

Chapter 887 A Verbal Chess Match

Elliana's perspective on Merlin was starting to change as she watched him. There was a time when she couldn't stand him. She used to think he was insufferable, and if it hadn't been for his connection to Cole, she might have socked him every time he came around.

Yet, seeing how tenderly Merlin treated Hailee now, Elliana began to suspect that, when it came to love, Merlin was genuine straightforward in pursuit and devoted once committed. That kind of single-minded affection was something she found oddly admirable. Looking at the whole picture, Merlin just might be the right person for Hailee after all.

Unable to hold back her curiosity, Elliana asked softly, "Hailee, tell me the truth, do you have feelings for Merlin?"

Hailee practically choked, instantly shaking her head. "What are you talking about? I'm nobody special, while Mr. Blakely is on a completely different level, a real tycoon. What could I possibly offer him? I know my limits. I'm not foolish enough to chase after something impossible."

She hesitated, her tone turning wistful. "Besides, Boris hurt me deeply. The thought of love and marriage scares me now. I think I'd rather stay single for my whole life. It just feels safer that way."

Elliana asked gently, "So, you're set on being alone forever?"

With a determined nod, Hailee replied, "I fall too hard, too fast once feelings are developed. The moment I start caring, I become an open book, easy to fool, easy to wound. The only way to protect myself is to never let any man close again."

Seeing the resolve in Hailee's eyes, Elliana let the subject drop. Plenty of people these days choose to stay single. After everything Hailee had been through with Boris, she had every reason to keep her guard up.

Elliana acknowledged that it wasn't something she could fix for Hailee;

she could only offer support and let her friend decide for herself.

Elsewhere in the ballroom, Ruben and Raymond were locked in a sly contest of words. Despite being well into their eighties, they quarreled with the stubbornness of children.

From afar, they looked like two old friends sharing a lighthearted chat, but anyone standing near would catch the pointed digs woven into their banter, each man eager to outdo the other.

Their "conversation" started with polite greetings, but quickly shifted to a verbal chess match.

Raymond started with pride, beaming. "Who would have guessed Adah would become such a star? Truly a credit to the Shaw family!"

Ruben shot back instantly, "As I recall, Allan and Adah broke off their engagement quite some time ago. So her fame doesn't really bring honor to the Shaw family, does it?"

"What nonsense you're talking out!" Raymond replied smoothly, not missing a beat. "As far as I know, the two of them are still going strong. In fact, they're even talking about getting married soon and giving me a great-grandchild to dote on."

Ruben met him head-on, unflinching. "Is that so? Funny, because Adah recently told Lance she was done with Allan. She even said Lance is exactly her type and that she's set on joining the Evans family!"

Ruben jabbed Lance hard in the shin with his cane. "Lance! Back me up here. Isn't that right?"

Stuck awkwardly between the two feuding elders, Lance looked absolutely miserable. He had spent his entire life watching them bicker, and now they were dragging him into their battle, a situation he wanted nothing to do with.

But under Ruben's stern, expectant gaze, Lance knew he had no way out. He caved, choosing to lie just to keep the peace. "That's right."

No sooner had the words left his mouth than Lance started glancing around anxiously, dreading that Adah might walk in and call him out, exposing his fib to everyone and making him a laughingstock.

Ruben's move struck a nerve. After all, during the last banquet, everyone had noticed that Adah had been far friendlier to Lance than to Allan, whose only reward was a chilly glare and a cold shoulder.

A sliver of doubt edged its way into Raymond's mind, rattling his confidence. Could Ruben actually be right? Was Adah set on marrying Lance and becoming an Evans after all?

Annoyance and frustration simmered beneath Raymond's composure. The genial mask he wore dropped in a flash. "And what does Lance have that Allan doesn't? What makes Lance think he can take Adah away from my grandson?"

"Seriously?" Ruben shot back, brimming with pride. "Lance is a force to be reckoned with in the AI world, talented, good-looking the whole package. He and Adah would be perfect together."

Before Raymond could muster a response, Ruben went for the kill. "Let's be honest, Raymond. Allan has been missing for weeks. Clearly, he is too embarrassed to show up after losing to Lance; he is likely off licking his wounds somewhere. You might as well accept the reality!"

Raymond had no comeback for that. Allan had vanished without a trace, and not a soul knew where he'd gone.

Raymond's certainty began to waver.

Ruben straightened with satisfaction, relishing his apparent victory. "Well, it's quite predictable that Allan lost to Lance. Lance takes after me, intelligent, charming and always a hit with women. It's just the Evans way."

He let that last line hang, all but spelling out his past triumphs over Raymond in their own rivalry in love years ago.

Raymond felt the old sting all over again. He gave a snort of irritation, spun on his heel, and turned his back to Ruben, ending the exchange right there.

At that very moment, Adah appeared, dressed impeccably and claiming the spotlight.

