

Chapter 101: Find a Chance to Get a DNA Test with Mommy

Estelle asked the store manager to ring up her purchases, casually pulling out a black card and handing it over.

Nathaniel's throat tightened. He stepped forward and intercepted the black card. "I'll pay."

"That won't do." Estelle raised an eyebrow. "I can't be a greedy woman and give Mr. Sloan the wrong idea. It's just a few pieces of clothing; I'll handle it myself."

Nathaniel's heart skipped a beat. An indescribable emotion spread through his chest, but he insisted, "Let me pay."

Estelle's eyes darkened. "I have my own money. I said I'll handle it myself. Do you not understand?"

Henry Kendrick had once called her a little hedgehog, and in truth, she really was. Until she fully opened her heart to someone, she would draw a clear line between herself and them, regardless of their relationship. Whether they were husband and wife or blood relatives, until Estelle truly accepted them, she would keep her finances and personal life completely separate. Only when she fell in love and accepted someone—when the hedgehog was willing to expose its soft belly—would she allow herself to act affectionately and rely on them.

In the past, she had prepared three meals a day for Nathaniel, treated his chronic headaches, and secretly bought him ties and cufflinks. She had thought they were a married couple, that they were family. She believed she, the little hedgehog, could roll over and show him her soft belly. And so, she had wanted to act spoiled just once. She had wanted Nathaniel to gift her a necklace.

It wasn't that she couldn't afford the necklace, nor was it expensive. At the time, she had taken on several perfumery commissions, and the cufflinks she had bought for him were worth far more than that piece of jewelry. She simply wanted a gift from her husband. She just wanted to receive a present from her significant other during their marriage, to experience that tiny, pleasant surprise.

So, she had thrown herself into his arms affectionately and said, "Nathaniel, this is so pretty. I love it. Can you buy it for me?"

Nathaniel had set down his wine glass with an unreadable expression. He casually glanced at the price tag and asked dismissively, "Are you short on money?"

Estelle had been about to shake her head when Nathaniel continued, "Have I not given you enough? Why are you so greedy? It seems Noelle guessed right; you really would come begging me for things."

Stunned, Estelle had asked, "Nathaniel... what do you mean?"

Nathaniel shot her a sideways glance. "I married you on my grandfather's orders. I've given you and the Lockwood family plenty. Ask for less, lest everyone starts calling you a greedy gold-digger, hmm?"

Only later did Estelle learn that Nathaniel had attended a social gathering prior to that day. At the party, Noelle had casually mentioned that ever since Estelle returned to the Lockwood family, she acted as if everyone owed her. Noelle claimed that despite the family providing her with food and shelter, Estelle was never satisfied, demanding that Mr. Lockwood buy her luxury watches, sports cars, and designer goods. She even made a bet with Nathaniel that as soon as he got home, Estelle would definitely ask him for a gift.

The wealthy heirs at the gathering had also gossiped behind her back, calling Estelle—the true daughter of the family—a gold-digger who was lazy, useless, and only cared about spending men's money.

Estelle had desperately wanted to explain that none of it was true. She hadn't asked the Lockwoods or Nathaniel for any of those things. She just wanted a small gesture. But no one would have listened.

From that moment on, Estelle never asked Nathaniel for anything. She drew a strict line between their finances. He used his money, and she only spent her own. Over those two years, he spent barely anything on her—his actual wife—yet he showered Noelle with countless gifts and resources.

Pulled back to the present, Estelle grew angrier the more she thought about it. She thought, "What a jerk!"

She glared viciously at Nathaniel and mocked, "First you're pursuing me, now you're trying to spend money on me. What exactly are you trying to do? Just spit it out. I wouldn't dare spend Mr. Sloan's money. If word got out, who knows what people would say."

Nathaniel's lips pressed into a tight line.

Estelle swiftly swiped her card to finish the transaction. Catching sight of him out of the corner of her eye, she added, "Do as you please, Mr. Sloan. I have things to do."

Nathaniel suddenly asked, "And if I insist on giving you something, what will you do?"

Estelle found the question utterly baffling. After that incident in the past, she had never asked him for another gift. He would occasionally buy her things on a whim, but she never even glanced at them. She couldn't even remember what he had bought her.

"I won't do anything. Just because Mr. Sloan bought it doesn't mean I have to accept it." After speaking, Estelle didn't even look at him again and walked straight out the door.

Nathaniel's eyes grew dark and profound. He stood silently in the boutique while the store clerks didn't even dare to breathe. Only after Estelle's silhouette disappeared did the man briefly raise his gaze and stride out.

All the clerks let out a collective sigh of relief. It had scared them half to death! The big boss had come to their store and seemingly gotten rejected by a woman! Who on earth was she to dare reject Mr. Sloan?

After leaving the store, Nathaniel received a call from Luke White. "Sir, Young Mr. Christian said you don't need to attend today's activity."

The kindergarten was hosting an activity that required parental accompaniment, and Nathaniel had specifically taken time off work for it. Yet, at this very moment, he was being rejected by his own son?

Having been rejected twice in one day, Nathaniel's expression turned grim. "What's going on?"

Luke thought, "My life as a corporate wage slave is truly full of hardships." He replied, "Uh... the young master said he only needs Ms. Yara."

In reality, Young Mr. Christian's exact words had been far more arrogant. When Luke had asked "Christian" about it, the usually exceptionally well-behaved young master had acted extremely defiant and rude, even rolling his eyes at the mention of Nathaniel's name.

"What is he coming for? He finally remembered he's a father? No, no way!"

Iris Sloan's banquet was in a few days. After picking out an evening gown, Estelle headed to the kindergarten. There was an activity this afternoon—some sort of educational class explaining DNA—that required parental accompaniment.

Upon arriving, Estelle was surprised to find "Christian" standing all alone. She couldn't help but let out a cold laugh. The school had made it clear that today's activity required the biological parents to be present. It was one thing for Noelle not to show up, but Nathaniel hadn't come either. They had just left Christian here all by himself.

While the other children had their parents by their side, and "Zachery" and Mia had run up to her the moment they saw her, "Christian" remained rooted to the spot like a bewildered little cub.

Estelle's heart instantly melted. "Christian, where's your daddy?"

Zachery, who was pretending to be Christian, rolled his eyes slightly. "Daddy is too busy. Ms. Yara, you don't need to worry about me."

How could she not worry? Estelle frowned. She glanced around and noticed some people looking their way. She knew that children had fragile hearts. If Christian felt left out because all his classmates had their parents with them while he didn't, it might leave him with psychological trauma.

Estelle didn't hesitate. "Then stick by my side. We'll do this together."

"Christian" immediately stood on his tiptoes and hugged her waist. "Thank you, Ms. Yara!"

The two little rascals who had swapped identities exchanged a look. Zachery couldn't help but feel smug. He thought, "HMPH, I've got Mommy eating out of the palm of my hand!"

Today's identity swap was a plan the three little ones had discussed for a long time before Mia gave the final approval. After the swap, the "Zachery" currently standing next to Estelle was actually Christian.

Later, there would be a DNA paternity test activity. Mia planned to egg her mommy and "Zachery" on to take the test together. Their mommy was completely in the dark. Once the test results came out, they would reveal that the one she took the test with wasn't Zachery, but the young master.

That way, Mommy would know that Christian was also her biological child!

Chapter 102: Estelle Lockwood Was So Heartless Back Then

The event began, and many parents and children were already trying out the paternity test activity. The whole kindergarten was bustling.

Mia was the little social butterfly of the kindergarten; almost the entire class were her good friends. Other parents had, more or less, heard of Mia from their own children. So when they saw Estelle Lockwood bringing Mia, they all greeted her one after another.

"Mia's mom! Wow, do you have three kids?"

Estelle froze for a moment. For some inexplicable reason, she thought of her child who had died in the fire back then.

Before she could answer, Mia nodded. "Yes, yes!"

The parent looked at the three children and couldn't help but say, "It's a pity that everyone can only try the paternity test activity once today. Mia's mom, you can only choose to take one child to try it out."

Estelle was taken aback. She had originally planned to let both Zachery and Mia try it.

Mia rolled her eyes playfully. "Mommy, let Zachery go. I don't want my hair pulled."

"Zachery" also chuckled softly. "Yeah, Mommy, I'll do it."

Estelle felt something was a bit off, but she couldn't pinpoint exactly what it was. She nodded, walked to the activity area, and did the paternity test with "Zachery."

With their plan successfully completed, the three little ones exchanged glances. The test results wouldn't be out for a week, so they were in no rush. Christian felt a surge of secret excitement. In a week, he would finally be able to officially reunite with his mommy!

Meanwhile, upon returning to the Lockwood family home, Noelle Lockwood could no longer maintain her gentle facade. With a scream, she smashed everything on the table!

"Get lost! All you useless things, get out of my sight!"

The servants were startled and hurriedly retreated. Outsiders always praised Noelle for being reasonable and well-educated, but only the long-term servants of the Lockwoods truly knew what kind of person she really was.

After smashing things, Noelle went crying to Rose Lowell. Rose already knew about what had happened at the Celestar Commercial Center today. She gritted her teeth. "Why is that bitch Yara targeting you like this? And Vivian too—over a hundred million! Where are we going to find that kind of money to compensate her?"

Previously, due to the plagiarism scandal, Noelle already had to pay Yara over two hundred million in compensation, and now there was another hundred million on top of

that. The company had also suffered a significant blow. It seemed someone was secretly acquiring their shares. The Lockwoods all knew that the Lockwood Group was not doing well right now.

Noelle pursed her lips and hinted, "Mom... don't you think that ever since Yara came to Crestfall, our family has been facing nothing but bad luck? First, Christian started hating me, and Nathaniel drove me out of Imperial Crest. Then came several astronomical compensation payouts, and now our shares..."

Rose calmed down. "Now that you mention it, it really is true. Could Yara be targeting us on purpose? But there is no bad blood between us. Why would she do that?"

Seeing that Rose had taken the bait, Noelle's eyes shifted. "Mom, there's something... I don't know if I should say it."

"Just say whatever is on your mind."

Noelle feigned hesitation and bit her lip. "Actually... I think Yara might be Estelle..."

Rose's eyes widened in shock. "What!"

Noelle pursed her lips tightly, her small face covered in tears. "Mom, I don't think Estelle died back then. You know, Estelle always felt that I stole her place, so she hates me, and she hates the Lockwood family..."

Noelle's speculation didn't come out of nowhere; she genuinely felt that the woman was Estelle Lockwood!

Noelle deliberately spoke in a helpless tone, "Mom, if Yara is truly Estelle, then... I might as well leave. It's better for me to sever ties with the Lockwoods than for your biological daughter to hate you like this..."

As expected, this show of weakness instantly sent Rose into a rage.

"Why should you leave! That bitch tried every possible way to kill you back then, and now she wants revenge? She's the one who should get lost! Goddamn wretch! No, I have to drive her away!"

Seeing her goal achieved, Noelle hurriedly added, "Mom, I can't be sure either. Besides, if she really is Estelle and you drive her away, everyone will definitely think I'm a bad person. They'll say you favored your adopted daughter so much that you couldn't even tolerate your biological daughter..."

Rose was sick to her stomach with anger. It was clearly Estelle who couldn't tolerate Noelle. Must Noelle suffer so many unprovoked disasters just because she was an adopted daughter?

Suddenly, a thought struck Rose, and her eyes instantly darted around. "Don't worry, Noelle. Mom has a way!"

Nathaniel Sloan still went to the kindergarten. He watched the parents happily participating in activities with their children inside, an unfathomable look in his eyes.

Luke White remained silent. He inexplicably felt that his boss looked like a stay-at-home husband coming to catch a cheating wife; the resentment in his eyes was almost palpable. It made sense, though. Young Mr. Christian was having a blast playing with Ms. Yara, while he, the biological father, was shut out. How tragic.

Luke was just about to suggest that Nathaniel go inside to take a look when Nathaniel's phone rang. He glanced at the caller ID and narrowed his eyes.

"Father."

The person on the other end of the line was Ethan Sloan. The father and son didn't communicate much, and Ethan rarely called him. Although Nathaniel came from a wealthy background and never lacked material comforts, he had never been close to his parents. In the Sloan family, he was actually closer to Old Mr. Sloan and his aunt.

Ethan cut straight to the chase. "Nathaniel, Noelle is a celebrity after all, and she has ties to the Sloan family. How could you show her so little respect in front of outsiders?"

Nathaniel's eyes were indifferent. "Did Noelle Lockwood run to you to complain?"

Ethan frowned. It was Rose who had called Laura Jennings, and Laura had run to tell him about it. That was how he found out. Although Noelle wasn't directly involved, how could someone like Ethan not figure it out? Therefore, Nathaniel's words weren't wrong. It really was Noelle who had come complaining.

Ethan didn't deny it. "That's not the point. The point is—Nathaniel, I heard you're courting Yara?"

The surroundings instantly quieted down. An icy chill surfaced in Nathaniel's eyes as he spoke in a hoarse voice, "Yes."

Ethan seemed to think of something else. "I also heard that Yara and Estelle are the same person?"

These words were, of course, hinted at by Rose to Laura. Laura was a fool and didn't understand, but Ethan caught on. Rose despised her biological daughter and wanted to use the Sloan family's hands to drive her away. Although Ethan felt disdain for the Lockwoods' actions, he couldn't let Estelle return to Nathaniel's side either.

"If Yara is just Yara, I have no objections to you courting her. But if Yara is Estelle, then absolutely not!"

Nathaniel's eyes were filled with freezing hostility. "And what if you object?"

Ethan raised his voice. "Back then, Old Mr. Sloan insisted on this marriage. You were unwilling in the first place. Since that's the case, why must you reconcile with that woman?"

"Besides, have you forgotten how cruel Estelle was and everything she did? Christian was almost burned to death, and my other two grandchildren died in that fire! But what did she do? She set a fire and just walked away!"

"If Estelle had died five years ago, I could still acknowledge her as my daughter-in-law. I could believe she committed suicide in a moment of despair."

"But if she didn't die, then she deliberately set a fire that killed her own children, caused a massive disaster, and pushed both the Lockwoods and the Sloans to the forefront of public scrutiny! What does all of this amount to? It proves that this woman is deeply scheming and utterly heartless!"

"Moreover, have you even thought about who she had those two kids with—Zachery and Mia?!"

Nathaniel abruptly tightened his grip on his phone.

Chapter 103: That Child Noelle Lockwood Was Pregnant With...

Ethan Sloan probably thought Nathaniel Sloan had taken his words to heart, so he continued, "In short, you and Estelle Lockwood are not a good match. Whether she's dead or alive, I will never accept her!"

Silence reigned on the other end of the line.

After a long while, Nathaniel finally spoke in a slow, measured tone. "Estelle's status doesn't need your approval. Father, if Mother really has so much free time that she insists on meddling in the Lockwood family's affairs, I can find a temple for her to clear her head."

Ethan choked on his words. "Nathaniel!"

Back when he married Estelle, Nathaniel had clearly been unwilling as well. What on earth was going on with him now? Knowing that arguing further would be useless, Ethan changed the subject to persuade him.

"When you're out there, at least don't be so heartless toward Noelle. She saved your life when you were kids. Five years ago, she lost the baby in her womb to save Christian. She's sacrificed so much. Even if you don't love her, you can't treat her like this!"

"Nathaniel, a life-saving debt must be repaid. Not only did she save you, but she also saved your son. Think about it!"

Hanging up the phone, Nathaniel pressed his lips into a tight line, his eyes suddenly darkening.

Standing nearby, Luke White clicked his tongue, sighing endlessly. Having been by Nathaniel's side since childhood, he naturally knew what Ethan meant.

When Nathaniel was fifteen, he was severely injured and saved by a young girl. Later, they found out the little girl was Noelle Lockwood, the apple of the Lockwood family's eye. From then on, to repay Noelle, the Sloan family poured countless resources into the Lockwood family, catapulting them into the ranks of Crestfall's high society.

When Noelle entered the entertainment industry, Nathaniel acted as her absolute protector. Resources, endorsements, movies, TV shows, variety programs... as long as Noelle set her sights on something, Nathaniel would help her get it. In private, the luxury cars, designer watches, and mansions he gave her were too numerous to count—all to repay her for saving his life back then.

That was until Nathaniel got married.

In truth, after the marriage, all debts had essentially been paid. It was impossible for Nathaniel to be endlessly guilt-tripped by Noelle into repaying her for the rest of his life. At that time, his willingness to continue supporting the Lockwood family was mostly because of his wife.

Unfortunately, that tragic incident happened later...

Once, when Laura Jennings and Noelle went on a trip, Noelle was assaulted by a stranger and got pregnant. Consumed by guilt, Laura went to great lengths to protect Noelle, even going so far as to force Nathaniel to claim the child in Noelle's womb as his own. With Laura begging bitterly and the Lockwood family bringing up that past life-saving grace, Nathaniel promised that this would be the last thing he ever did for Noelle, and from then on, the debt would be wiped clean.

At this point, Luke reined in his thoughts. A boss's family affairs weren't something a mere employee could interfere with. It was just that after hearing Ethan's phone call today, Luke felt a sense of injustice on Estelle's behalf.

Snapping back to reality, he noticed it was time for the kindergarten to let out. Luke spotted Estelle walking out with the three little ones. He was about to ask a question when he saw Nathaniel turn around.

"Let's go home first."

Luke had no choice but to follow.

Two days later, at the Sloan family's banquet.

As the only son of the Sloan Group's head, Christian naturally needed to make an appearance. Worried that the young master wouldn't like such an occasion, Zachery wanted to go in his place. But after careful consideration, Christian shook his head.

The Sloan family was massive, with many people and just as much drama. Zachery was kind enough to offer help, but he couldn't let him get into trouble.

Meanwhile, Estelle was getting ready for the banquet.

However, right before leaving, she found that her invitation was missing. Aunt Iris had specially handwritten that invitation for her. It was the only one of its kind, yet she couldn't find it anywhere. She thought it was strange, as she had clearly placed it on the desk.

She tried to recall who had entered her study over the past few days. However, pressed for time, she could only call Iris first.

Iris didn't think much of it. "The invitation? It's fine, just come over. I'll personally go to the entrance to meet you later."

"Thank you," Estelle said gratefully.

Without overthinking it, she headed out the door. Only after she left did a servant sneak shiftily into a corner and make a call.

"Mrs. Sloan, it's me. I've already delivered the invitation to Miss Noelle. Rest assured..."

On the other end of the line, Laura was finally satisfied.

Iris had actually hosted a banquet without inviting Noelle! How could Laura swallow that? Hearing that Iris had handed an invitation to that little tramp Yara, Laura immediately ordered a servant to steal it.

Anyway, all these invitations looked exactly the same, and they didn't have names written on them. If Noelle entered with Yara's invitation, even if Iris found out, she wouldn't possibly kick Noelle out in front of so many people, would she?

As for Yara? Hah, she was just a cheap slut trying to cling to the rich and powerful. Without an invitation, she would naturally be told to get lost!

When Estelle arrived at the Sloan family's villa, Iris hadn't come out yet, so she waited by the door for a while.

"Didn't I say all irrelevant people should be cleared out? What are you good for?!"

Suddenly, a woman's voice rang out, furiously rebuking the security guards at the door. The guards panicked the moment they saw who it was.

"M-Madam, this lady says she's Ms. Iris's guest..."

Knowing that Estelle didn't have an invitation, Laura had deliberately brought Noelle over to watch her make a fool of herself. Hearing this, she immediately put her hands on her hips, her face full of disdain. "She says she's Iris's guest, and you all just believe her? Chase her away!"

Since Iris had never married, the Sloan family staff still referred to her by her maiden honorific. Laura always felt that everything in the Sloan family should be hers. That old bitch Iris refusing to marry was definitely a ploy to fight Ethan for the inheritance. Thus, Laura harbored a deep-seated hatred for her. Furthermore, she already loathed Yara. Since Yara was Iris's guest, driving her away would also severely slap Iris in the face—killing two birds with one stone!

The security guards looked at each other in dismay.

Laura flared up with unprovoked anger. "What? Are my words useless now?!"

"Mrs. Sloan, what's wrong... Yara?" Acting as if she knew nothing, Noelle walked over and feigned surprise. "Yara, you're here too? Why are you standing at the door? Hurry up and go inside."

Laura instantly spoke in a sarcastic tone. "Noelle, this is something you don't know. Certain people don't have an invitation, so they can only squat at the door and stare longingly!"

"Unfortunately, our Sloan family's banquet won't leave any loopholes for such people. Thinking of fishing in troubled waters to get into the party? Hah, impossible!"

The people around them also looked over, somewhat surprised by her words. They wondered if she was really not afraid of being blacklisted by the Sloan family for daring to show up at their banquet without an invitation.

Noelle put on a surprised expression. She bit her lip, maintaining her innocent and naive facade. "Yara, didn't Nathaniel come with you? I'm sorry, I could have brought you in normally, but today's banquet is a bit special. Without an invitation, there's nothing I can do either..."

Estelle had come for Aunt Iris. Aside from her aunt and Old Mr. Sloan, she couldn't be bothered to spare anyone else a single glance. But then, she saw the invitation in Noelle's hand, and her eyes immediately narrowed.

No wonder she couldn't find her invitation after searching for so long. It hadn't been lost; it had been stolen.

Hearing Noelle's words, Laura frowned. "Noelle, you're just too kind-hearted. What is there to say to a woman like this? Someone, throw her out—"

Before she could finish her sentence, a voice suddenly rang out from a short distance away, cutting her off!

Chapter 104: Face-Slapping Laura Jennings and Noelle Lockwood

"Miss Yara is Great-Aunt's invited guest! Who dares to kick her out!"

Though the child's voice was young and tender, it already carried a nascent authority that froze the approaching security guards in their tracks. Christian was trailed by a large group of bodyguards. His face was taut, and despite his soft, cherubic features, he exuded an intense, intimidating aura.

"Don't be afraid, Miss Yara."

Estelle froze. She never expected Christian to be the one to step up for her.

Clearly, Noelle and Laura Jennings hadn't expected this either. Noelle, in particular, was so furious she wanted to march over and strangle this meddling little bastard! But she had to hold herself back.

Feigning disappointment, Noelle's expression dimmed. "Christian, Christian, how could you..."

Laura suddenly snapped out of her shock and shrieked, "Christian Sloan! Look at how you're behaving! Are you really helping an outsider and scolding your grandmother and your own mother?"

Christian replied coldly, "You know perfectly well whether Miss Noelle Lockwood is my real mother or not, Grandmother. Since we both know the truth, there is no need to keep up this charade."

Laura nearly fainted from anger. "You... you..."

Christian's words prompted the surrounding onlookers to exchange surprised glances.

Noelle realized things were going south. The only reason the public still treated her as the future daughter-in-law of the Sloan family was because everyone believed she was Christian's biological mother. She knew she couldn't let him continue this line of thought, so she hastily redirected the conversation.

"Christian, Mrs. Sloan just let her concern cloud her judgment. Please don't blame her! Besides, we aren't trying to target Yara. It's just... it's just that she doesn't have an invitation..."

Christian said coldly, "I already told you. She is Great-Aunt's guest, and mine as well."

Feigning helplessness, Noelle sighed. "Even so, we still have to follow the rules. And the rule is that no one can enter without an invitation. If everyone acted like Yara, wouldn't things descend into chaos?"

Christian was struck once again by Noelle's shamelessness. He pressed his lips together, suddenly feeling a bit helpless. He thought, "This woman is clearly so wicked... Yet Grandpa, Grandma, Dad's assistant, and even Daddy all say that Noelle risked her life to save me back then, so I have to honor and respect her. How is that even possible!"

Estelle suddenly felt a pang of heartache for him. Christian was only five years old. With a supposed mother like Noelle and a grandmother like Laura, he must have had a very hard life growing up. Stepping forward to shield Christian behind her, Estelle's eyes turned icy as she fixed her gaze on Noelle's smug face.

"Since Miss Lockwood insists that no one can enter without an invitation... then may I ask how exactly you got in?"

Laura instantly sneered, "Noelle was allowed in because she has an invitation, of course!"

Estelle asked nonchalantly, "Is that so? Where is it?"

Unable to contain her smugness, Laura put her hands on her hips and shouted, "Are you blind? What do you think is in Noelle's hands right now? Get lost before you make a bigger fool of yourself!"

It was true. The crowd was utterly confused by Estelle's angle. Noelle had, without a doubt, used an invitation to get through the door.

But to their surprise, Estelle merely chuckled. "Let me phrase the question differently. Is this invitation... actually yours, Miss Noelle Lockwood?"

A sudden silence fell over the crowd for a few seconds as everyone's eyes widened in shock.

Noelle's fingers tightened around the card, but she put on a look of perfect innocence. "Yara, what kind of joke is this? Of course the invitation is mine."

Estelle shot her a sidelong glance and spoke coldly. "Is it? How unfortunate, then, that my invitation mysteriously vanished this morning. Aunt Iris made it explicitly clear that she wasn't inviting you today. So my invitation goes missing, and you—someone who shouldn't have one—miraculously end up with one in your hands. How do you explain that?"

Noelle bit her lip. Laura's heart leapt into her throat, and she immediately raised her voice to mask her guilty conscience.

"What are you implying? Are you saying Noelle stole your invitation? What a load of nonsense! Even if Iris Sloan previously said she wouldn't invite Noelle, who's to say she didn't change her mind?"

Estelle's lips curled into a smirk. "Since Mrs. Sloan is so confident that the invitation belongs to Noelle, why don't we ask Miss Noelle to open it up? Let's see if my name is written inside."

Laura suddenly burst into boisterous laughter. "Hahaha! Estelle Lockwood, you're hilarious! If you want to impersonate a guest of the Sloan family, you should at least do your research first! The Sloan family's invitations don't have names on them!"

The bystanders immediately turned to look at Estelle, their faces alight with the anticipation of a good show. It was true. The invitations they had all received were uniformly produced by the Sloan family and didn't include names. Anyone who had ever received one knew exactly how they were formatted and designed.

Estelle's claim that her name was written on it proved she was spouting nonsense. Because every single invitation was identical, it was absolutely impossible for anyone's name to appear on one!

Laura was overwhelmingly smug. She reasoned that even if they had stolen Estelle's invitation, it didn't matter. The girl was utterly brainless anyway, so she only had herself to blame!

Estelle looked calmly at Noelle. "Well, Noelle, do you dare to open it?"

Noelle knew Estelle had no way to prove the invitation was hers. Putting on a helpless expression, she said, "Yara, your name isn't on this invitation at all... This is my invitation. Wouldn't I know what's written inside my own invitation?"

"But today is Aunt Iris's banquet, after all. It wouldn't be right to cause a scene at the entrance. Since you want to see it so badly, I'll show it to you.

"However, you have to promise me that once you've seen it, you'll leave. Please don't disturb the banquet, alright?"

The crowd couldn't help but marvel at how magnanimous Miss Noelle was. Even though Yara had repeatedly claimed the invitation was hers, Miss Noelle maintained a gentle demeanor and negotiated with her pleasantly. If it were them, they would have kicked Yara out ages ago!

Estelle raised an eyebrow in amusement. "Open it."

Shaking her head helplessly, as if demonstrating boundless tolerance, Noelle brought the invitation in front of her and slowly flipped it open.

"Yara, I'm really not trying to make things difficult for you. Like I said, rules are rules. Those without an invitation simply cannot enter."

Noelle had attended several Sloan family banquets in the past. She knew for a fact that their invitations never featured names. Combined with Laura's reassurance, she felt completely at ease in this moment.

She thought, "So what if this is Yara's invitation? If Yara really is Estelle, I've already stolen so much from her in the past—what's one more invitation? Going against me will only result in her humiliation! It was true then, and it's true now! Whether she is Estelle or Yara, she is nothing but my stepping stone!"

At that thought, the smile on Noelle's face widened slightly. She looked gentle and helpless, as if perfectly innocent, yet every word that slipped from her lips was designed to push Estelle further into the abyss.

"Yara, if you want to attend a banquet next time, you can tell me in advance. I will definitely try to figure something out for you. But today, I must ask you to please..."

Before she could finish her sentence, the invitation was fully unfolded.

Seeing the glittering gold name stamped on the card, the crowd collectively froze.

"Wait a minute, Yara's name really is on the invitation!"

Chapter 105: Christian Confirms: Daddy and Zachery Are Real Father and Son

Noelle Lockwood's expression stiffened. What was that? Had she misheard? Before she could react, the guests broke into another flurry of discussion.

"It really has Yara Lockwood's name on it!"

"Why is Yara's invitation different from ours? Is it a forgery?"

"Who would dare forge an invitation from the Sloan family? Besides, even if it were a fake, how do you explain why it's in Noelle's hands?"

"GASP... You don't suppose Noelle actually stole it, do you?"

The crowd's expressions turned strange as they looked at Noelle.

Laura Jennings suddenly snapped back to her senses and screamed, "How is that possible!"

Noelle subconsciously looked down at the invitation. It was different from the others; the entire card was handwritten: 'The Sloan Group... cordially invites... to attend...'

At the end, written stroke by stroke in golden ink, was a name—Yara Lockwood.

Noelle's face instantly drained of color.

Estelle Lockwood's lips curled into a faint, nonchalant smile. "I think Miss Lockwood is right."

Before Noelle could fully process this, Estelle continued in a slow, mocking tone, "We definitely need to do things according to the rules. Without an invitation, one cannot enter the banquet. So, Miss Lockwood would rather steal an invitation just to abide by the rules. Ah, how deeply moving."

Those last few words were delivered in a flat, unrippled tone, yet they practically dripped with sarcasm.

"So now, according to the rules," Estelle said leisurely, "shouldn't you ask Miss Noelle to leave, Mrs. Sloan? After all, when you thought I didn't have an invitation earlier, you couldn't stop talking about the rules. We can't have double standards now, can we?"

Noelle felt a dizzying rush to her head. On the verge of tears, she shook her head desperately. "I-I didn't know..."

Laura choked back her words for a second before shielding Noelle behind her. "Even if Noelle doesn't have an invitation, she is still my guest! Who do you think you are, trying to chase her away!"

"So what if she's your guest? Yara is a guest I personally invited, yet didn't you try to chase her away, too?!"

Suddenly, an authoritative female voice rang out from the villa, making Laura flinch violently.

Iris Sloan strode over to Estelle's side before letting out a scoff. "Laura Jennings, this is my banquet today. Are you saying my guests aren't allowed in?"

Laura's legs went weak, her face flushing red and then turning pale. "You, you... I am the matriarch of the Sloan family, you can't..."

"Get out of the way!" Iris couldn't be bothered with her. She then shot a sharp glare directly at Noelle. "It's not impossible for Noelle to attend, but please tell me first—why is Yara's invitation with you?"

"Yara's invitation was lost and ended up in your hands, yet you tried to bar her from entering. All of this makes me suspect that you did it on purpose.

"Could it be that you're jealous of Yara and wanted to humiliate her, which is why you put on this little show?"

Tears welled up in Noelle's eyes. "It's not like that. I didn't know this was Yara's invitation..."

Iris interrupted her. "You didn't know this was Yara's invitation, so you weren't targeting her on purpose?"

Noelle nodded tearfully. "Of course. Why would I target Yara?"

Iris hummed in acknowledgement. "Noelle, I informed the Lockwood family that you were not included in today's banquet. You were present when I said that, and you heard it loud and clear. Since you knew I wouldn't allow you to attend, you should have also known that I wouldn't send you an invitation.

"So where did the invitation in your hand come from? Did you steal it?"

Estelle raised an eyebrow slightly. Even after five years, her aunt's sharp tongue hadn't dulled one bit. With just a few sentences, she had choked Noelle into silence.

Noelle gritted her teeth. Her gentle, refined features twisted into a hideous grimace because of Iris's words. That old bitch was forcing her into a corner! She either had to admit she was intentionally targeting Estelle, or confess that she stole the invitation just to sneak into the banquet...! She absolutely could not admit to either of those!

Noelle instinctively looked at Laura. It was Laura who had ordered someone to steal the invitation, yet right now, the older woman was keeping her head down, acting as if none of this had anything to do with her.

She inwardly cursed Laura for being an absolute bitch.

Frantic with rage, Noelle's small face was covered in tears. She swayed on her feet, looking as though she might faint at any moment.

"Enough, what are you all doing blocking the entrance?" Ethan Sloan walked over.

"Your dear wife said that no one is allowed inside without an invitation," Iris said coolly. "So here I am, planning to kick someone out."

Ethan glared fiercely at Laura before turning back to his sister. "Alright, no matter what, Noelle is still Nathaniel and Christian's savior. If she wants to come, let her come. Don't blow this out of proportion."

Knowing there was no stopping it now, Iris reached her hand out to Estelle. "Yara, let's go."

Estelle gave a soft sound of agreement, nodding as she followed her inside, brushing past Nathaniel Sloan who was just walking out the door.

In front of Ethan and Nathaniel, the guests naturally didn't dare say anything more aloud, but they couldn't help gossiping in hushed whispers.

"Looks like Noelle really did steal the invitation, huh?"

"Definitely. Otherwise, why would the Head of the Sloans suddenly step in to interrupt? Isn't it just because he's afraid of the situation escalating and Noelle being branded a thief?"

"Noelle stole the invitation, yet Laura is still defending her. What is Laura thinking?"

"Who knows... I heard that last time, Laura even secretly went to get a paternity test done for Mr. Sloan and Young Mr. Sloan. She suspects that the young master isn't Mr. Sloan's biological son!"

"Oh my god, when did this happen?"

"About a week ago. When Laura was dining at Glaze Garden, she plucked a few strands of the young master's hair. I mean, what kind of nonsense is that..."

Christian froze for a moment, then fell deep into thought.

A week ago at that restaurant, they had indeed bumped into his grandmother and Noelle, and the encounter had ended on a sour note. So, his grandmother had plucked his hair

during the meal for a paternity test? But that day, he and Zachery had swapped identities! Therefore, the hairs Laura had plucked actually belonged to Zachery.

Which meant...

Christian's heart pounded like a drum.

Which meant that Zachery and his daddy were undeniably biological father and son!

Back then, everyone claimed that his mommy had committed arson and ruthlessly murdered her two children. But now, if it could be proven that Zachery and his daddy were blood-related, it would prove that the children from back then hadn't died. His mommy hadn't killed her own children at all!

Christian's eyes darted around, and he hurriedly chased after them.

Laura followed indignantly behind Ethan, her face full of displeasure. "You're just going to let Yara in like that? She completely disrespected Noelle just now. If word gets out that our Sloan family mistreats our savior, how will the family ever save face!"

Beside her, Noelle wept softly.

Ethan furrowed his brows. "Then what do you suggest we do? You insisted on blocking a guest Iris personally invited at the door and yelling at the top of your lungs. Does that give the Sloan family face?"

Laura looked embarrassed and muttered awkwardly, "I was only doing it for the sake of the family... Besides, I told you before that Yara might actually be Estelle. Did you even listen to me?"

Ethan's face darkened. Of course he had listened, but...

The banquet was about to begin.

Nathaniel's brows were tightly knitted as he scanned the milling crowds at the banquet. Where was Estelle?

He hadn't known that Noelle would actually steal her invitation. This was his fault; he had given Noelle and Laura the opportunity to cause a scene.

Suddenly, Nathaniel spotted Estelle being cornered by several people. He quickly strode forward.

However, someone else beat him to it—

Chapter 106: Mr. Sloan, I Can Dance With You

Estelle arrived at the banquet hall and sat down in the lounge area. Before she could even catch her breath, the light in front of her was blocked. Looking up, she saw a girl standing at the forefront, surrounded by a group of lackeys.

She recognized the girl. It was the pampered eldest daughter from a branch of the Sloan family, Nathaniel's cousin—Leo Sloan.

Leo looked indignant. "Were you the one bullying Noelle just now? How could you be so awful!"

Estelle couldn't be bothered to engage. She didn't even spare the girl a glance.

Just then, someone stepped forward.

The elegant male voice was as gentle as jade, yet his words carried a distinct sense of pressure. "Miss Sloan, cornering a guest here is hardly proper behavior for a lady of your standing, wouldn't you agree? Ms. Sloan was just looking for you."

Furious and frustrated, but afraid that Iris Sloan would find out she was here making trouble for Estelle, Leo hurriedly stormed off.

Only then did Estelle look up. She instantly raised an eyebrow. Jasper Kingston?

After finalizing the collaboration with the Kingston Group last time, she had handed that part of the project over to Henry Kendrick. She had only visited the Kingston Group a few times; she never expected to run into Jasper here.

"Miss Lockwood, are you alright?" Jasper asked with concern.

Estelle shook her head. "I'm fine. A pleasure to meet you, Mr. Kingston."

Meanwhile, Nathaniel's face darkened.

He had been searching the entire venue for this woman, and here she was, comfortably drinking with Jasper in a corner. He strode over quickly. "Yara, come here."

Estelle had just clinked glasses with Jasper when she suddenly heard the cold male voice. Frowning, she glanced over.

She hadn't seen Nathaniel at all over the past few days. The pile of clothes he had bought from the mall was still sitting untouched in her walk-in closet. Seeing those clothes only reminded her of five years ago... For some reason, her emotions had been exceptionally volatile lately.

She turned her head away. It was Jasper who stood up first. "Nathaniel."

Nathaniel's pale gray eyes swept over him before landing back on Estelle. "The dance is about to begin."

Estelle raised an eyebrow. "The dance?"

Nathaniel didn't know what was wrong with him either. He hadn't seen this woman for two days, yet his heart felt as if it were tightly clenched, making him impatient to see her.

There was indeed a dance at the start of the banquet. He didn't even need to participate, and even if he did, he certainly wasn't short on female companions. Yet, he had scoured the entire hall just to find her, wanting to attend the dance together.

Hearing this, Jasper feigned surprise. "Nathaniel, are you here to invite Miss Lockwood to the dance as well? Because I had the exact same intention."

Nathaniel inexplicably found the man to be an eyesore. "Mr. Kingston, I was the one who asked first."

Jasper nodded gentlemanly. "I know. However, Mr. Sloan, Miss Lockwood hasn't accepted your invitation yet, which means everyone still has a chance."

Estelle narrowed her eyes as a certain memory surfaced.

It was a tradition for the Sloan Group banquets to open with a dance. Once, at a Sloan Group annual gala, Nathaniel, as the heir, was supposed to dance the opening number with a partner. As a married man, his partner logically should have been his wife.

Back then, Estelle didn't know how to dance. For Nathaniel's sake, she had practiced extensively. Prior to the event, he had even promised her that he would invite her when the dance began. At that gala, almost everyone knew that Estelle, as Mrs. Sloan, would accompany Nathaniel to the dance floor.

But when the time actually came, Nathaniel bypassed her and walked straight toward Noelle. He extended a hand, offering a courteous bow as he invited her onto the dance floor. Meanwhile, Estelle—who had changed into a gown and dressed to the nines for this very dance—became a complete joke in the eyes of the crowd.

Voices from the crowd echoed in her memory.

"Look at her... She put out word earlier that she would be Mr. Sloan's partner. How embarrassing."

"Tsk, tsk. She even changed her clothes. It's a matching outfit with Mr. Sloan's!"

"So what if they're matching? Didn't Mr. Sloan ignore her entirely and just invite Noelle?"

"Estelle is such a disgrace..."

Estelle had watched with tear-filled eyes as her husband danced gracefully with another woman, leaving her—fully prepared and dressed up—looking entirely out of place.

She couldn't understand why. They had agreed on it, and he had promised her. It wasn't as if Nathaniel hadn't seen all the effort she put into preparing for that dance. Why did he abandon her at the very last moment?!

Her thoughts snapping back to the present, Estelle clenched her fists and closed her eyes tightly. She couldn't let herself be affected by memories of the past anymore.

She curled her lips into a smile. "Mr. Sloan, the dance, is it? I accept."

Jasper raised an eyebrow in mild surprise.

Nathaniel's eyes remained as cool and indifferent as ever, though his Adam's apple bobbed. After a long moment, he finally uttered a hoarse reply, "Alright."

"However," Estelle said, smoothing her hair. "Leo just warned me to stay away from you, and your mother is dead set on having you dance with Noelle. I hate dealing with trouble, so I must ask you, Mr. Sloan, not to reject Noelle just yet. Wait until the dance actually begins, and then invite me."

This long string of demands left Liam, who had just hurried over, completely dizzy.

What did that mean? She wanted Nathaniel to pretend to agree to dance with Noelle first, and then, when the dance started, bypass Noelle and invite Yara instead?

He sucked in a sharp breath. Now that was a massive slap in the face! Wasn't this just blatantly telling Nathaniel: "I don't like Noelle. Help me mess with her and humiliate her. Once I'm happy, I'll dance with you."

Was Yara really Estelle? Did Estelle really have so many schemes up her sleeve? Besides, Nathaniel had always been a principled man. Even if he didn't like Noelle, surely he wouldn't stoop to playing such cruel pranks on people...

Nathaniel was no fool; he naturally understood the underlying meaning in Yara's words. His expression didn't change. "Fine."

Liam snapped his mouth shut. Oh, he had forgotten. When it came to Estelle, Nathaniel was hopelessly lovesick.

Estelle hadn't expected Nathaniel to agree so quickly either. Snapping back to her senses, she let out a dry chuckle.

After all, Nathaniel had a track record. Why did he end up inviting Noelle at that dance back then? For all she knew, he and Noelle had teamed up to play a prank on her. Now, the person getting played was switching from herself to Noelle. It was only fair, wasn't it?

Estelle nodded. "Then don't forget, Mr. Sloan. The dance starts in a few minutes. I'll go change my clothes first. Oh, by the way... Mr. Kingston, the dance is quite interesting. You absolutely must attend."

Jasper, suddenly called out, raised an eyebrow in amusement.

She was insisting that he attend as well... What was Miss Lockwood planning to do? Did she really agree to dance with Nathaniel just to mess with Noelle?

Fifteen minutes later, the banquet officially began. Amidst the clinking of glasses, the lights focused on the dance floor in the very center of the hall.

Noelle had already adjusted her mindset. Changed into a dancing gown, she walked downstairs with a flushed face.

Laura Jennings was thoroughly satisfied. She turned to Ethan Sloan and said, "I told you, Nathaniel isn't unreasonable. As long as we explain the pros and cons to him, he understands perfectly. See? He even went out of his way to invite Noelle to dance!"

Hearing this, Liam was left speechless.

Heh. Explaining pros and cons to a lovesick fool? Ah, he was genuinely worried that Laura and Noelle would lose their minds in a little while.

Chapter 107: Miss Yara Lockwood, The Person I Am Inviting Is You

The ball began. The crowd saw Noelle Lockwood dressed in her finest, standing beside Laura Jennings.

A sharp-eyed guest took a few glances and suddenly spoke up. "It looks like Miss Noelle and Mr. Sloan are wearing matching outfits!"

"You're right! Miss Noelle is even standing next to the Head of the Sloans and Mrs. Sloan. It seems Mr. Sloan will definitely invite her for the first dance, won't he?"

"Is there even a need to ask? After all, she's the daughter-in-law Mrs. Sloan has her eye on."

Although there had been a minor incident outside the doors earlier, everyone present was smart enough not to bring it up again, giving Noelle plenty of face.

Laura patted Noelle's hand in satisfaction. "Noelle, later you'll enjoy a nice dance with Nathaniel. Let's show those blind fools who the person Nathaniel cherishes most truly is!"

Ethan Sloan frowned at her words, but he didn't say anything more.

Noelle smiled shyly. "I'm quite surprised that Nathaniel will invite me, too."

Laura looked as if it were a matter of course. "What's there to be surprised about? For so many years, it's always been you and Nathaniel dancing the opening dance. This is what you deserve. Even if certain people want to steal it, they can't!"

Estelle Lockwood let out a mocking smile. It was true. Laura had said the exact same words five years ago.

At the banquet that day, she had waited full of anticipation for Nathaniel to invite her. Instead, he had walked right past her, and Laura had begun to mock her. Laura's mocking voice had grown louder and louder until everyone around them could hear. Everyone had watched her husband and her sister dance on the floor while she was reprimanded by her mother-in-law.

"Know your place," "Don't covet things that don't belong to you," and "It's always been Noelle and Nathaniel dancing. Who do you think you are to try and steal it?"

Estelle's lips curled into a faint, dark smile. Nathaniel's eyes were light and indifferent as he glanced at her, then slowly walked over.

The surroundings quieted down, and many people secretly envied Noelle. No matter what had happened in the past, and no matter how many scandals Noelle was currently embroiled in, as long as she had Nathaniel protecting her, no one could afford to offend her. Today's dance was a signal. Nathaniel was using this opportunity to tell everyone that Noelle was under his protection and no one could touch her.

Nathaniel walked closer and closer. A blush crept up Noelle's face.

Laura was overjoyed. "Oh, Noelle, what are you so shy about! Hurry, Nathaniel is coming!"

Noelle couldn't help but shoot a glance at Estelle, feeling increasingly smug. She thought her sister was so capable, but wasn't Nathaniel going to dance with her in the end? Noelle had already arranged for people to flood the internet with press releases the moment she and Nathaniel started dancing!

Nathaniel had reached her side. Noelle shyly extended her hand. "Nathaniel..."

Nathaniel hummed in acknowledgment. He gave a gentlemanly bow and reached out his hand as well.

Noelle grew excited, her heart pounding like a drum. She thought, "Hold my hand, let that bitch Estelle die of envy!"

The next moment, under the gaze of everyone in the room, Nathaniel turned slightly and looked at the person beside Noelle.

"Miss Yara, may I invite you for a dance?"

The entire hall fell dead silent; one could hear a pin drop. The crowd wondered if they had misheard. Wait! Who did Nathaniel just invite? Yara? Not Noelle?!

Noelle's hand was still suspended in mid-air. Her expression changed drastically upon hearing this, and she looked up in disbelief. Nathaniel invited Yara? He actually invited Yara? Then what about her?!

Laura abruptly snapped back to reality, the smile on her face instantly turning fierce. "Nathaniel! Did you invite the wrong person? Noelle is right here!"

Right on cue, Noelle let tears fall down her face.

Laura immediately turned her head, shooting a sharp, furious glare at Estelle. "Was it you? Did you pull some dirty trick! Today's first dance was supposed to be Noelle and Nathaniel. Who do you think you are!

"Seducing my son right in front of me... Yara, you're quite the schemer!"

The guests looked at each other in dismay. The first dance at Sloan Group banquets was always led by Nathaniel, the man in charge, and in the past, his partner had always been Noelle. Today, Nathaniel suddenly invited Yara. Coupled with Mrs. Sloan's absolute certainty that Yara had seduced Mr. Sloan, could it be...

"Does my previous dance partner dictate who my partner must be for the rest of my life?" Nathaniel said flatly.

Noelle's face paled, a sense of foreboding rising in her chest. "Nathaniel..."

Laura didn't even think before answering, "Of course it does!"

Nathaniel chuckled softly. Then, he spoke slowly, "Then do you remember, Mother, who my partner was supposed to be in the first place?"

Noelle's face turned deathly pale. "Nathaniel—"

Nathaniel said coldly, "My dance partner was supposed to be my wife. It was never Noelle Lockwood!"

The crowd was in an uproar. Everyone knew Nathaniel had been married, and they knew his ex-wife had died—and died in a rather undignified manner. But no one expected Nathaniel to bring up that dead woman on an occasion like today. Come to think of it, though, it had always been highly irregular that Nathaniel's partner remained Noelle even when he was married...

"What... what do you mean..." Laura's face was ashen, her entire body trembling violently as she threw a fit and shrieked without any regard for her image. "You're still thinking about that bitch! What do you expect Noelle to do? Ah!"

Nathaniel looked calmly at Ethan Sloan. "Father."

Ethan only felt a headache coming on, his disgust for Laura deepening. He wondered how he had ever fallen for such an ungrateful shrew back in the day!

Ethan dragged Laura away, leaving Noelle all alone to make a fool of herself. Waves of dizziness washed over her, and she felt like she was about to pass out. No, she couldn't... If she wasn't Nathaniel's dance partner today, she would be humiliated to death!

"Nathaniel, Nathaniel, I..."

"Having played the cuckoo in another bird's nest for so long, Miss Noelle would do well to keep a low profile. Otherwise, it will only end in greater humiliation, won't it?" Estelle interrupted calmly.

The phrase "played the cuckoo in another bird's nest" carried profound implications.

Nathaniel didn't even spare Noelle a glance as he extended his hand to Yara again. "Miss Yara?"

Everyone's eyes were fixed on the scene. The crowd was still sighing internally; it seemed Noelle wasn't as favored as they thought. Rumor had it that this Miss Yara bore an eighty-percent resemblance to Mr. Sloan's ex-wife. Perhaps...

Before they could finish their thoughts, they saw Estelle smile brightly. Her red lips curled up slightly as she slowly uttered two words.

"I decline."

The crowd thought that no one could refuse Mr. Sloan's invitation... Wait, what did Yara just say?

She refused?!

Under everyone's astonished gazes, Estelle slowly walked toward Jasper Kingston, beaming with a smile. "Mr. Kingston, may I invite you for a dance?"

The crowd was speechless.

What on earth??

Huh?!

Noelle had invited Nathaniel, Nathaniel had invited Yara, and Yara had invited Jasper.

What... what kind of game were they playing?

Nathaniel's eyes instantly turned ice-cold.

Chapter 108: She Refuses! Nathaniel Sloan Seethes with Jealousy

Jasper Kingston suddenly realized why Miss Yara had insisted he attend the ball.

He smiled gently. "Miss Lockwood, you're putting me on the spot here. Just look at Nathaniel's eyes."

Estelle didn't even turn her head. "Are you worried about that, Mr. Kingston?" she replied nonchalantly.

Jasper chuckled softly. "You're right, Miss Lockwood. I'm really not." He leaned forward slightly, offering a gentlemanly bow. "Then I shall gladly accept your invitation."

Estelle lifted her chin and gave a lazy hum of acknowledgment. She then glanced back at Nathaniel Sloan and drawled, "The first dance must be opened by Mr. Sloan. Mr. Kingston and I won't steal your thunder. Please, Mr. Sloan, choose another partner."

The entire hall fell silent. No one dared to speak; they all felt that this was a situation far beyond the pay grade of ordinary guests like themselves. Everyone wondered if Yara was going crazy. Mr. Sloan had rejected Noelle Lockwood for her, completely disregarding Mrs. Sloan's pride, yet she had actually refused him! Was she not afraid of offending Nathaniel?

As if reading their minds, Estelle voiced their exact thoughts. She smiled meaningfully. "Mr. Kingston, do you think Mr. Sloan will get angry and blacklist me because I rejected him?"

Nathaniel's eyes grew dark and profound.

Standing to the side, Liam Sloan furiously pinched the bridge of his nose. No, no, wait a minute. What on earth was going on here? Estelle had just rejected Nathaniel, chosen some random man, and even provoked Nathaniel with that sarcastic tone! She really wasn't afraid of death!

Estelle's smile grew increasingly radiant and audacious. With so many people watching, would the dignified helmsman of the Sloan Group feel humiliated to be rejected by a woman? But so what? When Nathaniel had abandoned her to invite Noelle, did he ever stop to think about how humiliated she would feel?

There had been hundreds of people present—guests of the Sloan family, alongside employees of the Sloan Group and Evernight International. Hundreds of pairs of eyes had watched her, the legitimate Mrs. Sloan, show up dressed to the nines, only to receive not a single glance from her husband. Her husband had danced gracefully with Noelle, leaving her looking like an abandoned wife.

Nathaniel was the one who humiliated her first, leaving her open to mockery and gossip. So, he couldn't really blame her for putting on this show today, could he?

Nathaniel's expression remained calm, but his emotions were churning violently. He didn't mind Estelle rejecting him, but he did mind her choosing another man! A cold

gleam flashed in his eyes behind his gold-rimmed glasses as he closed the distance step by step.

Estelle met his gaze head-on without backing down. "What? Is Mr. Sloan planning to take me by force just because I'm unwilling?"

Jasper offered a gentle smile and stepped in front of Estelle to block Nathaniel's path. "Nathaniel, dancing requires mutual consent. Since Miss Yara isn't willing, what's the point of forcing her?"

Liam watched with his heart pounding in his chest. What a terrifying romantic battlefield this was!

The entire hall fell dead silent. Even the air seemed to freeze. Iris Sloan was just about to say something to ease the tension when, suddenly, everyone watched Nathaniel lunge forward and pull Estelle into his arms!

Liam's jaw dropped. Holy crap! Nathaniel, you really are something else!

After Jasper spoke, Estelle curled her lips into a smile. She was just about to say something when she suddenly heard a faint SNAP. Before she could even register what was happening, a sudden chill swept across her bare back.

Estelle's face instantly drained of color. The straps of her evening gown had broken!

She was wearing a form-fitting mermaid dress today that exposed a large swath of her fair back. The entire upper half of the dress was held up by just two thin straps designed to look like fish scales. Normally, a gown of this caliber would never malfunction like this. However, Estelle suddenly remembered that Laura Jennings had sent someone to bump into her earlier. That must have been when Laura tampered with her dress!

Laura wanted to expose her in front of everyone and utterly humiliate her!

Estelle instinctively raised her hands, trying to cover her chest. But with the straps broken, the gown was slipping down uncontrollably. She wouldn't be able to hold it up for long. There was absolutely no way she could dance now.

"Ah—" Estelle let out a soft gasp.

Before she could react, Nathaniel suddenly stepped forward, bypassed Jasper, and pulled her straight into his arms.

Enveloped in his warm, solid embrace, Estelle froze for a moment. "Nathaniel, you... what are you doing!"

Nathaniel simply gave her a steady look before suddenly bending down and sweeping her into a bridal carry.

"Huh? Mr. Sloan, what about the dance?"

"Mr. Sloan just picked up Yara... That's the direction of the lounge. What is he trying to do?"

"What about the opening dance?"

"Why would Mr. Sloan just carry her off out of nowhere? Hiss... Could it be that Yara's rejection was too harsh, so Mr. Sloan's love turned to hate and he wants to teach her a lesson?"

Liam was thinking the exact same thing. Liam, the self-proclaimed Guardian of Love, thought, "I absolutely cannot let this happen. The Guardian of Love is moving out!"

Seeing that Iris had already stepped up to pacify the crowd, he hurriedly slipped over to the door of the lounge. He planned to wait there, ready to bust in if Nathaniel got too violent with Estelle.

However, he waited and waited. After ten minutes, Liam suddenly heard a stifled whimper.

"Mmph!"

Ambiguous sounds drifted out intermittently from inside.

"Nathaniel, don't... Mmm..."

"Yara, rejecting me, hmm?"

"Let me go first, it's uncomfortable... Ah..."

Liam froze. His face burned beet-red as he stood there, completely at a loss for what to do. He thought, "Holy shit, Nathaniel! You... you carried her off just to do this? There are so many eyes watching! Doesn't Estelle care about her dignity?"

Blushing furiously, Liam finally cleared his throat and instructed the waiters nearby, "Do not let anyone near this lounge. You guys leave too. Go stand guard outside."

Ah, he truly sacrificed too much for Nathaniel's happiness.

Meanwhile, inside the lounge.

Estelle sat stiffly in Nathaniel's arms. Her gown had practically no fabric on the back to begin with. Nathaniel's scorching hand rested on her waist, half touching her bare skin and half resting against the precarious fabric that threatened to fall at any second.

Estelle felt that the current atmosphere was incredibly strange. Unable to help herself, she bit her lower lip. "Let me go!"

Nathaniel held her, originally intending to set her down on the sofa before going to find her some clothes. But before they even reached the sofa—right after entering the lounge—Estelle demanded that he let her go.

Nathaniel narrowed his eyes, suddenly recalling her every smile and frown when she invited Jasper just moments ago. No one knew it, but he was fiercely jealous. The jealousy churned violently within him. He wished he could just hide Estelle away where no one else could see her.

It took every ounce of his restraint not to show the slightest hint of it in public, and now she wanted him to let go?

Nathaniel's lips curled into a playful smirk. "Are you sure?"

Estelle felt increasingly flustered. Her head was growing hot and dizzy. That hand of his slowly moved upward, pressing intimately against her bare skin. Gritting her teeth, she snapped, "I'm sure!"

Nathaniel gave a faint nod and let her go.

Before Estelle could even find her footing, she suddenly felt the gown on her body slipping down entirely out of control. She wasn't wearing anything underneath the gown. If the dress fell off, wouldn't she be completely exposed?

In a split second, Estelle's body moved faster than her brain, and she threw herself right back into Nathaniel's arms.

Chapter 109: Based on My Brother's Stamina, Today, They... Hehe...

"Nathaniel Sloan!" Estelle Lockwood instantly realized she had been played.

The man hummed in a leisurely tone. "What is it?"

Estelle gritted her teeth. It took her a long moment to force out a single sentence. "...You did that on purpose!"

Nathaniel didn't bother to deny it. He scooped her up in his arms, set her on the sofa, and draped a blanket over her. With a half-smile, he said, "On purpose? Miss Lockwood, you were the one who told me to put you down. Why are you pointing fingers at me now?"

Estelle turned her head away, her emotions in turmoil.

Nathaniel took a step closer. "Miss Lockwood, aren't you going to thank me?"

The words caught in Estelle's throat once more.

Nathaniel drawled, "It was an emergency. Fortunately, I reacted quickly enough to block everyone's view—even though you made a fool of me. Given all that, Miss Lockwood... don't you think I deserve a 'thank you'?"

Estelle wasn't stupid. He had deliberately emphasized the part about her making a fool of him, clearly reminding her that he hadn't forgotten that little stunt.

She smoothed her hair, putting up a strong front as she spoke. "I suppose a 'thank you' is in order. However, even without you, Mr. Sloan, I'm confident Mr. Kingston wouldn't have let me fall into such a compromising position."

Nathaniel's expression instantly turned glacial. "Is that so?"

His eyes still held a smile, but it didn't reach his pupils. Instead, a dangerous aura veiled his gaze.

"It seems I ruined Miss Lockwood's big moment. That would be my mistake, then."

Estelle ignored his sarcastic tone and got up to grab her phone. She wanted to ask Iris Sloan if she had a change of clothes, but Nathaniel clamped a hand down on her wrist. "Who are you calling?"

Estelle looked up at him, a wave of irritation washing over her. Five years ago, he couldn't have cared less about her affairs. Now, five years later, they were practically strangers. What right did he have to interfere in her life?

She deliberately taunted him, "If you know you ruined my moment, why haven't you let go of me?"

Nathaniel narrowed his eyes. "You're calling Jasper Kingston?"

Estelle knew he had misunderstood, but she simply arched an eyebrow. "So what if I am?"

"Heh."

The man let out a cold scoff, seemingly laughing out of pure anger. His tall figure suddenly lowered, completely trapping her within his shadow.

Before Estelle could react, Nathaniel suddenly reached out and hooked a finger under the strap of her dress.

Panic flared in Estelle's chest. "Nathaniel Sloan, what are you doing..."

"Yara... You reject me time and time again, yet Jasper Kingston occupies your every waking thought?"

Moving at a slow, agonizingly deliberate pace, Nathaniel wound the thin string of her strap around his fingertips.

The motion forced Estelle to tilt her head up, her body practically melting into his embrace.

Her heart pounded against her ribs. The intimacy of his actions made her feel like she had been dragged back five years into the past. Desperate to escape, she cried out, "Nathaniel, let me go— Ah!"

The man gave the strap a sharp tug, and the fragile string snapped instantly.

What neither of them realized was that Liam Sloan was currently eavesdropping just outside the door.

Liam's face flushed bright red. He wondered if this was really something an innocent guy like him should be listening to. "Tsk, tsk. Nathaniel, you are an absolute menace," he

thought. "There's a massive banquet going on outside, and everyone is waiting for you and Estelle to make an appearance, yet here you two are in the lounge... Tsk, tsk. Hehehe..."

Estelle had no idea that Liam was lingering in the hallway, nor did she realize the massive misunderstanding they had just caused him.

Mortified, she snapped, "Nathaniel Sloan, what on earth are you doing?!"

The man looked down at the broken strap resting in his palm and let out a soft chuckle. "I'm laughing at how foolish you are. You got played by someone else, yet you're putting the blame on me."

Estelle froze. Before she could say a word, Nathaniel tossed the broken strap back into her palm.

"This gown is the newest release from the ZE brand. Because the designer was concerned the spaghetti straps would be too thin to support the weight of the dress, they utilized exceptionally durable materials. Plenty of socialites have worn this exact design without any issues.

"Yet somehow, the moment Miss Lockwood wears it, the strap magically snaps? If someone hadn't been there to cover you up, a wardrobe malfunction would have been the least of your worries. A luxury house like ZE simply does not make such amateur quality-control errors."

If they did, they wouldn't survive in the luxury fashion industry. ZE's clientele consisted entirely of the wealthy and elite. If a structural flaw caused one of their VIPs to expose themselves, the brand would be instantly blacklisted by high society.

Therefore, an accident like this was impossible.

So why did Yara's dress strap suddenly break?

There was only one explanation.

Nathaniel narrowed his eyes. "Your gown was tampered with. Think carefully, Miss Lockwood. Who had access to this dress?"

Estelle's expression darkened. He was right.

ZE would never make such a glaring mistake, which meant the gown had to have been sabotaged after she purchased it.

She had tasked her assistant with buying the dress. The assistant had worked for the Kendrick Family for ten years and had spent almost all of her time abroad. Since she was practically a stranger in Crestfall, the odds of her betraying Estelle were virtually nonexistent.

Estelle frowned and dialed her assistant's number. "Tina, did anyone go into my studio over the past few days?"

After she received the gown, she had hung it up in the studio's lounge. If someone had tampered with it, it had to have happened there.

The moment Nathaniel suggested the dress was sabotaged, the first person who came to Estelle's mind was Noelle Lockwood. But Noelle wouldn't have had the time or opportunity to do it.

Tina thought about it for a moment. "No, Yara. You're the only one who has been in the studio. Did something happen? I can pull up the security footage."

A few minutes later, Tina replied. "I fast-forwarded through the footage. It's true—no one besides you went inside. It looks like you visited the studio three times..."

Estelle's gaze turned remarkably sharp.

After hanging up, she asked Tina to send over the security footage. That couldn't be right—she had only gone twice.

Lately, she had been working out of Evernight International and rarely returned to her own studio. She remembered it vividly: she had only gone back twice.

Yet, in the security footage, a woman with a silhouette almost identical to hers could be seen walking into the studio.

Nathaniel hadn't heard the other end of the call, but he immediately sensed the shift in her demeanor. "What's wrong?"

Estelle reflexively shook her head. "It's nothing."

Nathaniel's lips pressed into a tight, hard line.

"It's nothing..." he thought. "Is that the only phrase she is willing to say to me now? She wanted to share her first dance with Jasper Kingston, and when she ran into trouble, her first instinct was to call Jasper. Meanwhile, I'm standing right in front of her, breathing and fully capable—"

"Hey, wait, don't go in! This lounge is occupied! My brother is inside!"

A male voice suddenly rang out from the hallway, shattering the tense silence within the lounge.

Acting like a self-appointed bodyguard of romance, Liam blocked the entrance to the lounge with a bashful expression. "My brother is, uh, tied up right now. He'll probably..."

probably need a lot more time. Hehehe. You guys should go find another lounge. Oh, and by the way, let my aunt know later that my brother probably won't be making an appearance for the rest of the night. Come to think of it, given my brother's stamina..."

The intercepted guest stared at him blankly, wondering why on earth he was blushing.

Inside the lounge, Nathaniel and Estelle were rendered completely speechless.

Finally realizing exactly what Liam was implying, Estelle hurriedly threw on the spare clothes a maid had delivered earlier. She shot up from the sofa, marched over, and yanked the door open. "Young Mr. Sloan!"

Liam, who had been speaking with great enthusiasm, stumbled backward in shock. "Ah? What?"

He stared at her in utter disbelief. His eyes glazed over as his brain failed to process the situation. "Wait, you two... huh? You're already finished?"

Chapter 110: Isn't It Obvious Who's Lying?

Estelle Lockwood choked on her words. Just as she was about to speak, Liam Sloan's expression suddenly changed.

"I-I-I didn't mean it like that, Nathaniel! I'm not saying you're inadequate, but this is way too fast. No, I'm not saying you're quick, I just mean... uh... oh! Oh! Estelle even changed her clothes. Nathaniel, you're a beast!"

Estelle was completely at a loss for words.

Nathaniel Sloan shot him a half-smile and asked casually, "How long have you been abroad?"

Liam answered, dumbfounded, "Ah, I came back once two years ago and went abroad again after that, so I guess it's been two years."

Nathaniel nodded faintly. "I see. It's been two years since I last beat you up."

Liam was baffled, wondering what his brother meant. He was obviously complimenting him!

Estelle took a deep breath, pushed Nathaniel away, and quickly walked out. Although her footsteps were steady and her back was straight, her retreating figure still betrayed a hint of someone fleeing in a panic.

The young master who had come to the lounge earlier had long since slipped away. In an instant, only Nathaniel and Liam were left at the door.

Liam said sympathetically, "Nathaniel, why do I get the feeling Estelle isn't very happy? Do you really have a problem with your technique..."

"Men still need to pay attention to that sort of thing. Don't think you can keep a woman's heart just because you're rich, handsome, tall, and have an eight-pack. In reality... Hey, I'm not done talking! Don't you want to hear the rest of my dating playbook, Nathaniel!"

Back at the banquet, Iris Sloan came over and asked a few questions. Estelle didn't tell her that her gown had been tampered with; she only said that she had accidentally torn it. Her gaze swept across the room and landed on Noelle Lockwood.

The figure in the surveillance footage clearly didn't resemble Noelle. Estelle was slightly taller than Noelle, and the figure in the video was almost a perfect match for her own, as if someone had deliberately disguised themselves to mimic her physique.

Estelle mentally ran through everyone she knew, but couldn't think of any woman who fit that description. It was strange. A woman with a silhouette so similar to hers had appeared out of thin air, yet she had absolutely no idea who it could be. It was as if this person was hiding in the shadows, observing her every move. She wondered who it could be.

"Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for attending the Sloan Group's banquet."

Suddenly, the stage lights flared to life. Old Mr. Sloan slowly walked to the center and picked up the microphone, evidently overjoyed by Iris's return to the country.

"From now on, Iris will be developing her career here in the country. Today is not only a welcome party for her, but also her birthday. As her father, I want to thank you all on her behalf."

Iris was in her forties, but in Old Mr. Sloan's eyes, she was still his most beloved youngest daughter.

Iris's return signified a shift in the Sloan family's power dynamics. Ethan Sloan, the current Family Head, already held less actual power than his son; now, half of what he had left would be taken by his sister.

Laura Jennings's face twisted with rage, but there was nothing she could do. She thought, "That damn Iris! She went abroad five years ago, so why did she have to come back?"

Five years ago, Iris had been utterly heartbroken over Estelle's death and chose to go abroad. Laura had reveled in her own arrogance ever since. Now that Iris was back, Laura was naturally the one who hated it the most!

Since it was Iris's birthday, the guests naturally presented their gifts. At this moment, the butler walked in carrying a long gift that looked like a scroll. It had likely been left behind earlier, which was why it was only being brought in now.

Iris immediately spotted the name on the gift. When giving gifts, the sender would write their name on it to avoid confusion.

Iris broke into a smile. "Is this from Yara?"

Estelle was momentarily stunned before she nodded. "Yes."

Wanting to pave the way for Estelle, Iris played along and said, "Is it the Purple Sun Mountain Residence Painting? Yara, you're so thoughtful!"

Estelle knew that Iris loved calligraphy and paintings. This Purple Sun Mountain Residence Painting was from Old Mr. Kendrick's collection; he had given it to her two years ago. "I'm glad you like it."

"I love it, of course I do."

Seeing Iris praising Estelle so highly, the more perceptive guests naturally caught on. Miss Sloan was clearly very satisfied with this Yara. Thus, they chimed in with flattering remarks to give her face:

"I recall that this Purple Sun Mountain Residence Painting was auctioned off to a wealthy tycoon for an astronomical price a few years ago. It couldn't have been easy for Ms. Yara to acquire it. How truly thoughtful!"

"I didn't expect Ms. Yara to be interested in calligraphy and paintings as well."

When Nathaniel returned to the banquet hall, this was the scene that greeted him. Estelle was surrounded by people. He clicked his tongue, a sudden wave of inexplicable jealousy churning in his chest once again.

Iris was very pleased. However, right at that moment, a gasp of surprise rang out.

"Isn't this the gift I brought? How did it become Yara's?"

The banquet hall instantly fell silent.

Everyone turned to look. Noelle's eyes were wide with apparent confusion as she delicately bit her lower lip. "I'm sorry, I don't mean to say that Yara took my gift... I just think, perhaps the butler made a mistake?"

Laura also snapped to attention. She was eager to see Iris and Yara humiliated. "That's right! Noelle's gift is also the Purple Sun Mountain Residence Painting. This clearly belongs to Noelle!"

Sometimes, it was entirely possible for the name tags attached to the gifts to fall off by accident and get mixed up by the butler. Moreover, the Purple Sun Mountain Residence Painting wasn't some commonplace item you could find anywhere; it was the only one of its kind in the entire world.

Since Noelle claimed she was the one who gifted the Purple Sun Mountain Residence Painting... could it be that the butler had made a mistake, and Yara just played along with it to save face?

Iris furrowed her brows. "You think I wouldn't know what Yara gave me?"

Tears welled up in Noelle's eyes, and she shook her head desperately. "Aunt Sloan, I didn't mean it like that. But I bought the Purple Sun Mountain Residence Painting from Jade Pavilion just last week. Many people saw me buy it. There might just be a misunderstanding. I'm really not blaming Yara, and I don't want to blow things out of proportion..."

Jade Pavilion was a professional antique and calligraphy shop founded by industry experts. In its twenty years of operation, it had never made a single mistake.

Someone recalled, "I think I did see Miss Noelle at Jade Pavilion last week."

Laura couldn't wait to seize the opportunity. "Hah! If you ask me, this is Noelle's gift! I mean, how shameless can some people be? Trying to claim Noelle's things as their own! Are they addicted to stealing?"

Laura wondered what Yara was feeling so smug about. All that praise and flattery should have clearly belonged to Noelle!

Iris's face abruptly darkened. "Laura Jennings—"

"Miss Noelle Lockwood, are you absolutely certain that your gift is the Purple Sun Mountain Residence Painting?" Estelle suddenly asked in a calm tone.

Noelle's delicate face was streaked with tears as she replied weakly, "Of course."

"Then let's bring Miss Lockwood's gift up here as well," Estelle said, her lips curving into a slight smile. "Won't it be obvious who's lying then?"

Laura put her hands on her hips and yelled, "We already said the name tags got mixed up—"

"Ms. Jennings," Estelle interrupted slowly. "My name isn't written on a tag. It's written directly on the outer packaging of the scroll.

"Therefore, the original owner of this painting can only be me. Do you understand?"

Estelle had written her name on the packaging. If Noelle still insisted the painting was hers, did that mean Estelle had stolen the painting first, found matching packaging, and then written her own name on it? There simply wasn't enough time for all of that!

The butler acknowledged the order and went down to fetch the other gift.

Noelle gritted her teeth.