiled and waved back.

The middle-aged man next to Cody, feeling slightly envious, commented, “Congratulations! Your student beat mine. Quite the achievement!”

Cody responded confidently, “Not surprising at all. Elyse’s emotional delivery was clearly superior to your student’s. That 0.1-point difference came down to emotional depth!”

The middle-aged man huffed, feeling proud yet challenged. “We’ve learned a lot this time. I’ll keep pushing my student. Next time, the first place will be his.”

Cody, just as determined, retorted, “We’ll see at the next contest. No matter how often we compete, my student will always outperform yours. The top spot will always go to my student.”

Irving, overhearing this exchange, smirked slightly, amused by their rivalry.

After exiting the stage, Elyse kissed her trophy and joyfully headed back to her dressing room.

However, Elyse found Fiona still sitting with a sullen expression. When she noticed the trophy in Elyse’s hands, Fiona asked with a hint of jealousy, “What place did you finish? Third? Second?”

In Fiona’s mind, it was unthinkable for Elyse to have won first place, and she certainly didn’t wish it for her.

Elyse frowned. “I won first place. What does that have to do with you? Now, please leave.”

“You got first place?” Fiona’s voice was tinged with shock, envy, and a touch of disbelief.

She remembered when she first got to know Elyse; Elyse's skills were somewhat lacking, even inferior to her own. How on earth had Elyse managed to clinch first place?

Fiona, seething with jealousy, couldn't contain herself. She stood abruptly, reaching out. She demanded, "Let me see it. I can't believe you actually won first place."

Elyse, initially inclined to show Fiona the award, reconsidered. Winning first place was her achievement, her moment. Why should she have to prove anything just because Fiona demanded it?

She withdrew her hand and shook her head firmly. "Whether you believe it or not is up to you. I don't have to prove anything to you."

Her expression hardened as she continued, "This is my lounge, not yours. I'm going to have to ask you to leave."