

Bound love 861

Chapter 861:

Fiona crossed her arms, her voice dripping with sarcasm. “Wow, Elyse, feeling pretty high and mighty now, huh? Taking first place at the Swan Cup, you’ve certainly caught Mr. Tucker’s eye.”

Elyse quirked an eyebrow, her smile sharp. “Are you jealous I won first place, while you’ve failed so spectacularly you can’t even face him anymore?”

Fiona clenched her jaw, her eyes burning with rage. “You’ve really sharpened your tongue.”

Seeing the venom in Fiona’s eyes, Elyse realized just how much Fiona had changed, transforming into someone she could hardly recognize. Once a good person, Fiona seemed to have lost her way.

Elyse ceased her reflections with a sigh, turning to Fiona to ask, “What changed you, Fiona? Was it Jayden? Or an unrequited love?”

“It’s because of you, Elyse! You’ve taken everything from me, and yet you stand there playing the innocent. I can’t bear to look at you!” Fiona’s words burst forth, unleashing her fury.

“Me?” Elyse retorted with disbelief. “Am I just an easy target for you? Must I shoulder the blame for your mistakes?”

Fiona’s laughter followed, cold and mocking. “It doesn’t matter. Deny it if you wish. We’re past the point of talking. I have nothing left to say to you.”

At that moment, Gavin stepped in, flanked by two officers, his presence commanding and resolute. He swung the door wide and declared, “Nothing left to say? I don’t think so, Fiona.”

Fiona recoiled slightly at the sight of the officers, then asked warily, “What is this about? I haven’t done anything wrong.”

Gavin chuckled at Fiona’s distressed look and teased, “Scared, are you? What’s there to be afraid of if you’re innocent?”

Fiona, sensing a trap, sharply responded, “My fear is that you’re framing me—accusing me of crimes I never committed.”

Gavin dismissed her concerns with a wave of his hand.

“That’s not my problem. There have been too many dubious occurrences in this competition, and some competitors have even demanded a thorough investigation into your actions. Ensuring the competition’s integrity and involving the police was inevitable.”

Fiona shook her head, a rueful smile playing on her lips, her eyes tinged with sadness. “To think you would do this—lead the investigation that hands me over to the police. I never saw it coming.”

At this, Elyse furrowed her brow and interjected, sounding disapproving, “What are you implying? That Gavin is betraying you, that he lacks sympathy for you? Wasn’t it you who let him down first?”

Fiona scoffed, “I let him down? Isn’t he clearly favoring you? Both you and Irving are siding with Elyse. That’s just the truth.”

A sigh of resignation passed Gavin’s lips. “If you believe I’m favoring Elyse, then believe what you will,” he said, his patience wearing thin.

Long ago, when Fiona first turned against him, any sense of friendship he felt towards her had evaporated.

Gavin addressed the two officers. “I’ve said all I need to. It’s in your hands now.”

Chapter 862:

The officers, with a firm nod, stepped toward Fiona, their faces set in serious lines.

Feeling cornered, Fiona retreated step by step. Her guilty conscience amplified her fear, making it clear to everyone there that she had something to hide.

In a voice filled with terror, Fiona protested, “No! You can’t arrest me! I haven’t done anything. There’s no evidence against me.”

One officer responded calmly, “We’re just conducting an investigation, ma’am. There’s no need to panic. We’re not going to harm you.”

Overwhelmed by her fears, Fiona shouted back, “No! Gavin sent you, didn’t he? You’re not real cops. You’re here to set me up, to make me admit to something I didn’t do!”

No matter how much Fiona screamed and cursed, the police officers still took her away.

Elyse glanced at Gavin and mused, “You know, I’ve always felt that without solid evidence to prove Fiona’s guilt, arresting her doesn’t make much sense.”

Gavin raised an eyebrow. “Oh, I forgot to mention—about fifty minutes ago, a man walked into the police station and turned himself in. He said that, out of sheer desperation, he met a woman online who paid him to sabotage you. After carrying it out, his conscience caught up with him, so he decided to come clean to the authorities.”

Elyse was taken aback. “But what does that have to do with Fiona?”

Gavin explained, “He identified Fiona as the one who hired him—the same guy who ran over another finalist and kidnapped your...”

Still puzzled, Elyse pressed on, “Wait a second. That doesn’t make sense. Would Fiona have that kind of money? And how could she even manage to hire someone online to commit a crime like that?”

Gavin shrugged, looking just as perplexed. “That’s exactly why the police have to take her in for questioning. There are too many unanswered questions here.”

He paused briefly, then went on, “Besides, you know the music hall’s security is pretty inadequate, and there’s no surveillance. We still haven’t figured out everything that happened there.”

Elyse pouted, crossing her arms. “Well, that’s not my problem. It’s yours, Gavin!”

Gavin noticed her sulking and playfully flicked her forehead. “You heartless little thing! I’m so stressed out over this that I can barely eat, and you’re just brushing it off like it’s nothing.”

“Ouch!” Elyse yelped as tears of pain sprang to her eyes.

Gavin, clearly pleased, announced, “There’s a celebration tonight. Mr. Tucker is looking forward to introducing you to his longtime friend. Make sure you make a good impression and don’t let us down.”

Elyse nodded in response. “I understand. I’ll give it my all!” As Gavin turned to leave, a thought struck him, and he swung back around, adding, “Oh, and I saw Jayden on my way here. He’s down in the lobby, apparently waiting for you.”

Elyse paused for a moment, her expression turning somber. “I’d rather not see him.”

Understanding her discomfort, Gavin suggested, “Why don’t you use the back exit then? I’ll have Irving escort you.”

Elyse nodded again, her voice silent.

Chapter 863:

Noticing her downcast expression, Gavin tried to lift her spirits. “You took first place today. Don’t let this spoil your mood. You’ve outshone a lot of skilled competitors to achieve this. Take pride in that.”

Feeling awkward from the compliment, Elyse looked away. “Thanks, Gavin, but please, ease up on the praises. I’m quite shy, you know.”

Gavin chuckled. “Alright, I’ll text Irving. You go ahead and meet him backstage.”

“Will do, just let me change first.”

Gavin left, and Elyse let out a quiet sigh. Despite the excitement of the win, she was weary of the constant attention.

After changing from her competition attire into a thick coat, Elyse grabbed her large bags and exited the dressing room.

As she waited for Irving backstage, a hurried staff member bumped into her, sending her tumbling to the floor.

Luckily, she was bundled up in thick clothing, which protected her from injury.

“Sorry, I’m so sorry!” The staff member halted immediately, helped Elyse to her feet, and offered a hurried apology, “Are you all right?”

Elyse gestured dismissively. “I’m okay. I’ve got plenty of padding on. But what’s the rush? What’s going on?”

The staff member looked visibly shaken as she explained in a distressed tone, “There’s a man who set himself on fire right at the entrance to the music hall. They say he couldn’t handle losing a bet on today’s competition.”

Elyse, puzzled, asked, “What do you mean? It was just a competition. Anyone could have won.”

The staff member sighed. “You might not know, but he was a gambler. He wagered everything, hoping to win, but when you won, his hopes were dashed.”

Surprised, Elyse responded, “People were betting on this?”

The staff member nodded. “It happens every year. Folks gamble everything they have, dreaming of a big win, only to lose it all.”

Hearing this for the first time, Elyse struggled with the concept. With a thoughtful frown, she said, “I’ve never gambled myself. It’s something I know nothing about.”

The staff member earnestly advised, “And it’s better that way. Stay clear of gambling. It’s nothing but trouble.” With that, she hurried away to address the crisis at the music hall.

Elyse was leaning against the wall, her patience wearing thin when Irving finally showed up, notably late. She couldn’t help but blurt out, “Irving, what took you so long?”

Irving’s expression soured, his frustration evident. “You wouldn’t believe what happened. I was at the front entrance of the concert hall, bidding someone farewell, when out of nowhere, a maniac sets himself on fire. Can you guess what he was yelling as he burned?”

Elyse, taken aback, shook her head, her voice tinged with disbelief. “What on earth could he have said? That he’d quit gambling in his next life?”

Irving let out a bitter chuckle. “It wasn’t about giving up gambling. He claimed that Edward should have won, not you. Can you believe that?”

Realization dawned on Elyse. “Oh, so he must have placed his bets on Edward?”

Chapter 864:

“You figured out he was a gambler?” Irving exhaled heavily. “The whole place is in chaos now. Gavin is in for a long night. He’ll be dealing with this mess until morning.”

A curious spark lit up in Elyse’s eyes as she pondered, then inquired, “Gavin gets to be a staff member at the Swan Cup. Why not you?”

“I declined because I’m not interested in such thankless tasks that would only wear me out and make me age ahead of my time,” Irving explained calmly.

Elyse scratched her head. “I just thought maybe you weren’t as skilled as Gavin, and that’s why the organizers didn’t ask you.”

“Hey, just because you won first place, do you think you can insult me to my face?” Irving chided her lightly.

Elyse shook her head and softened her tone. “I didn’t mean it like that. Let’s drop it and get moving. I’m really tired and want to lie down for a bit.”

Irving looked at her and, seeing her stand there quietly, sighed resignedly. “Alright, I won’t argue. Let’s head back to the hotel and rest.” He gathered Elyse’s belongings, escorted her to the car, and they drove away.

Elyse, sitting in the passenger seat, rested her chin on her hand and gazed out the window absentmindedly. As they drove past the front of the concert hall, she noticed the area was still bustling, indicating the earlier self-immolation incident hadn’t been resolved yet. A sudden thought struck her: could Jayden be in that crowd? If he didn’t wait for her, would he be upset and disappointed?

The moment this thought entered her mind, she slapped her own cheek sharply without a second thought. Irving, behind the wheel, was taken aback by her sudden action. His voice filled with astonishment, “Did you just slap yourself? Is this some kind of ritual you have for celebrating wins?”

Elyse responded with a level tone, “Not really. I just felt a bit foggy and needed to clear my head.”

Misinterpreting her comment, Irving nodded. “I see. It’s true, isn’t it? Many who win or achieve great things tend to get a bit full of themselves. Staying humble is key if we want to continue improving.”

Without challenging his point, Elyse replied, “Absolutely. Getting first place doesn’t mean we can rest on our laurels.”

Irving appreciated her modesty and willingness to learn. “Exactly. Feeling proud is natural, especially after clinching the Swan Cup this year. It wasn’t an easy feat. Be proud where it counts, but remember humility is essential. And maybe skip the self-slapping next time. It’s quite startling.”

Elyse just nodded, choosing to remain silent.

Once back at the hotel, the weight of exhaustion overwhelmed her. She collapsed onto the bed and drifted off to sleep almost immediately.

Dreams were a rarity for her, yet that day was different. She was enveloped in darkness, aware she was dreaming but unable to awaken, no matter her efforts.

Elyse found herself wandering through the darkness, losing track of time until a young boy materialized in front of her.

Chapter 865:

Driven by curiosity, she circled around him. Despite her efforts, his face remained elusive, though he struck a familiar chord within her.

Kneeling to match his height, she inquired with a hint of curiosity, “What’s your name, little one? Tell me, and I can take you somewhere exciting.”

The boy clutched a book, paying her no mind, lost in its pages.

Annoyed by his indifference, Elyse reached out to pinch his cheek, her voice rising in frustration, “Why are you ignoring me?”

Her fingers barely grazed him when he suddenly seized her hand.

Looking up, Elyse found that the boy had aged into a teenager, now towering over her. Despite his youth, his presence was imposing.

With the unclear visage of the boy now emanating a threatening aura, Elyse felt a wave of unease.

Cocking his head, the boy challenged her with a question, "Are you afraid?"

Elyse was momentarily stunned, pausing without response. Suddenly, the boy lunged at her, pinning her to the ground as he shouted in anger, "Why are you afraid of me?"

Although just a teenager, the boy stood nearly six feet tall. Beside him, Elyse looked very small.

Feeling overwhelmed by his towering presence, Elyse shook with fear, yet she could tell that the boy felt even more pain and fear than she did.

Gathering her bravery, Elyse responded, "I'm not afraid of you. You've got the wrong idea."

"I got the wrong idea?" he repeated her words before laughing dismissively. "That's a weak excuse. You don't actually like me. You hate me."

Elyse shook her head in denial. "How could I hate you? You're mistaken about that too."

"Really?" The boy's tone was skeptical.

As Elyse attempted to rise, the boy forced her back down. He abruptly screamed, "No! You are lying! You do not truly care about me. You are a liar, full of lies, and I will never trust you again!"

Elyse winced, striving to maintain her composure. "I mean it. I'm not lying to you. You can believe me." She swallowed hard, anxiously awaiting his response.

The boy then fell into a haunting silence. He slowly helped her to her feet and stood behind her, his hands on her shoulders as he whispered, "You say you're not afraid of me and that you like me. Prove it."

Elyse felt a shiver down her spine. After a brief silence, she inquired, “How can I prove it?”

“Turn around and look at me. If you’re not afraid, then I’ll believe you,” the boy said in a compelling tone.

Hesitating briefly, Elyse eventually nodded.

He released her.

As Elyse slowly turned around, her eyes widened in shock upon seeing him. She covered her mouth and stepped back in horror.

The boy had changed into a monstrous figure. He was enormous and looked incredibly sinister.

Chapter 866:

The boy opened his mouth wide and bellowed, “You lied to me. You lied!”

Elyse covered her mouth with her hands, shaking her head desperately to stifle her urge to scream.

“Didn’t you promise you liked me? That you’d stay by my side forever? Now, seeing me like this, you want to leave. You’re the biggest liar ever, Elyse.”

The monster’s roar was thunderous, and his appearance terrifying. Elyse couldn’t contain herself anymore and ran as fast as she could. The monster chased after her, repeatedly calling out her name.

She stumbled and collapsed to the ground. As she lay there, she glanced back and caught sight of the monster’s wide-open mouth diving at her. A sharp scream escaped her lips.

Suddenly, Elyse woke up. She opened her eyes wide, gasping for air.

It took her a moment to realize she was soaked in cold sweat. She sat up, still shaking from the intensity of the nightmare. The fear lingered, holding her tightly.

Resting back against her pillow, she took some time to calm down. She closed her eyes, feeling even more drained than before her sleep.

After recovering, she stood up and headed to the bathroom for a shower. Afterward, she sat at her dresser to put on makeup. She was due at a banquet that evening and was now looking forward to a pleasant evening with good food.

Once ready, Irving knocked on her door, reminding her, "Are you set? It's almost time. We should leave for the banquet."

"I'm on my way!" Elyse called back as she grabbed her coat and rushed out, fixing her hair. "Is Gavin coming along? Or is he still busy?"

"He sent me a text about half an hour ago. He won't make the banquet. He asked me to escort you," Irving replied, holding his phone with a knowing smile. "I always tell him not to accept such jobs. I bet he'll think twice next time."

Elyse paused, then suggested, "Let's bring back some food for him. Sadly, he's been working by himself this whole time."

Irving agreed. "Good idea. He probably hasn't even had dinner. By the time he's done, there won't be anything left to eat out there."

Elyse felt even more sympathetic towards Gavin. They got into the car and headed to the hotel for the banquet.

As soon as Elyse entered, she was greeted by a crowd of people.

"I recognize you! I saw your competition. It was incredible. Congratulations on taking first place."

“My friend bet on you as soon as they saw you compete. They were sure you would win.”

“May I have the pleasure of a dance with you later?”

Suddenly, Elyse found herself encircled by a group of men, her expression showing embarrassment and confusion. She politely said, “Thank you, but I’m not in the mood for dancing.”

Noticing this, Irving stepped in, pulling Elyse aside with a dismissive smile. “Sorry, gentlemen, my friend here doesn’t dance just for anyone. You should move along.”

Chapter 867:

Ignoring the displeased looks of the young men, Irving led Elyse away.

Feeling a bit uncomfortable, Elyse asked nervously, “Irving, who were they? Isn’t it rude to dismiss them like that?”

Irving snorted. “I’ve seen those types around. They frequent these events and target young ladies. Do you really think their compliments were sincere? They were just making advances.”

As they continued walking, Irving stopped suddenly and said seriously to Elyse, “Men can be trouble. Don’t let a few kind words cloud your judgment. They often don’t mean them.”

Elyse agreed but teased, “But Irving, you’re a man too. Aren’t you also criticizing yourself?”

Irving pointed to himself and replied with a grin, “Yes, I am, but I keep my urges in check. That’s what makes me special.”

Elyse chuckled at his comment, and they kept walking.

Irving took Elyse to a secluded booth and greeted Cody.

Cody turned around, stood up, and warmly said to Elyse, "Congratulations on your first-place win. You've worked hard these past months, and it shows."

With Cody's direct praise, Elyse blushed slightly. "Thank you, Mr. Tucker. The extra practice really helped. I couldn't have succeeded without everyone's support."

"Oh, you're quite the charmer, unlike my stubborn apprentice who only knows how to upset me," the middle-aged man next to Cody chuckled as he stood and offered his hand with a smile. "I'm Simon, a friend of your mentor. It's a pleasure to meet you."

Elyse shook his hand and replied shyly, "Nice to meet you. I'm Elyse, Mr. Tucker's student."

Simon smiled and teased, "I know. He's talked about you before."

Elyse quickly looked at Cody. Did he often speak of her?

Simon, slightly envious, continued, "He's been boasting about having a prodigiously talented student. He predicted you'd beat my student in the next contest and take first place."

Simon glared at Cody and replied, "And he was right. I should have stopped him from bragging."

Cody laughed heartily, clearly pleased. "I've always said my student could outperform your unruly one. And now, she's won first place, while your student came second. It's a nice reality check for him."

Simon, feeling indignant, gritted his teeth, unwilling to accept that his apprentice was lesser than Elyse.

After listening for a while, Elyse asked, puzzled, “Who is your student? Should I know him?”

Cody seemed surprised and questioned, “You don’t know who his student is? Haven’t you two been practicing together?”

Elyse’s confusion deepened, and she turned to Simon for an explanation.

Simon cleared his throat and said in a gentle tone, “Edward. How did you not know that?”

“Edward?” Elyse was taken aback. “No one ever informed me he was your apprentice.”

Irving lightly tapped Elyse on the head and said helplessly, “Who told you that you weren’t informed? Didn’t Gavin ever mention it?”

Chapter 868:

“Gavin told me Edward was his friend,” Elyse recalled firmly. She was sure of her memory.

Cody nodded and explained, “Yes, Edward and Gavin are friends. They connected through Simon and me. Since they’re different ages, they’ve never competed against each other.”

Elyse touched her chin, now fully understanding the connection to Edward’s mentor.

“By the way, Edward is here too. Would you like to meet him?” Simon sipped his drink, smirked, and added, “He’s been moping around all day after finishing second. He just started feeling hungry and went off to the food area.”

Elyse paused to think for a moment. Realizing she needed to discuss more with Edward, she nodded in agreement and decided to look for him.

Elyse said to Cody, “Mr. Tucker, I’m heading out to meet Edward.”

Cody nodded and smiled warmly. “Enjoy yourself. Grab a bite if you’re hungry. I’ve got some friends coming by.”

Elyse acknowledged softly, “Okay.” She then turned to Irving with a quiet inquiry, “Irving, will you join me?”

“No, I’ll stay here. Go ahead,” Irving replied, settling next to Cody with little intention of moving.

“Alright then, I’ll go alone,” Elyse stated, then turned and briskly walked away.

As she departed, Simon remarked to Cody, “Elyse sure follows orders well. I wish Edward was as compliant.”

Cody let out a laugh. “Let it go. Edward’s just full of character. A loss might actually do him some good—keep him from getting too cocky.”

Simon glanced around nervously before probing, “Does Elyse have a boyfriend? Maybe she and Edward could talk and bond?”

Cody’s expression clouded momentarily. “Stay out of their personal affairs,” he cautioned sternly.

Simon chuckled awkwardly, “Just thinking of mixing things up a bit.”

Meanwhile, Elyse reached the food section and spotted Edward fervently tearing into a chicken leg.

Edward was plowing through chicken legs, alternating bites with sips of red wine, his zeal unfazed by his recent defeat. Observing him, Elyse couldn’t reconcile his voracious eating with the image of someone disheartened by a loss.

After polishing off the chicken legs, Edward reached for some grilled shrimp. Just as he was about to grab a few, Elyse approached and inquired, “Do you know where I might find some lamb chops?”

Edward paused, his face clouding over as he muttered, “How should I know where the lamb chops are? I’m not really hungry. Just picking at things.”

Catching the pretense in his tone, Elyse offered a slight smile and teased, “I just watched you happily devouring those chicken legs. No need to play it down with me.”

Caught off guard, Edward quickly grabbed his wine glass, covering his embarrassment, and retorted, “Why didn’t you mention you were here? Watching me in secret? Could it be...” boldly, he inquired, “You like me?”

Chapter 869:

Caught off guard while handling shrimp, Elyse gave him a puzzled stare, then set down the tongs and quietly stepped back.

Undeterred, Edward pressed on, following her, “Is your interest why you were secretly watching?”

Elyse’s lips quirked slightly as she retorted, “I was told a certain apprentice was too heartbroken to eat after his loss. Yet, there he was, devouring chicken legs with gusto.”

Realization dawned on Edward. “I was just playing up for my mentor. He’s overly stern. Without that act, he’d never let me hear the end of it.”

Reflecting Simon’s earlier demeanor, Elyse doubted the strict image Edward painted. Given Edward’s reputation, she remained wary. Deciding to dismiss the interaction, she headed off in search of her lamb chops, leaving Edward behind. Once she found them, she sat down, only for Edward to appear beside her, his plate heaped with food, looking pleased.

Mid-bite, Edward inquired curiously, “When are you planning to leave?”

Elyse, slicing through her lamb chop, looked up in confusion, “Leave?”

“The competition’s over. Aren’t you heading home? Will you go back to your country or stay here?” Edward, unconsciously licking his lips, betrayed his nervousness.

The question caught Elyse off guard. She hadn’t contemplated it, especially after her separation from Jayden, which felt like losing her true home. Her ties to many places had evaporated, leaving her with no desire to return to them.

After a pause, she revealed, “I’ll travel for a while, explore a bit. There’s no rush to find home.”

Puzzled, Edward ventured, “What about your parents? Don’t you want to share your victory?”

Elyse’s expression dimmed. “My parents have passed away. There’s no one to tell anymore.”

Edward, caught off guard by her revelation, fumbled for words, rubbing his chin in awkwardness.

Noticing his unease, Elyse let out a soft chuckle, “Don’t worry. It doesn’t pain me as it once did.”

“Even if you’re alone in this world, I’ll always treat you kindly,” Edward suddenly leaned in close to Elyse, his eyes filled with deep affection.

Elyse’s lips twitched slightly as she instinctively pulled away, awkwardly saying, “I don’t need that from you.”

Recalling the topic he wanted to discuss, Edward set down his utensils, propped his face on one hand, and asked eagerly, “Now that the competition is over, can we talk about us?”

Upon hearing this, Elyse sighed deeply and said, “Must we discuss this during dinner? I just want to enjoy my food quietly right now.”

“Does discussing our feelings disrupt your meal?” Edward clutched his chest, his face broadcasting profound pain.

After a brief silence, Elyse sighed again and said firmly, “Let’s talk after we eat. I’m worried if we talk now, you might lose your appetite.”

Edward looked stunned. “Are you rejecting me? Why? Haven’t I been good to you? I’m much more dependable than your ex-husband.”

Chapter 870:

This comment frustrated Elyse. After her breakup with Jayden, she wasn’t eager to dive into another relationship so soon. She still aspired to travel the world, perform on her beloved stages, and follow in her father’s footsteps.

Noticing Elyse’s silence, Edward continued, “You realize Jayden isn’t a good man, right? He has a new girlfriend but still interferes in your life. What a jerk!” He continued to persuade, “You’ve seen how that woman behaves. She’s not just jealous; she’s also dangerous. She’s tried to harm you multiple times, almost costing you your life.”

Elyse massaged her temples, growing impatient, “Edward, I’m aware of all this. Can we not talk about it anymore? I have my own opinions, and I can make my own decisions.”

Edward scoffed, “So you think you can make the right decisions? You’ve never truly considered leaving Jayden and starting fresh.”

Elyse became irritated and retorted, “Are you suggesting that starting anew means jumping into a relationship with you? Just because I’ve ended one relationship and am wary of men doesn’t mean I can’t begin anew on my own.”

Edward, momentarily lost for words, hurriedly tried to clarify, saying, “That’s not what I was implying. Please, don’t be upset.”

Elyse narrowed her eyes. Her look was one of fierce anger. “I am capable of being independent. I don’t need another man to secure my future.”

Realizing his error, Edward quickly said, “I misspoke. I just meant you might consider a relationship with someone else, like me.”

Elyse looked at Edward for a prolonged period. After calming herself, she asked calmly, “Why are you so obsessed with me? You claim to want a relationship, but I don’t sense any genuine sincerity!”

In response, Edward reached out to take her hand. “How can you question my sincerity? Feel my heartbeat. It speaks the truth!”

Elyse withdrew her hand sharply, repelled. “Is this flirtatious approach really how you treat someone you care about?”

Edward stubbornly said, “Why wouldn’t it be? This is how I’ve always treated those I care about.”

Elyse was no longer the naive girl she once was. She could recognize genuine intentions. Her past challenging relationships had taught her to be very cautious about love.

Facing Edward, Elyse replied, “To be honest, I’ve never really felt that way about you. Your personality doesn’t match mine, and there’s no spark between us.”

Edward’s expression faltered, but he managed a smile. “Isn’t that a bit harsh? You care nothing for my pride, right?”

“Sorry, but if I were only worried about protecting your pride and not hurting you, it would send the wrong message, making you think I’m interested.”

After a brief pause, she continued, “Rejecting you directly is actually the right choice to make.”

Edward's mouth twitched. "Has anyone ever told you that you're particularly stubborn and rigid?"

Elyse shook her head, "No, you're the first."