

Bound love 881

Chapter 881:

Aarya's legs gave out, and she crumbled to the ground, muttering, "It couldn't be. Who else would dare touch me but you? It had to be you! You're just too cowardly to admit it!"

Jayden's eyes held a trace of pity. "Does it really matter who it was? Considering how many partners you've had, one more shouldn't make a difference."

Shaking his head, his smirk deepened. "And don't pretend you were faithful while we were 'together.' You were sleeping with other men. A lot. So, let's not act like you were so pure."

Hearing this, Aarya laughed bitterly, her head tilted back. "I never realized you knew. It must have been unbearable for you to tolerate me."

At that moment, her demeanor shifted completely. Rising slowly as tears gathered in her eyes, she said, "You had to betray me, Jayden. Fine. You and your precious Elyse can go meet your maker together."

With a swift signal from Aarya, the black-clad bodyguards hidden around the area surged forward. Yet, something quickly became apparent. Nearly half of the men she'd brought had switched sides, engaging the others in combat.

Aarya's eyes widened in disbelief when she saw this. Looking at Jayden, she barked, "What have you done to my men? Why aren't they following my orders?"

Shrugging, Jayden replied with a smug grin, "Because they now follow my orders."

After Jayden spoke, he scooped Elyse up into his arms and began retreating slowly, planning to exit through the back.

Aarya wanted to intercept Jayden and Elyse, but with most of her bodyguards now against her, she found herself at a disadvantage. Her remaining guards quickly escorted her away.

As Aarya was led away, she screamed before breaking down in tears. “Why has Jayden treated me this way? Everything he ever did for me was just a pretense! All of it was pretend! He’s only ever loved Elyse. What am I supposed to do? What the hell am I to him?” After letting her emotions out, she grabbed her phone to call her father, hoping to share her distress.

But he didn’t pick up.

Stubbornly, she dialed his number several times, but there was still no answer.

In a fit of anger, she hurled her phone. “He’s always buried in work. He doesn’t care that his daughter is in pain. He doesn’t love me at all.”

Her bodyguard said, “Miss Hudson, perhaps we should head home first. You can confront your father once he’s back.”

Reluctantly, Aarya agreed and returned home.

Meanwhile, Elyse climbed into Jayden’s car and was on her phone, assuring Irving and Cody of her safety.

After ending the call, she sighed deeply. The events of the day had taken a toll on her; she felt overwhelmed and exhausted.

Jayden re-entered the car, bringing a chill with him, but the warmth inside the vehicle quickly chased away the cold.

After shutting the door, he cautioned, “You shouldn’t return to the hotel tonight. The Hudsons might target you at any moment. It’s safer to stay with me for now.”

Chapter 882:

Elyse, wary, asked, “What are you planning?”

Jayden said, “I’m not plotting anything against you. It’s just that my relationship with Aarya is beyond repair. I can no longer stay with the Hudsons, and they won’t let this slide easily. Staying with me is your safest bet.”

Elyse bit her lip, confused. “What have you done? You always have schemes I’m unaware of, and I’ve been left out of the loop.”

“Do you really think Aarya and her father will believe you’re clueless?” Jayden questioned, pointing to the phone in her hand. “Moreover, if you return, Aarya and her father might retaliate against you and your friends. Staying away could offer them some protection.”

Elyse bit her lip again, pondering. “So, if I stay away, they’ll be safe?”

“They will be, and I’ll ensure they are protected,” Jayden said.

After a moment of contemplation, considering the well-being of Cody and her friends, Elyse reluctantly said, “Alright, I’ll stay with you.”

Then, overwhelmed with anger, she delivered a forceful kick to Jayden.

Jayden observed the dirt mark her shoe left on his trousers, seized Elyse’s ankle, and pulled her slowly but resolutely toward him. “Sweetheart, do you still feel any discomfort down there? Shall I take a look?”

Elyse caught the mischief in Jayden’s expression and knew he was scheming something again. She attempted to withdraw her leg, but he gripped it tightly, not releasing her.

Irritated, she said, “Stop the nonsense. Don’t touch me. Let go, we’re divorced, remember?”

Jayden responded with a soft chuckle and drew her closer into his embrace, securing her waist firmly. No matter how much she resisted or rebuked him, he wouldn't release her.

"Sweetheart, the drug Aarya administered was a triple dose. I resisted its effects just to see you, almost reaching my limit. We were together just once.

It helped counteract the drug's influence. But now, it's overpowering me again. Could you assist me, please?" His voice was a whisper against Elyse's ear, seductive and deep, as his hands explored her body.

He expertly targeted her sensitive spots, gradually dismantling her resistance.

Despite the heat rising in her body from Jayden's caresses, Elyse held onto her last shred of rationality. "I won't be with you. I'm not your wife anymore. Find someone else. I reserve that intimacy for my husband."

"That's right, good girl, your husband. Let me help you out of your clothes," Jayden replied, his laughter echoing in the car.

Elyse shook her head firmly. "No, we're divorced. You're not my husband anymore."

"Then let's get married again. Once we remarry, I'll be your husband again," Jayden said as he removed Elyse's clothes completely.

"Married again? Is that all you ever think about?" Elyse, overwhelmed, struck Jayden across the face. As she realized what she had done, she froze.

Jayden was equally shocked.

Chapter 883:

Silence enveloped the car, erasing the romantic tension Jayden had built.

Regaining her composure, Elyse felt awkward and sheepishly pulled her hand back, attempting to get off Jayden's lap. However, as she began to move, he firmly pressed her back down.

"Now that you've hit me, are you calm?" Jayden, feeling a tingle on his cheek, spoke in a tone that mixed helplessness with grievance.

Elyse looked away, unwilling to meet his eyes, and said stubbornly, "What more is there to say? We didn't part ways over some unforgivable act."

Jayden quietly replied, "Then why are you so severe with me?"

Anger nearly drove Elyse to laughter as she snapped back, "You tried to control me, to stop me from competing! I pleaded with you, didn't I? Was your treatment justified?"

She pressed on, accusing him further, "I tried to talk, to truly connect with you. How did you respond? You deceived me time and again, kept me in the dark. Stop claiming it was for my benefit! You've repeated that so often, you must believe it yourself by now!"

Jayden looked long at the furious Elyse before asking softly, "Why do you try so hard to understand me? Do you really want to connect?"

This only infuriated Elyse more, and she exclaimed, "What other reason could there be? I cared about you deeply! That's why I couldn't overlook our issues or simply ignore them!"

Still seething, she slapped Jayden again and declared sharply, "I should have done this much sooner, you heartless man!" Elyse longed to leave; her prior affection for Jayden had turned to disappointment and resentment.

Despite this, Jayden clung to her, embracing her tightly and burying his face in her chest like a child seeking solace and love.

He whispered, "You've hit me twice already. Isn't that enough to calm you?"

“Leave my sight. Your mere presence irritates me,” Elyse snapped. After their divorce, she felt Jayden had lost all shame. She pushed him away forcefully, unwilling to speak with him.

Jayden hadn’t reached out before their divorce, so why now? She was uninterested.

In response, Jayden quickly locked the car doors, signaling to Elyse that she wasn’t free to leave.

“Jayden! If you dare to confine me again, I will smash your face.” When she failed to open the doors after multiple tries, Elyse glared at him, filled with a desire to physically harm him.

Facing an enraged Elyse, Jayden’s breathing slowed, and he spoke softly, “Sweetheart, it’s too dangerous right now. I can’t leave you alone for your own safety.”

“Then explain the danger to me! What are your intentions? Are you scheming with Aarya and her father? Speak up! Have you lost your voice?” Elyse’s voice rose sharply. When Jayden remained silent, her anger intensified, and she began hitting him over and over.

Jayden didn’t fight back. He simply covered his head, allowing Elyse to release her frustration on him. Worn out from the assault, she sat down, breathing heavily.

Noticing her reddened hand, he reached out to soothe it, but she rejected him with a slap.

“Who gave you permission to touch me? Dare to touch me again!” she snapped fiercely.

Chapter 884:

Jayden, a tall man, remained seated, avoiding her gaze, and whispered timidly, “I was concerned about your hand hurting.”

Elyse sneered, “If you hadn’t angered me, would I be this mad?”

Once again, Jayden was silent.

Her frustration grew as she lashed out with a kick, exclaiming, "I've said so much, yet you remain silent. It seems you'll never be honest. Maybe you'll keep your secrets forever!"

Jayden quietly responded, "I'll explain everything later."

"Later! Later!" Elyse gritted her teeth with each repetition, her anger not subsiding. "Why are you still sitting here? I need to rest. Staying any longer with you might just kill me from frustration," she declared vehemently. Elyse's fury erupted loudly.

Jayden promptly signaled the driver outside to start driving.

The driver, aware that Jayden often had playful plans in the car, had been waiting nearby. He hadn't anticipated a quick summons. Had something gone wrong? The driver looked back in confusion, but Elyse immediately reprimanded him.

"Why are you staring? Keep your eyes on the road! If we're not back in ten minutes, both you and Jayden are out of this car!"

Realizing the severity of the situation, the driver quickly focused on the road, pondering Jayden's significant troubles with Elyse this time.

The driver, sensing the tension, hurried to their destination.

Once out of the car, Elyse wrapped her arms around herself and marched into the house, with Jayden trailing close behind.

They arrived at her bedroom door, where Elyse spun around to face Jayden, who had managed to keep up with her. She raised an eyebrow and challenged him, "We're both single now. Do you really think it's a good idea to come in?"

Persistent as ever, Jayden responded with a sly grin, “There’s plenty of room. Your bed could fit five people.”

Elyse scoffed dismissively, “I’m not sharing a bed with you. You’ll have to sleep alone.”

Undeterred, Jayden proposed a compromise. “What if I sleep on the floor? I just need to stay nearby to keep you safe.”

Elyse rolled her eyes. Letting Jayden into her room seemed like the riskiest option. Did he really think she was oblivious to his intentions?

Without another word, she slipped into her room and swiftly locked the door behind her.

Outside, Jayden lingered by the shut door, feeling somewhat aggrieved. He had thought Elyse might appreciate his offer to look after her.

Later, after freshening up, Elyse’s stomach rumbled, reminding her she’d barely eaten at the banquet. She unlocked her door and headed for the kitchen. No sooner had she opened the door than she stepped on something unexpectedly soft. A muffled yelp of pain erupted from below.

Shocked, she looked down to see Jayden lying on the floor at her doorstep.

Chapter 885:

Jayden grimaced, and once the pain subsided, he said playfully, “Darling, you just stepped on my… well, you know. Who’s going to ensure your happiness in bed if you’ve damaged it?”

When Elyse realized what she had stepped on, her cheeks flushed with a mix of rage and mortification. She snapped, “Why are you sleeping at my doorstep?”

Unabashed, Jayden murmured, “I feel safer when I’m close to you.”

Elyse huffed, “Afraid I might escape, are you?”

“No, that’s not it.” Jayden sighed, knowing any explanation would fall flat with her right now. Switching topics, he asked, “You can’t sleep because you’re hungry, aren’t you? Were you headed to the kitchen for a quick bite?”

Elyse looked at him, bewildered. “How did you know?”

“I know you too well,” Jayden replied, getting to his feet. He took the opportunity to drape an arm around her waist, surprising her further. “Come on, I’ll show you where the good stuff is.”

Elyse furrowed her brows. “Lead the way if you must, but keep your hands to yourself.”

Jayden playfully threatened, “If you don’t let me hold you, I might just have to tease you until you stop pushing me away.”

Elyse retorted sharply, “Stop it! You have a girlfriend. I’m not going to be your dirty little secret.”

“Who said I have a girlfriend? I’ve already crossed the Hudsons. I bet there’s a warrant out for my arrest tonight,” Jayden remarked, his smile unfaltering.

Elyse had forgotten about that. She was under the impression Jayden was involved with someone else.

With a helpless chuckle, Jayden said, “I’ve finally shaken off that lunatic. Now I can focus on winning my true love.”

Elyse looked at him, baffled.

Jayden playfully squeezed her waist, “Why are you looking at me like that? You don’t believe me, do you? I’ve deceived you enough in the past. Wasn’t I just pretending when I was with Aarya?”

Elyse retorted, her voice tinged with sarcasm as she reminded him of his previous deceit.

Jayden shifted uncomfortably. He had his reasons back then, though he knew it was wrong.

With a touch of regret, he vowed, "I'll never lie to you again, I promise."

Elyse remained silent, still trying to make sense of the depth of Jayden's past deceptions.

When they reached the kitchen, they found the servants had already retired. Jayden peered into the refrigerator, which was brimming with ingredients. He grabbed a few and offered, "How about I whip up something for us?"

Elyse was caught off guard. She never thought of Jayden as someone who could cook. She inquired, somewhat incredulously, "You'll cook? Really?"

"I haven't cooked in ages, and I'm a bit rusty. It might not be perfect," Jayden confessed while he started to prepare the food.

Chapter 886:

"Okay, I'll try it. But if it's awful, I'm not eating it," Elyse consented, though with reservations.

Meanwhile, in the living room, Aarya lay curled on the sofa, her stomach audibly rumbling. A servant next to her grew increasingly worried.

"Miss Hudson, you need to eat something. You've been ignoring your hunger for too long. If you continue like this, you'll fall ill," the servant implored.

Aarya responded with a firm shake of her head. "No, I'm not eating. I'm waiting for my father to return; I must tell him about Jayden's betrayal. I want him to handle Jayden and make him pay."

“Miss Hudson, please don’t let your distress affect your health,” the servant urged, feeling utterly powerless.

Aarya had spent the entire night waiting on the sofa and ended up falling asleep there.

It was only around 7 a.m. the following morning that Charlie, who had been out the whole night, entered the house.

When he saw Aarya asleep on the sofa, he gently tapped her face to wake her, asking with concern, “Aarya, why are you sleeping here on the sofa? Why didn’t you go to your room?”

Slowly, Aarya looked up at Charlie, and the tears she had been holding back began to flow. Overwhelmed with emotion, she exclaimed, “Dad, you need to help me! Something awful happened to me last night.”

Upon hearing her distress, Charlie’s weariness vanished. He sat beside her on the sofa, his voice urgent with concern, “Sweetheart, tell me what happened. Don’t worry, just explain everything, and I’ll take care of it.”

“Jayden betrayed me. He went back to his ex-wife. He can’t seem to let her go. Yesterday, he even told me I’m not as good as Elyse and that he doesn’t want to be with me!” Aarya cried, her words broken and muddled, making it difficult to grasp the events of the previous day.

However, Charlie, who was no stranger to deciphering complex situations, quickly pieced together what had happened. Jayden had exploited the opportunity Charlie had given him, turning it into a trap.

With a newfound clarity, Charlie realized that this betrayal might just be part of a larger scheme orchestrated by Jayden. He grumbled under his breath, “It makes sense now. I wondered all night why things weren’t going as expected. It was Jayden—he betrayed me long ago.”

Aarya, not grasping the gravity of Charlie’s revelation, continued sobbing. “Dad, I need you to bring Jayden and Elyse here. I want to kill them myself! I must kill them!”

The Hudson family had long been entangled in dubious dealings, and Aarya, buoyed by her family's fortunes, had committed her fair share of misdeeds without a second thought to the repercussions. There was always someone to cover for her, so she had never truly faced any consequences.

However, under the manipulation of Elyse and Jayden, she had now experienced betrayal and agony. She was resolute in her decision not to let them go.

Charlie paused, weighing his options. With the Hudson family already under threat, it seemed prudent to stay out of the limelight with his daughter until the danger subsided. But compelled by Aarya's distress, he chose to act.

He gently patted Aarya's shoulder, offering comfort. "Don't worry. I won't let them hurt you. We'll make Jayden regret crossing us."

Chapter 887:

Buoyed by Charlie's words, Aarya calmed down somewhat. She looked up at him, her resolve hardening. "And Dad, don't forget Elyse. I want her to suffer more than she can imagine. I want to be the one to put her through hell."

"Fine, everything will be as you wish. You mean the world to me. Once we settle this, I promise to find you someone truly worthy," Charlie assured her, his voice filled with paternal love.

"Thank you, Dad. He must be even more charming, gentler, and caring than Jayden," Aarya insisted firmly.

"I promise he will be. It's morning now. How about joining me for breakfast?" Charlie proposed.

Once Charlie assured her, Aarya's distress seemed to dissolve. She nodded enthusiastically. "Okay. I'm really hungry, I'm going to eat plenty."

At Jayden's villa, Elyse entered the living room just as Jayden was speaking on the phone.

“Charlie, the fact that you found me so quickly shows you’re not completely without brains. But what does it matter if I manipulated you?”

In this complex game, I’ll be the only true winner. I don’t need to listen to you. I’m well aware of what’s happening. And your daughter?

I have no feelings for her. It was all just a performance. If you couldn’t see that, then you’re as dull-witted as she is. Your flailing attempts are truly amusing. I look forward to seeing you try to confront me. Remember, I’m a player in this game too. The victory will be mine.”

Once the call ended, Jayden turned to find Elyse eyeing him intently.

Raising an eyebrow, he inquired, “Caught every word, did you?”

Elyse snorted dismissively, “Does it even matter? I can pretend I didn’t hear anything.”

Jayden, noting the resolute look on her face, felt a warm affection swell inside him. “So, do you have questions or...?”

“Questions?” Elyse paused, then pressed, “Did you and Charlie really have a falling out?”

He exhaled slowly, “Charlie and I were never truly partners, so there’s no ‘falling out’ to speak of.”

Taken aback, Elyse looked puzzled, “Then what was all this about? Wasn’t it just for the money?”

Jayden offered a sly smile, “It’s about money, but not the way you’re thinking.”

Elyse sneered, “What if I ask what’s going on? Are you planning on keeping me in the dark again?”

“Exactly. You’re as sharp as always. The time isn’t right, so I can’t say anything yet,” Jayden grinned slyly.

Ignoring him, Elyse turned and walked into the kitchen. She calmly sat down at the dining table and began eating her breakfast.

Jayden followed, asking, “Aren’t you curious about when it will all end?”

“It’s none of my business. I don’t care,” Elyse replied, her tone indifferent, as if she didn’t give it any thought.

Chapter 888:

Jayden was about to press further when his phone rang again. Glancing at the caller ID, he raised an eyebrow and said, “I’ll take this call outside.”

Elyse didn’t respond, uninterested in who Jayden might be speaking to. She didn’t have the time or patience to care.

Jayden stepped out of the villa, ended the incessantly ringing call, and turned to face the man waiting at his doorstep. With a smirk, Jayden asked, “What brings you to my home? We didn’t arrange a private meeting, did we?”

Edward’s eyes blazed with anger as he glared at Jayden. He shouted, “You betrayed our agreement at the most critical moment! Are you trying to sabotage everything we’ve worked for?”

“I haven’t broken any agreements,” Jayden responded coolly. “You’re upset because I took Elyse away. You were planning something behind my back, weren’t you?”

Jayden wasn’t rattled. In his eyes, Edward was far less capable than his father, the governor.

Edward sneered, “You cut ties with the Hudson family. How are we supposed to carry out our strategy now? You’re nothing but a madman.”

Jayden shook his head, saying, “Who said I can’t still carry out our plan? Distancing from the Hudson family doesn’t mean I’ve completely severed ties.”

After a short pause, he continued, “Besides, Charlie’s been quite cautious lately. He’s too afraid to take any risks. For our plan to succeed, the Hudson family has to make the first move.”

Jayden explained further, “By betraying the Hudson family, Charlie and Aarya won’t let me off easily. They’ll resort to underhanded tactics out of desperation.”

Edward scoffed, “So, this was all part of your plan?”

“Of course, Edward. When you’re strategizing, you need to see the bigger picture, not just a piece of it,” Jayden said, tapping his temple mockingly. “And remember, my brain works differently from yours.”

Edward rolled his eyes so hard they nearly disappeared into the back of his head. He then asked, “What about Elyse? You didn’t spill the beans about our dealings, did you? Don’t forget our agreement. If you violate it, I can cut off what you’re after immediately.”

Jayden responded with a bright smile, “While your brain may not be as sharp as your father’s, you’ve certainly surpassed him in making threats.”

Edward sneered, “Hand Elyse over. You have no right whatsoever to take her away, or have you forgotten you’re already divorced?”

Jayden’s voice turned firm. “That’s not happening. I will never hand Elyse over to you.”

Edward’s rage boiled over as he stepped forward and grabbed Jayden by the collar, shouting furiously, “Stop being disgusting. Elyse doesn’t love you anymore. Clinging like this is pathetic!”

Jayden, with a cold stare, replied, “Clinging on? Haven’t you been chasing her relentlessly too? You’re attracted to Elyse, aren’t you? But don’t forget the nature of our bet. It all started as a whim for you.”

Jayden’s lips curled into a cruel smile as he asked, “If I let Elyse know that your feelings for her were just a joke, do you think she’d accept that?”

Chapter 889:

Edward roared in anger, “You sly, despicable man. Who the hell are you to judge me? You’ve chased after other women for your gain, never caring about Elyse at all.”

Jayden shot back, “What about you? As the governor’s son, can you claim to love deeply? Are you willing to show Elyse your darkest, most disgraceful side?”

Edward froze, stumped by Jayden’s question, standing still for the first time.

Jayden wasn’t surprised by Edward’s reaction. In Jayden’s eyes, Edward was too young and inexperienced to understand what love truly was.

But he understood why Edward was drawn to Elyse—she was a woman worth loving.

Jayden smiled and said, “Sorry, Edward, but I’m a better match for Elyse.”

Edward had been sent away by Jayden, and Jayden returned to the living room, hoping to relax with Elyse and enjoy a rare moment of peace. To his dismay, she had already retreated to her room.

He approached the door and asked pitifully, “Why did you leave so soon? Can’t we stay in the living room a bit longer?”

Elyse’s voice came through, laced with irritation, “I want to sleep. I just finished a competition, and I’m exhausted. Can’t I get some rest?”

Jayden stopped his knocking, a resigned sigh escaping him. “Alright, if you need anything, just call. I’ll be working downstairs.”

Elyse nestled into her bed, finally allowing herself to drift into a peaceful slumber, free from interruptions.

She had no idea how long she had been asleep when her phone rang. Groggy and disoriented, she squinted at the screen, noting the unfamiliar number. With a reluctant groan, she answered, “Who’s calling me at this hour?”

“Come on, it’s already noon, and you’re still in bed? You are so lazy and grumpy,” came the response.

The voice was oddly familiar to Elyse. Blinking sleepily, she asked, “Is this Brook? How did you get my number?”

“Finding your number was a piece of cake,” Brook replied with a chuckle.

Elyse’s brow furrowed in confusion. “So, what’s this about? We’re not exactly on close terms, are we?”

Brook’s tone softened. “True, we aren’t that close. I probably shouldn’t have called. But I wanted to congratulate you. I watched your entire competition—it had me on the edge of my seat. Congratulations on winning first place.”

Still struggling to shake off sleep, Elyse scratched her nose in bewilderment. Brook had always been difficult to deal with. What could possibly have made him call?

After a brief silence, she asked, her voice tinged with doubt, “Why the sudden change in attitude? Did you get promoted at the Owen Group? Have you become the second-in-command?”

Brook replied, “Not a chance. I’m still running the same show. How could I possibly climb up the ranks?”

Chapter 890:

The mere mention of Enzo made Elyse shiver. His name had become synonymous with nightmares and a taboo in her life.

She rubbed her temples in frustration. “So, you called just to congratulate me on winning first place?”

After a prolonged pause, Brook sighed heavily before asking, “Are you at Jayden’s place right now?”

Without thinking, Elyse answered, “Yes, I am. Why do you ask?”

“Where is Jayden now? And where does he live?” Brook asked.

The question jolted Elyse’s mind into clarity. She asked Brook warily, “What are you really doing in Manfek? It can’t be just to watch my competition. You must have another agenda.”

Brook chuckled softly. “It seems you’re not going to tell me. Well, if you’re with Jayden, you better stay close to him and not stray. Otherwise, you won’t have anyone to protect you.”

Elyse sat up, her frustration bubbling over. “What are you plotting? Spill it now.”

“Are you really that clueless? I’m not on your side, so why would I tell you anything? If Jayden’s not filling you in, why should I?” With that, Brook ended the call abruptly.

Fury bubbled inside Elyse. Brook’s cryptic words about Jayden not being forthcoming only added to her frustration. Clearly, something was wrong with both of them.

Fully awake now, Elyse dressed quickly, exited her room, and braced herself for a confrontation with Jayden. The situation had escalated to a point where it was no longer a feud between Jayden and the Hudson family. Enzo’s influence loomed over the affair, and she was determined to get to the bottom of it.

However, when she descended the stairs, she discovered that Jayden was nowhere to be found on the first floor. After a thorough search, she wandered into the garden, where a gardener was methodically tilling the soil. Winter had just relinquished its grip, making way for the burgeoning spring.

Standing among the freshly turned earth, Elyse exhaled in frustration. “Where could he have vanished to? He always seems to slip away just when he’s needed most.”

“Are you searching for Jayden Owen? He has stepped out. Mr. Hudson summoned him, so he left to keep that appointment,” the gardener, who had been quietly tending to his tasks, said.

Elyse turned toward the voice and noticed the gardener. The person stood about 5 feet 7 inches tall. They were slim and wore a black hat that shadowed half their face. Elyse squinted, trying to discern whether the gardener was male or female. As she stepped closer, she asked, “How long has Jayden been gone?”

“It’s been quite some time. Would you like to see him?” The gardener kept their head lowered, further obscuring their features.

Elyse inched even closer, about to pose another question, when a sudden realization struck her.

Why would Jayden’s subordinates address him by his full name and refer to Charlie as Mr. Hudson?

Elyse snapped to attention, backing away with wary eyes as she demanded, “Identify yourself. You certainly aren’t one of Jayden’s household staff.”

“With a keen eye like yours, Ms. Lloyd, I’m surprised you caught the oddity in my phrases,” the gardener remarked, raising his gaze.