

## Bound love 1561

Chapter 1561:

Jayden exhaled in relief. “I know. I tried waking you, but you wouldn’t budge. Honestly...” He hesitated, scratching the back of his neck sheepishly. “I was this close to slapping you awake.”

Elyse’s smile vanished in an instant. “Wait. Did you slap me?” she asked, narrowing her eyes.

Jayden, suddenly feeling the weight of a guilty conscience, waved his hands in defense. “No! I didn’t get that far—I swear.”

Elyse checked her face anyway, her fingers grazing her cheeks. Satisfied there was no sting, her expression turned icy. “If you ever lay a hand on me, even as a joke, I’ll kill you. Do you hear me?”

Jayden stammered, “I was just... worried. You wouldn’t wake up, no matter what I tried.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Elyse snapped, cutting him off with a glare sharp enough to cut glass. “It’s non-negotiable.”

Jayden nodded quickly, his compliance immediate. It had only been a fleeting thought, a moment of panic—he never would’ve actually dared. Shaking off the tension, Elyse rolled out of bed, hit the shower, and got dressed. Before long, they were out the door and on their way to Cody’s place.

Anticipating their arrival, Cody had already arranged breakfast in his yard and sat waiting patiently, his demeanor calm and unhurried. A few minutes later, they arrived, and Cody rose to greet them, swinging the wooden gate open with an easy smile.

He gave them a once-over, his eyes twinkling with amusement. “Well, you two don’t look like you’ve been duking it out. So, what brings you here?”

Elyse flashed her best wide-eyed, innocent look. “What? Can’t we just stop by for a visit?”

“Of course,” Cody replied smoothly, gesturing for them to come in. But then he leaned closer, a knowing smirk tugging at his lips. “Although I’ve got a feeling you’re not here just to enjoy my company.”

Jayden shook his head with a sly grin. “Don’t worry, it’s a good something.”

Cody opened his mouth, ready to reply, but thought better of it. With a sigh and a scratch of his head, he gave in. “Forget it. Just come inside—I made breakfast.”

Elyse, famished after a restless night filled with unsettling dreams, didn’t need to be told twice. She dove into the meal like someone who hadn’t seen food in days.

Watching her devour everything in sight, Cody arched a brow and turned to Jayden. “Doesn’t she get enough to eat at your place?”

Jayden chuckled, casting a fond glance at Elyse, who was still laser-focused on her plate. “She’s been eating like a horse lately,” he said with a shrug. “Must be working up an appetite with all her practice.”

Cody nodded, a faint smirk tugging at his lips.

“Good. She’s way too skinny. If she doesn’t eat, where’s she supposed to get the energy to play the violin?”

Elyse polished off the last bite, then gratefully accepted a mug of warm milk Cody handed her. She sipped it slowly, letting it soothe her nerves.

“Full now?” Cody teased, leaning back in his chair. “So, are you going to tell me the real reason you came knocking on my door?”

Chapter 1562:

Elyse shot a hesitant glance at Jayden before turning back to Cody. “Promise you won’t get mad? And no shutting me out, okay?”

Cody rolled his eyes like a long-suffering older brother. “Knew you were up to something.”

“Promise,” Elyse pressed, her tone firm.

“Fine, fine,” Cody relented with a dismissive wave. “I promise.”

Elyse exhaled, her shoulders visibly relaxing as if she’d been carrying a boulder on her back. She paused, searching for the right words. “I got invited to perform.”

Cody’s brows knitted in confusion. “And that’s a problem? Isn’t that what you’ve been working so hard for? More people are noticing your talent, and at the end of the day, it’s your call whether to say yes or no.”

Elyse fiddled with the edge of her sleeve, her voice dropping. “I know, but... this one’s different. Rebecca Dyson invited me to play at the 20th-anniversary celebration of the Virelia-Manfek peace accords.”

At the mention of Rebecca, Cody’s face tightened ever so briefly, like a shadow passing over the sun. It was fleeting, but it didn’t escape Jayden’s sharp eye.

Elyse, blind to the storm brewing on Cody’s face, pressed on. “I mentioned it to Ms. Griffin, and she practically turned to stone. She revealed that you and my dad went through something similar.” Her voice faded into whispers as she caught the haunted look in Cody’s eyes.

Lost in the shadows of memory, Cody took a measured breath. “What exactly are you trying to uncover?”

Treading carefully, Elyse ventured, “The truth about what transpired decades ago. Why did you and Ms. Griffin drift apart like ships in the night?”

Cody’s silence spoke volumes as he bowed his head, wrestling with old demons.

The quiet grew thick enough to cut with a knife, sending shivers down Elyse’s spine as she fidgeted in her seat.

Finally, like a dam breaking, Cody spoke. “I can’t tell you anything about what happened back then. But about that performance you mentioned...” His eyes darkened. “Stay far away from it.”

Noting Elyse’s puzzled expression, he added grimly, “That concert harbors secrets you don’t want to uncover.”

Elyse’s mind raced with questions. What skeletons were Cody and Celeste keeping buried?

“I need to clear my head,” Cody muttered, rising from his seat. “Going for a walk. Make yourself comfortable.”

Elyse watched his retreating form with worried eyes.

Turning to Jayden, she whispered, “Whatever happened must have left deep scars. I’m burning to know the truth.”

Jayden remained a pillar of reason. “Sometimes, curiosity leads down dangerous paths. They both raised red flags. Perhaps it’s best to heed their warning.”

Elyse nodded. “I think so too.”

The gravity in Cody’s voice had painted the concert in sinister shades. After a moment of contemplation, Elyse messaged Louise, declining the performance invitation and asking her to relay the news to Rebecca. With Louise’s assurance to handle the situation, Elyse tried to push the matter from her thoughts.

Chapter 1563:

As she and Jayden wandered through the whispering woods, her phone buzzed with an unexpected friend request.

Elyse’s eyes widened at the name glowing on her phone screen, her mind refusing to accept what she saw. She thrust the phone toward Jayden, her voice barely a whisper. “Is that Rebecca befriending me? Am I losing my mind? Can it really be her?”

“Profile picture and name match,” Jayden remarked, amusement dancing in his eyes. “Seems someone’s eager to give you a piece of their mind.”

While Jayden found humor in the situation, Elyse felt her stomach twist into knots.

With trembling fingers, she accepted the friend request and typed out, “Is there something I can help you with?”

Rebecca’s response shot back like an arrow, “Why are you backing out of the performance? I can’t fathom your refusal. Don’t tell me you’re worried about payment.”

Elyse released a weary breath. “This isn’t a decision I’ve made lightly. I simply don’t wish to participate. Money has nothing to do with it.”

“Funny, I don’t recall discussing payment during our last conversation,” Rebecca countered. “Let me make you an offer that will change your mind. Sleep on it and get back to me.”

Then came the deafening silence. Rebecca vanished into the digital void, leaving Elyse’s messages floating unanswered.

Elyse turned to Jayden, frustration etched across her face. “What’s her angle? She’s practically begging me to join this performance, yet we’re practically strangers. I could count our meetings on one hand.”

“Your guess is as good as mine,” Jayden mused, shaking his head. “But this level of pushiness? That’s setting off all kinds of alarm bells.”

Elyse’s brow furrowed. Despite her clear rejection, Rebecca was like a dog with a bone, refusing to let go.

“She wears a mask of sweetness, but underneath? Pure control freak.”

“Took the words right out of my mouth,” Jayden agreed. “These kinds of invitations? They’re usually strings attached to puppet masters. Better to cut them before they can pull.”

With each passing second, Elyse's resolve to avoid the performance crystallized like ice.

Two hours melted away as they wandered the woods, finally leading them back to Cody's doorstep.

They found Cody in the kitchen, arranging freshly cut fruit in a bowl. His face brightened at their arrival. "Help yourselves. The neighbors' orchards were generous this season."

As Elyse settled into her seat, sampling the fruit, she recounted her digital encounter with Rebecca.

Cody's face transformed, darkness seeping into his features as he let out a sharp, bitter laugh. "Some snakes never shed their skin."

Elyse's eyes widened, curiosity sparking in their depths. Did he know Rebecca? But the math didn't add up—Rebecca couldn't be a day over thirty, while Cody was well into his fifties.

Chapter 1564:

The more questions Elyse had, the deeper her curiosity grew.

Yet, no matter how hard she tried, Cody refused to divulge anything. Frustrated, Elyse sought solace in a bowl of blueberries, popping them into her mouth one by one.

Cody joined her, eating a few berries himself before casually suggesting, "If you're not in a rush to go back, why not stay at my place for a few days?"

Surprised, Elyse hesitated. "Wouldn't that be too much trouble for you?"

Cody smiled warmly and shook his head. "Not at all. You're all so easygoing; it's no trouble at all."

Jayden, ever adaptable, added with enthusiasm, "That works for me too. I can handle all my work online, so I'll stay here with you."

Cody's grin widened. "Perfect."

The trio chatted leisurely for a while before Cody excused himself to prepare lunch. After their meal, Elyse returned to her room for a nap. However, sleep brought no peace—only the recurring nightmare that haunted her.

When Elyse emerged later, Jayden noticed her tired, drawn expression.

Concerned, he asked, “You’re having nightmares even during naps now?”

Elyse nodded pitifully, her voice tinged with sadness. “I dreamt about him again. He looked so sorrowful. And it made me feel the same way.”

Jayden frowned, unsure of what to do. After a moment’s thought, he suggested, “When we get back in a few days, maybe I can find a hypnotist to help. It might work.”

Elyse looked doubtful. “A hypnotist? Do you really think that will help?”

“It’s worth a try,” Jayden replied earnestly.

With no better options, she reluctantly agreed to the idea, though her skepticism lingered.

Over the following days, her nightmares became relentless. They plagued her every time she closed her eyes, leaving her visibly exhausted and emotionally drained. Her listlessness was impossible to ignore.

Cody, noticing her deterioration, voiced his concern, asking, “Elyse, what’s been going on? You look completely worn out.”

Elyse replied softly, “I’ve just been having this nightmare... over and over.”

Cody’s brow furrowed. “What kind of nightmare could affect you this badly?”

Elyse explained everything—every unsettling detail of her recurring dream, her frustration spilling out as she spoke.

When she finished, Cody was stunned. “Really? You saw him?”

Elyse shook her head. “Not exactly. It was just a shadow, a silhouette. I couldn’t see his face.”

Cody fell silent, his expression clouding as if wrestling with a troubling thought. After a pause, he asked, “When did the nightmare start?”

Elyse thought back. “It started when Rebecca asked me to attend the Peace Concert.”

Chapter 1565:

Cody’s face turned pale, and he remained frozen for several moments, as though grappling with a hidden fear.

Sensing an opportunity, Jayden pressed him. “Mr. Tucker, do you know something about this nightmare? If you tell us what happened back then, we might be able to understand what her nightmares mean.”

Elyse turned to Cody with hopeful eyes. “Please. These nightmares are wearing me down. Can you help me?”

For a long time, Cody didn’t respond. Finally, with a deep sigh, he muttered, “Let me think about it.”

Elyse, sensing that he would eventually reveal the truth, waited patiently.

After half an hour, Cody emerged from his room, his face unreadable.

Sitting down stiffly, he said, “Where should I start? I guess it makes sense to begin with why your father and I parted ways with Ms. Griffin.”

Elyse straightened, her curiosity sharpening. Cody continued, “Back then, your father and I were celebrated violinists, well-known in our circles. But your father... Well, he had a reputation. He was charming, especially with women, and let’s just say he didn’t take relationships seriously. Before meeting your mother, he was the kind of man who’d flirt with anyone and move on without a



second thought. One day, he came to me with big news. He'd received an invitation from the king of Virelia, who admired his music and wanted him to perform at a prestigious Peace Concert. It was supposed to be a monumental event. He called it an incredible opportunity and asked me to join him."

Elyse tilted her head, her interest piqued. "That sounds amazing. A Peace Concert sounds so meaningful."

Cody nodded. "That's what we thought, too. So, we went to tell our mentor, Ms. Griffin. We thought she'd be proud of us. But instead, she was furious. She scolded us harshly and forbade us from attending."

Elyse frowned, confused. "Why would she stop you? The concert sounds like such a noble cause."

Cody began, his voice laced with nostalgia. "Ms. Griffin believes music is a universal marvel. It transcends words, weaving emotions into a tapestry that can touch hearts across borders. Yet, those in positions of power often fail to grasp its profound essence."

Elyse blinked, momentarily startled. "That... actually makes a lot of sense."

A faint smile played on Cody's lips as he continued, "It does, doesn't it? But back then, we were young and blinded by our passion for music. We brushed aside her caution. Furious at our obstinacy, she severed our bond."

Elyse nodded slowly, piecing together the fragments of the story. "So, that was the reason for your falling out."

Cody fell silent for a moment before speaking again. "Ms. Griffin wasn't wrong. Her words carried wisdom I only began to understand later. But even now, I can't say I regret my choice. If I were to turn back time, I would still perform in that concert. The only regret that lingers is this: my music wasn't potent enough—neither powerful nor profound enough to stir the depths of people's souls. If I had achieved that level of artistry, perhaps the course of the past would have been rewritten entirely."

Elyse tilted her head, her expression softening. "But you're incredible—a world-class violinist. Isn't that enough?"

Chapter 1566:

Cody's eyes reflected a wistful determination. "For some stages, being world-class is merely the entry ticket. What we need is a voice so profound it shakes the core of existence. I don't yet know what kind of music would have that magic, but I hope one day, I'll find it."

Elyse frowned, her thoughts clouded with questions. What could be more extraordinary than a world-class violinist? Had history ever witnessed such an enigma?

Breaking the brief silence, Cody took a measured breath and spoke again. "Later, your father and I attended that ill-fated concert, but chaos erupted midway. That single event crushed your father's dream of music."

Elyse's composure faltered as her expression grew serious. Her voice trembled slightly as she asked, "What happened?"

Cody's voice turned somber. "A nightmare. What was meant to symbolize harmony became the spark for discord. Your father was dragged into the storm, scapegoated, and ultimately silenced. His name was tarnished, and he never played on stage again."

Elyse's voice was barely a whisper. "A victim of the chaos?"

At that moment, Jayden, who had been silent, pulled out his phone. After scrolling for a while, he found what he was looking for and showed Elyse a news article from over twenty years ago. He said, "It should be about this."

Elyse took the phone, her fingers trembling as she read the article. "A terrorist attack at Dolonby Music Hall claims over 30 lives. Mastermind identified as Rickey Benson—a wolf in sheep's clothing, who manipulated innocents under the guise of promoting peace while inciting war..."

Her voice trailed off, the words hanging heavily in the air. She clenched the phone tightly, her eyes shut as if to block out the words. "No. That can't be true. My father wasn't a monster. He couldn't have been the devil they're painting him as!"

Cody's tone was steady but firm. "He wasn't a devil, Elyse. He was a pawn, used and discarded by Rebecca for her own gain."

Elyse's eyes widened in disbelief. "Rebecca? What happened?"

Cody sighed, his memories dredged from the past. "When we first met her, she was just a child, no more than eight years old. She followed your father everywhere, acting quite sweet. None of us suspected the storm she would one day unleash."

He continued, his tone heavy with regret. "We saw her as a harmless little girl. But the chaos revealed her true nature. Your father disappeared after that day. I searched tirelessly for him, and three months later, I found him again."

Elyse leaned forward, her voice shaking. "Where was he? What happened to him?"

Cody closed his eyes, pain flickering across his face. "Rebecca had imprisoned him. Though she didn't harm him physically, she tormented him mentally. When he finally escaped, he was a shadow of himself. He told me Rebecca was a wolf in sheep's clothing, and in the wake of it all, he abandoned his love for the violin."

Elyse's voice cracked as she whispered, "How could it come to this..."

Cody's gaze softened. "That's precisely why Ms. Griffin doesn't want you at that concert. She knows what happened and fears history repeating itself. She's trying to protect you from the same fate as your father."

Chapter 1567:

He paused, then added, "And I share her concerns. Rebecca isn't someone to be trusted. The fact that she invited you to this concert means she has ulterior motives."

Elyse slumped back in her chair, her mind a whirlwind of emotions. She stared blankly, unable to fully process the weight of Cody's words. Understanding her turmoil, Cody chose to retreat, leaving her with her thoughts. He picked up a tray and walked to the kitchen.

Later, Elyse broke the silence, her voice trembling with uncertainty. "Did my father really give up the violin willingly?"

Jayden, deep in thought, replied after a moment, “When you were a child, did Lanny and Glenda ever stop you from playing the violin?”

A shadow of contemplation crossed Elyse’s face as she sifted through the hazy fragments of her past. Finally, recognition flickered in her eyes. “They tried to stop me,” she recalled, her voice barely above a whisper. “In my stubbornness to learn, they punished me with three days of starvation.”

“The violin found you,” Jayden observed thoughtfully. “No one guided you to it. You discovered it on your own, as if your father’s spirit was invisibly steering you toward the instrument.”

He leaned forward, choosing his words carefully. “I believe he never truly wanted to let go. The trauma was simply too overwhelming at the time, and abandoning the violin seemed like his only escape from the pain.”

Elyse pondered and then said in a deep voice, “But this wasn’t his fault. Rebecca orchestrated everything from the shadows. He shouldered guilt that was never his to bear, punishing himself by forsaking his beloved violin. The injustice of it all...”

Jayden’s gentle voice cut through her thoughts. “Time grows short. What will you say to Rebecca’s invitation?”

Creases of worry etched themselves across Elyse’s brow as inner turmoil played across her features. “I need space to think,” she said wearily. “Just... give me some time.”

Rising from her seat, she retreated into the shelter of the wooded area. Moments later, Cody returned to the yard with freshly brewed coffee, his eyes scanning the empty space. “Where’s Elyse?”

Jayden replied, “She went for a walk. She has a life-altering decision to make.”

Understanding flickered across Cody’s face as he settled down, pouring Jayden a cup of coffee.

“Elyse’s nightmare unsettled me,” he confessed while pouring. “She dreamed of Rickey’s past, and some pieces aligned perfectly with my own memories. I felt compelled to share the truth—it was as if Rickey himself was trying to reach her. I had to be his voice. The thought of him carrying that

burden of guilt for all these years, unable to hold his head high... it would have been too cruel to stay silent.”

Jayden nodded solemnly. “I sense he has never truly left Elyse’s side. Though physically absent, his protective presence lingers.”

Cody nodded. “Exactly. Elyse was everything he’d ever hoped for in a child. No one knew better than I just how deeply Rickey loved her.” After a thoughtful pause, Jayden mused, “I’m beginning to grasp just how remarkable his life truly was.”

A gentle laugh escaped Cody. “If he were still with us, he’d have achieved even greater heights.”

Chapter 1568:

But Rickey was gone. Had he lived, Elyse’s path might have been gentler.

Jayden’s gaze drifted toward the woods, wondering what storms of emotion were brewing in Elyse’s heart. What path would she choose?

Deep in the wooded sanctuary, Elyse found her way to a solitary bench. As she sank onto it, a weary sigh escaped her lips. She tilted her head back, watching the branches sway gently in the breeze, nature’s silent lullaby calling to her weary soul.

Exhaustion crept over her like a gentle tide, and before long, sleep claimed her consciousness.

Her dreams transported her once again to that familiar void of darkness. This time was different—she stood neither lost nor afraid. After two decades of silence, words she’d kept locked away finally found their voice.

“Dad...” Her whisper rippled through the emptiness, and in response, a soft luminescence bloomed before her. The light slowly coalesced, taking on the unmistakable silhouette of a human form.

Warmth radiated from the ghostly figure, and Elyse’s eyes welled with tears, their redness betraying decades of buried grief.

“Dad,” she called out again, her voice cracking under the weight of suppressed emotions.

The luminous figure stood before her, and somehow, she could sense the tender smile it emanated.

“Dad...”

The walls Elyse had built over the years crumbled in an instant. Every fiber of her being yearned to throw herself into her father’s embrace. All these years of solitude had carved deep channels in her soul. Her path had been a relentless uphill battle, each step heavier than the last.

She knew she had no parents, so she couldn’t afford the luxury of letting her guard down or relying on anyone else. Every step, every decision had been hers alone to bear.

But now, standing before this ethereal light, everything changed. Her father was here—even if only as a luminescent form in a dream, she was, in this precious moment, a daughter with a father once more.

An avalanche of emotions threatened to overwhelm her. She longed to share everything—her professional triumphs, the bitter sting of Glenda and Lanny’s machinations, and the unexpected gift of finding love with Jayden. Twenty years of unspoken words burned in her throat, desperate to be heard.

When she rushed forward, she expected to grasp nothing but air, remembering how her hands had passed through the light in dreams past.

But this time was different. Her father caught her.

Looking up, she couldn’t distinguish his features through the radiance, but she felt his smile enveloping her, his gaze holding her with that uniquely paternal tenderness that had left an indelible mark on her soul.

Though her heart ached with years of accumulated pain, she chose silence, savoring this precious moment of warmth she’d been denied for so long.

After what seemed like both an eternity and a heartbeat, she lifted her face and voiced the question that had been consuming her thoughts. “Dad, what path should I choose?”

Chapter 1569:

Rickey offered no answer. Instead, the light began to dim, his form starting to dissolve into the darkness.

Panic gripped Elyse's heart as she realized her father was fading away. Her hands reached out desperately, trying to hold onto the dissipating light.

Elyse couldn't hold onto Rickey. He was like a desert storm—powerful and present one moment, gone without a trace the next.

The hollow ache of having him, then losing him, carved emptiness into her soul. Why couldn't she keep her father's embrace? She yearned to stay in his arms, wrapped in a serenity she'd only glimpsed in dreams.

Elyse jolted awake, her eyes flying open to the familiar canopy of trees surrounding her. Grief ambushed her heart, sharp and merciless.

When Jayden discovered her, she sat motionless in her chair, tears carving silent paths down her cheeks. He rushed to her side, dropping to one knee. "Why the tears? I'm still here, aren't I?"

Elyse shook her head, emotion threading through her voice. "I just fell asleep. I had a dream. My dad was holding me. His face was just out of sight, but I could feel his smile."

A sob caught in her throat. "I asked him what I should do. And then he slipped away. I shouldn't have asked, should I?"

Jayden paused, considering his words. "I think he already gave you the answer."

Elyse managed to say between shaky breaths, "He didn't say anything."

"He told you he'd support any decision you make," Jayden leaned forward, sincerity etched across his features. "Whether you accept or turn it down, he'll always love you."

Elyse studied him, uncertainty clouding her eyes. “Really? He didn’t speak a word. Just held me. How did you read that?”

Jayden’s lips quirked into a small smile. “Maybe... because I’m a man, so I understand your dad?”

Elyse rolled her eyes, catching the playful undertone in his voice.

“No, really, I felt it!” Jayden pressed, earnestness replacing his teasing. Though doubt still whispered in her mind, Elyse conceded, “Okay, fine. I’ll trust you on this one.”

Jayden’s voice softened. “Actually, whatever you decide, I’ll support you.”

Surprise flickered across her face. “I thought you’d try to stop me. You’ve never let me compete before.”

“I’ve had an epiphany lately,” Jayden confessed. “Loving someone isn’t just about words. It’s about being there, showing support when it matters. If I stand idle while someone else acts for...”

“You, wouldn’t that mean their love runs deeper than mine? I’ve always said I’m the one who loves you most in this world, and the love I give you is something no other man can match.”

Elyse fell silent, struck by his words. After what felt like an eternity, she whispered, “When did you think it through?”

Chapter 1570:

Jayden’s smile held a touch of vulnerability. “Maybe because I’m finally learning how to love?”

Elyse burst into laughter. Her joy proved infectious, and soon Jayden joined in, his own chuckles harmonizing with hers.

They sat there together, their shared laughter dancing through the air like children at play.



When the mirth finally settled, Elyse's voice grew steady with conviction. "After everything you said, I've made up my mind. I know what I'm going to do."

Jayden held his breath. "You're going to refuse?"

Elyse shook her head, a quiet confidence illuminating her features. "I'm going to accept her invitation."

Jayden absorbed her words in silence before nodding slowly. "Okay. I'll help you. Whatever happens, I'll protect you."

Elyse nodded, nestling against Jayden's shoulder, cherishing the stillness between them.

After their moment of respite, they made their way back to Cody's house.

Cody rose to meet them as they entered. "Have you decided?"

Elyse met his gaze. "Yes."

Looking into Elyse's unwavering eyes, Cody read her answer clearly.

"So, you're ready to walk in your father's shoes?"

"Are you going to stop me?" Elyse challenged gently.

Cody shook his head, resignation mingling with respect. "Your mind's made up. I don't have the right to stop you. I just hope you can forge a different path than he did."

Elyse squared her shoulders. "I will. I'll make Rebecca understand that her success wasn't born from her scheming, but from my father's kindness."

Relief washed over Cody's weathered features. "The way you look now, you just might rewrite the ending."

Elyse stood tall, determination etched in every line of her being. She would make Rebecca understand that peace, in its purest form, remains unchanged—an eternal truth as constant as the stars.

The soft whir of zippers filled the room as Elyse finished packing her luggage, ready to return with Jayden. They had just secured their plane tickets when Rebecca's call pierced through the moment.

As Elyse answered, Rebecca's voice slithered through the receiver, honey-sweet yet dripping with insincerity. "Are you still not planning to accept my invitation?" Rebecca's words hung in the air.

Elyse caught Jayden's eye before responding carefully, "I haven't decided yet."

Rebecca pressed, "When will you make up your mind? I really hope you can attend."

Feigning contemplation, Elyse said, "I still have to think it over. I'll get back to you before the performance starts."