

Chapter 111: A Forgery? Noelle Lockwood, Yours Is the Forgery.

Soon, the butler returned with Noelle Lockwood's gift.

Like Estelle Lockwood's, Noelle's gift was packaged in a long, rectangular box. At first glance, it was obvious that the item inside was some sort of scroll.

When the butler opened the gift, everyone was dumbfounded.

It was also a Purple Sun Mountain Residence Painting!

Just like the previous one, the two paintings were absolutely identical in size, color, and material. However, it was widely known that there was only one such antique in the world. Therefore, one of these two paintings had to be a fake!

Estelle narrowed her eyes.

Noelle's eyes lit up, clearly not expecting this pleasant surprise. Earlier, she had assumed Estelle had stolen her gift, but now, it was glaringly obvious that Estelle had presented a forgery. What a perfect opportunity!

Noelle could hardly contain her excitement, but she feigned surprise on her face. "This... Two Purple Sun Mountain Residence Paintings?"

She hesitated for a moment before gently advising, "Yara, where did you buy your Purple Sun Mountain Residence Painting? If you need help, I can call the police for you."

The crowd froze for a moment, failing to process the situation immediately.

Estelle, however, understood perfectly. Her gaze shifted as she shot Noelle a glance.

Noelle was implying that her Purple Sun Mountain Residence Painting was the fake. But this painting had been collected by Old Mr. Kendrick years ago, and it was impossible for the Kendrick Family to purchase a forgery. So, whose painting was the actual fake?

Seeing Estelle remain silent, Noelle bit her lower lip and played the part of a good Samaritan. "Yara, I know forgeries are made incredibly realistic nowadays, and a layman couldn't possibly tell the difference. It's not your fault. Just tell me who the seller was, and I'll help you recover your losses no matter what."

The crowd finally caught on. Oh, so Yara's painting was the fake!

No wonder. They had been wondering how there could possibly be two Purple Sun Mountain Residence Paintings in the world. Besides, someone had just mentioned that Noelle bought hers at the Jade Pavilion. How could the Jade Pavilion possibly sell a forgery? The owner of the Jade Pavilion was none other than the eldest young master of the Kendrick Family in Capital City!

Seeing Noelle being so kind-hearted, the crowd began chiming in.

"It looks like Ms. Yara bought a fake. We absolutely cannot tolerate this kind of situation! Forging antiques for sale is a crime!"

"That's right, Ms. Yara. Where and from whom did you buy this painting?"

"Spit it out, and we'll definitely get justice for you!"

Noelle curled her lips slightly with a pointed remark, "Yara, it's okay. You don't understand these things. Don't take it to heart even if you were scammed."

Laura Jennings, on the other hand, was entirely different. Having finally found an opportunity, she mocked loudly, "So it's a fake!"

"Iris, what's wrong with you? The junior you've taken such a liking to actually gifted you a forgery at your birthday banquet!"

"Tsk, tsk. Even though a layman can't tell the difference, how come our Noelle bought the genuine piece while Yara gave a fake? Isn't it just because Yara didn't put any heart into it?

"If you ask me, when buying this kind of antique painting or calligraphy, you should go to a legitimate place. It might be a bit more expensive, but at least it guarantees authenticity. Yara, you didn't just try to score a cheap deal, did you?"

Iris Sloan's face turned pale. She looked at Estelle, a hint of worry flashing in her eyes.

She didn't suspect that Estelle would intentionally buy a forgery; she assumed Estelle had been tricked. However, as long as this painting was fake, Laura and Noelle would find the chance to attack her!

After speaking, Laura shot a look at the crowd. A few people immediately picked up on the cue.

"That's right. Although buying a fake isn't Ms. Yara's fault, it does show that she didn't put enough thought into Miss Sloan's gift."

"If she really cared, shouldn't she have hired an appraiser after buying it? Shouldn't she have bought it through proper channels?"

"If Miss Noelle hadn't coincidentally gifted a Purple Sun Mountain Residence Painting today, Yara's forgery would never have been exposed. Everyone would have thought she spent an astronomical price on this painting for Miss Sloan, and the Sloan Family would have owed her a favor. Wouldn't the Sloan Family have been taken for complete suckers then!"

"Sigh, now that you mention it, I'm starting to doubt whether Yara knew it was a fake all along. Maybe she bought a cheap forgery on purpose, betting that Miss Sloan didn't know enough about antique paintings to expose her?"

"Tsk, ts. Greed truly knows no bounds. Thankfully, we have Miss Noelle here today..."

As the murmurs grew increasingly ugly, Noelle finally smiled, then quickly shook her head in feigned anxiety.

"No, please don't say that. I believe Yara wouldn't do such a thing. She just doesn't understand the market and was scammed!"

After saying that, Noelle turned her head and hastily added, "Yara, don't take their words to heart. Anyway, Aunt Iris and I definitely believe you."

Listening to these words, Iris felt that something was amiss.

Estelle chuckled.

Noelle was truly a habitual offender when it came to twisting the truth. With just a few simple words, she had squarely pinned the label of 'gifting a forgery' onto her. But was what she gifted truly a forgery?

Noelle pretended to be magnanimous. "Alright, alright, let's not bring it up anymore. Please take this fake painting away first."

Even while playing the bigger person, Noelle still heavily emphasized the word 'fake'.

The butler looked at Iris and eventually nodded. A forgery indeed had no place here.

Just as the butler was about to step forward, Estelle suddenly smiled. "Wait."

Everyone's gaze instantly darted toward Estelle.

Noelle asked with gentle helplessness, "Yara, is there anything else?"

Estelle didn't back down in the slightest. "Are you sure this is a fake?"

Noelle seemed momentarily taken aback before her eyes grew slightly red, as if her good intentions had been completely misunderstood. She shook her head helplessly. "Yara, I know you can't accept it in your heart, but it's impossible for there to be two Purple Sun Mountain Residence Paintings in the world, so..."

"Since it's impossible for there to be two Purple Sun Mountain Residence Paintings in the world, why is the fake one mine, instead of..." Estelle slowly raised her eyes, her gaze profoundly meaningful. "...yours?"

The surroundings fell dead silent as everyone stared in absolute shock.

What was Estelle saying? Was she claiming that Noelle's painting was the fake?!

Laura let out two barks of laughter and shrieked sharply, "Truly an ignorant country bumpkin! To actually think that Noelle's is the fake! Yara, I advise you to stop putting up a stubborn resistance. Just obediently admit your mistake and say you were scammed too. We might still forgive you!

"But to think you'd refuse to admit it to the bitter end and even try to drag Noelle down with you!"

With red eyes, Noelle shook her head. "Yara... I bought this painting at the Jade Pavilion. Do you even know what kind of place the Jade Pavilion is?"

Estelle felt the name Jade Pavilion sounded a bit familiar. After thinking seriously for a moment, it suddenly dawned on her. It seemed to be an antique shop under her eldest brother's name.

Chapter 112: The Appraisal Begins! He Believes in Estelle Lockwood

The socialites around Noelle arrogantly chimed in to explain.

"It's normal for Miss Yara not to know about Jade Pavilion. After all, Jade Pavilion has always been open only to high society."

"Jade Pavilion has been open for ten years with an excellent reputation. They have never sold a single counterfeit! Moreover, Jade Pavilion is backed by a century-old wealthy family in the Capital City!"

"Yara, I can't believe you're claiming Jade Pavilion sells fakes. Hahaha, that's hilarious!"

Listening to them, Noelle laughed as well. "Yara, you might not know this, but the manager of the Jade Pavilion branch is here today. He also brought a distinguished guest. If you're still not convinced, why not have the manager appraise it on the spot?"

Iris furrowed her brows. "No, what if things blow out of proportion?" she worried.

She quickly turned to look at Nathaniel, wanting him to step forward and stop this, but she saw him shake his head at her.

"What does this mean?" Iris wondered. "Is Nathaniel not going to stop them? But..."

Nathaniel's light-colored eyes remained calm, but... for some inexplicable reason, he believed Estelle. He knew how much Estelle cared about his aunt; she would absolutely never gift a counterfeit.

Estelle nodded. "Sure."

Everyone gasped. This Yara truly wouldn't give up until it was too late! To question Jade Pavilion for selling fakes, and now to agree to an appraisal! Everyone knew the appraiser from Jade Pavilion had a notorious temper!

This was exactly what Noelle wanted. She curled her lips into a smile, feigning helplessness as she instructed a nearby servant, "Go invite Mr. Carter from Jade Pavilion and Mr. Morgan over."

Mr. Morgan was that renowned master appraiser.

Soon, Mr. Carter walked over with a stern face. "Miss Noelle, I heard someone is questioning if the antiques sold by my Jade Pavilion are fakes?"

Mr. Carter had dealt with the powerful and elite of high society for years. He was well-connected, and many recognized him. Because of the century-old wealthy family backing him, everyone showed him a great deal of respect. Seeing his displeased expression, the crowd felt that Estelle was doomed.

Noelle smiled and said, "Yes, Yara also has a Purple Sun Mountain Residence Painting. But as you know, I just bought the Purple Sun Mountain Residence Painting from you a few days ago, so..."

Mr. Carter immediately became furious upon hearing this. "What a joke! How can a Purple Sun Mountain Residence Painting bought elsewhere be compared to the one from our shop? Our shop has professional appraisers and never sells fakes!"

Noelle sighed. "That is true, but Yara... Please don't be angry, Mr. Carter. It's just that she bought a fake and can't accept it. I heard Mr. Morgan is also here, so I'd like to ask him to do an on-site appraisal. That way, Yara can accept reality."

"Hmph!" Mr. Carter sneered coldly. The more he looked at this woman named Yara, the more he disliked her. He had been a branch manager for ten years, but he had never met someone like this! "Fine, then let's shatter her delusions!"

After saying that, Mr. Carter looked fawningly at the man beside him. "Mr. Morgan, I will have to trouble you then."

Estelle looked up. She had never seen this manager or this Mr. Morgan before. However, she had heard of Mr. Morgan's name.

He was a professional appraiser hired by her eldest brother. His reputation was widespread, even extending overseas. He had a piercingly sharp eye for details. When appraising certain calligraphy and paintings, he would also take into account the era of the artwork and other historical factors. For example, there was once a painting rumored to be over a thousand years old, yet the paper looked brand new. Everyone else thought it was a fake, but Mr. Morgan could tell at a single glance that the ancient artwork had been preserved in a perfectly dry tomb.

Mr. Morgan looked to be in his early forties, with the appearance of a stern, unsmiling scholar.

Two seemingly identical copies of the Purple Sun Mountain Residence Painting were laid out on the table.

Mr. Morgan stepped forward and said calmly, "Everyone knows my rules for appraisal."

Mr. Morgan cherished antiques deeply, and the thing he despised most in his life was the existence of counterfeits. If something was a replica, one should openly state it as such, rather than selling it under the guise of an authentic piece. Therefore, after an appraisal, if an item turned out to be a fake, he would upload both the owner's name and the counterfeit to the official antique website. In a way, this was to warn others that the antique owned by this person was a fake and to not be fooled. Once a name was uploaded, it would be a complete loss of face!

This was precisely the effect Noelle wanted! She wanted Yara to be humiliated!

Thinking of this, Noelle smiled softly and said deliberately, "Yara, it's not too late to refuse. I believe Mr. Carter and Mr. Morgan won't make things difficult for you. After all, those who don't know any better are innocent."

Mr. Carter scoffed contemptuously. "I've seen plenty of people like you. You spent a fortune buying a fake, and now you're indignantly refusing to accept it."

Mr. Morgan, however, didn't say a word. He put on his gloves and stared calmly at the two paintings in front of him.

Estelle's expression was languid. "It's fine. Go ahead and appraise them."

Mr. Carter fawned over Mr. Morgan, saying, "Well then, Mr. Morgan, please don't hold back!"

Mr. Morgan didn't even look at him. His tone was as flat as if Mr. Carter were a complete stranger. "When it comes to appraisals, I am naturally thorough."

Mr. Carter felt the awkwardness of having his flattery met with a cold shoulder. However, Mr. Morgan never made a mistake, and both he and Miss Noelle were counting on the appraiser to help them slap this woman's face, so he swallowed his pride.

Noelle couldn't help but look at Estelle. "Let's see how you can still smile later," she thought.

Laura Jennings also laughed inwardly. "Hilarious! What a naive, ignorant fool!" she sneered in her mind.

Time ticked by. The appraisal process was tedious and lengthy. To ordinary people, the two paintings looked identical; they really couldn't tell the difference. They could only watch Mr. Morgan pick up one tool one moment, and a custom magnifying glass the next. He frowned at times and nodded at others, leaving everyone utterly clueless as to what he was discovering.

Iris couldn't help but worry. "Yara..."

Estelle gave her a reassuring look. "Don't worry."

Two hours later, Mr. Morgan suddenly put down his tools. "The results are in."

Noelle and Laura's eyes lit up. Laura couldn't wait. "Yara, just you wait!"

Mr. Carter also stepped forward. "Mr. Morgan, which one is the fake?"

Everyone waited with bated breath, but Mr. Morgan merely looked up calmly. "Which one of you is Noelle Lockwood?"

Hearing Noelle's name, Laura beamed with joy. It seemed Noelle's was the authentic piece! She hurriedly pushed Noelle forward. "Mr. Morgan, this is Noelle! She spent a fortune buying this Purple Sun Mountain Residence Painting from Jade Pavilion as a gift for her aunt. Unfortunately, some people would rather have a counterfeit than Noelle's authentic piece!"

Iris let out a cold sneer.

Mr. Morgan nodded. "I'll remember you."

Everyone was extremely envious. Although Mr. Morgan seemed unassuming, he was backed by the Morgan Family and had countless ties to that wealthy family in the Capital City. To be remembered by Mr. Morgan... it was something others couldn't even dare to dream of.

Noelle's heart leaped. She couldn't resist shooting Estelle a boastful glance before saying shyly, "Thank you, Mr. Morgan... Yara, why don't you apologize to Mr. Morgan?"

"Because of your unreasonable behavior, Mr. Morgan had to work hard for over two hours on this appraisal. Now that the truth is out, the facts have proven that your Purple Sun Mountain Residence Painting is a fake..."

The bystanders also jeered. "That's right, apologize! You wasted our time!"

Estelle raised an eyebrow, meeting Mr. Morgan's eyes.

Mr. Morgan looked puzzled. "Apologize?"

Mommy, Daddy Has Already Regretted It

Seeing Mr. Morgan's confusion, Noelle Lockwood assumed he simply didn't know the full context.

"There is something you don't know, Mr. Morgan," Noelle said, sighing as she put on a gentle and forgiving front. "Yara bought her *Purple Sun Mountain Residence Painting* from a shady dealer just to save money. Mine, on the other hand, was purchased from Jade Pavilion. Mr. Carter even invited many famous appraisers to authenticate it.

"When we first discovered there was a forgery, we already told Yara..."

"But Yara stubbornly refused to believe it. She insisted on making a scene and calling you over for an appraisal, delaying the banquet. So..."

Although Mr. Morgan was deeply immersed in his appraisal career, he came from the Morgan family. Having lived for over forty years, he was no fool. This woman, Noelle, seemed harmonious and gentle, but every word she spoke carried a hidden implication: everything that happened today was Yara's fault, and Mr. Morgan should definitely loathe her.

Mr. Morgan gave an enigmatic chuckle. "If that's the case, the owner of the forgery should indeed apologize."

Iris Sloan's lips tightened into a thin line as she looked at Nathaniel Sloan again. Nathaniel remained calm; he knew Estelle Lockwood could resolve this issue.

Iris furrowed her brows, silently cursing to herself. She wondered if her nephew knew how to woo a woman at all. But the most important thing right now was to resolve the current situation. If someone really had to apologize...

Before Iris could speak, Laura Jennings beat her to it. "Mr. Morgan is absolutely right! Our Noelle isn't doing this for herself, but for everyone else. Who would want their time wasted just because of one person's unreasonable behavior?"

A hint of smugness flashed across Noelle's eyes. Looking as if she couldn't bear it, she said, "Yara, just apologize. No one will hold it against you."

Estelle wore a faint, mocking smile.

Noelle looked helpless. "Yara, really... Mr. Morgan, what do you think we should do now?"

Mr. Morgan's gaze was placid. Suddenly, he smiled. "Who said the person needing to apologize is Yara?"

A stunned silence fell over the room as everyone widened their eyes. They wondered what Mr. Morgan meant; if the person who needed to apologize wasn't Yara, could it possibly be Noelle?!

Laura was the first to shout, "Mr. Morgan, you must be mistaken! Yara's painting is the forgery!"

Noelle's face paled, and she feigned a helpless look. "Mr. Morgan... forget it. I originally thought having Yara apologize would be for her own good..."

"When did I ever say Yara's *Purple Sun Mountain Residence Painting* is a forgery?" Mr. Morgan abruptly interrupted.

Cold sweat suddenly beaded on Noelle's forehead, and she could barely maintain her smile. She wondered what on earth this Mr. Morgan was talking about!

Laura's smile froze as well. She awkwardly tried to flatter him, "Mr. Morgan, this... if Yara's isn't a forgery, could it be that Noelle's is? That's impossible! Please, don't make such jokes!"

"I never joke," Mr. Morgan replied coldly.

Laura was dumbfounded, a bad premonition rising in her chest. "But... but just now you said you wanted to get to know Noelle. Doesn't that mean you admire her?" She thought that if Noelle held a forgery, there was no way Mr. Morgan could possibly admire her!

"Admire..." Mr. Morgan chewed on the word before letting out an eccentric laugh. "Then Miss Noelle has misunderstood. I remembered your name, but not out of admiration."

A sense of foreboding washed over Noelle. She felt that if she let Mr. Morgan continue, something terrible would happen!

But Laura was already furious. Stripped of all the elegance of a wealthy society lady, she acted like a shrew. Without considering whether she could afford to offend the man in front of her, she put her hands on her hips and roared angrily at Mr. Morgan.

"Then why did you remember Noelle's name! The appraisal results are already out, and now you're changing your tune? Are you afraid people won't know there's something shady going on between you and that bitch Yara—"

"Laura Jennings!"

"Mother!"

"Laura!"

Iris's face turned icy as Nathaniel and Ethan Sloan spoke up at the exact same time to interrupt her. Laura instantly felt humiliated. She couldn't understand why Nathaniel and Ethan were stopping her when she was just trying to help Noelle!

Mr. Morgan shot a sharp glare at her. "So this is the caliber of Mrs. Sloan. How enlightening.

"I had originally planned to save Miss Noelle some face. But since Mrs. Sloan insists on getting to the bottom of this, I have no choice but to answer." Mr. Morgan suddenly smiled. He turned to Noelle and enunciated every word clearly. "Miss Noelle, I remembered you because I need to publish your name on the official antiques website."

Noelle's face turned deathly pale as she desperately shook her head. She knew what Mr. Morgan was about to say, and she frantically told herself that it was impossible, that he couldn't do this!

"Miss Noelle, the painting you presented is the actual forgery."

BOOM!

The entire banquet hall exploded into a cacophony of murmurs and gasps! Mr. Morgan was saying that Noelle's piece was the fake! But wasn't Noelle's *Purple Sun Mountain Residence Painting* purchased from Jade Pavilion?

Mr. Carter was dripping in cold sweat. "Mr. Morgan, you can't just spout nonsense—"

"Although the two paintings look identical, and the silk and pigments used are the same—not to mention the copying technique is absolutely masterful—there is still one flaw.

"The genuine *Purple Sun Mountain Residence Painting* is a thousand years old, and the pigment right here has faded."

The crowd looked over. Mr. Morgan was pointing at a spot of black ink.

"The *Purple Sun Mountain Residence Painting* was painted entirely with mineral pigments, which do not fade even after a millennium. However, this particular ink spot was accidentally dropped by the artist. Because it blended so seamlessly into the overall composition, the artist considered it a stroke of divine inspiration and decided not to remove it.

"The ink used for that spot is just ordinary ink, which naturally fades slightly over a thousand years. The forger only copied the appearance of the painting without

understanding the creator's state of mind or the events that occurred during the painting process."

After Mr. Morgan finished his explanation, everyone understood.

"If I can detect this, the twenty senior appraisers at Jade Pavilion can as well," Mr. Morgan said nonchalantly. "Yet, this painting was still put up for sale. Mr. Carter, you can explain that to the Kendrick family yourself."

THUD. Mr. Carter fell to his knees.

"As for Miss Lockwood..." Mr. Morgan turned his head, a half-smile playing on his lips. "Regardless of whether Miss Lockwood was aware of the truth, you were the one who blew this out of proportion. You requested the appraisal, and you were the one who complained about wasting everyone's time. Apologize."

In an instant, the room fell dead silent. Mr. Morgan didn't even need any flowery words; with just two simple sentences, he completely cornered Noelle. And wasn't it true? She was the one who had confidently asserted that Yara's painting was a forgery. She and Laura had played good cop, bad cop, trying to force Yara into admitting guilt.

Noelle's face flushed red, then drained of color. Her body swayed unsteadily, and she found it hard to breathe. She was reeling from the realization that her painting was actually a forgery. Still, she stubbornly resolved that she wouldn't apologize—she absolutely refused to apologize.

"This... Noelle was deceived too!" Laura panicked, entirely at a loss for what to do.
"Nathaniel, you... hurry up and say something for her! You know Noelle is filial. When she heard Lucy Sloan liked this painting, she went and bought it. This isn't her fault!"

In an instant, everyone's gaze landed on Nathaniel Sloan.

Chapter 114: Estelle Lockwood Is Different from Her Childhood Self?

Mr. Morgan, naturally, was well aware of Nathaniel Sloan's reputation.

He had also heard about Nathaniel and Noelle Lockwood's so-called engagement. He frowned in displeasure. He was a man who believed in judging matters objectively, favoring reason over relationships. Today's farce was clearly Noelle stirring up trouble, but if Nathaniel decided to intervene...

"Would you like to step in and help, Mr. Sloan?" Estelle Lockwood brushed a strand of hair back, a half-smile playing on her lips. "If you beg me, I can excuse Noelle from apologizing."

GASP. The bystanders were shocked. Yara Lockwood was far too audacious!

Seeing Estelle's attitude, Laura Jennings was instantly consumed by rage. However, in her mind, Yara was nothing more than an orphan with no background—someone she could

manipulate at will. Even with the backing of the Kendrick family, would they really offend the dignified mistress of the Sloan family over an adopted daughter?

Emboldened by this thought, she fired back. "Stop flattering yourself. Let me tell you—"

"The *Purple Sun Mountain Residence Painting* was purchased by a wealthy tycoon a few years ago for 195.1 million, whereas the piece from Jade Pavilion was priced at 30 million." Nathaniel Sloan's tone was flat. "Anyone with a brain can figure out that the piece at Jade Pavilion was problematic. Noelle made a fool of herself by being greedy for a cheap bargain. That has nothing to do with me. Mr. Morgan, please handle this as you see fit."

Hearing the massive price discrepancy, everyone fell silent.

Just moments ago, Laura and Noelle had been so incredibly arrogant, standing on the moral high ground and accusing Yara of being greedy for cheap thrills. Now, who was the one truly guilty of that?

The authentic painting had fetched nearly two hundred million a few years ago; its value would only be higher now. Meanwhile, the counterfeit had sold for thirty million. To be fair, if the piece had been properly preserved and explicitly labeled as a replica of the *Purple Sun Mountain Residence Painting*, it might have been worth even more than that. But to buy a fake at a replica's price, insist it was authentic, and then haughtily look down on Miss Yara Lockwood who had brought the genuine article...

It was utterly humiliating! Noelle and Laura had completely disgraced themselves at the banquet today!

Noelle's face turned another shade paler as tears streamed down her cheeks. She could not believe that Nathaniel had refused to save her even a shred of dignity.

Estelle curled her lips in satisfaction. "Since Mr. Sloan has made his stance clear... Miss Lockwood, you may apologize now."

Noelle's face was drenched in tears. After a long moment of looking as though she had suffered some monumental injustice, she finally sobbed out an apology.

Thus, the farce came to an end. Shortly after, Noelle used the excuse of feeling unwell to leave early.

Iris Sloan shot Nathaniel a disgruntled glare. How was this any way to win back a wife? He had waited until the whole ordeal was practically over before speaking up. If it had been Liam Sloan, he would have been shielding his wife from the very beginning! Furthermore, Jasper Kingston had also wanted to intervene earlier, but he seemed to have been delayed by something else. If Jasper had managed to step in and play the hero, she wondered what Nathaniel would have done then!

Nathaniel's gaze remained calm, and he offered no explanation.

"Miss Lockwood, could I have a word with you in private?" Mr. Morgan suddenly asked.

No one found this request strange. After all, Mr. Morgan was fiercely obsessed with antiques. He probably wanted to ask Yara where she had acquired the *Purple Sun Mountain Residence Painting*.

Estelle assumed the same, but to her surprise, Mr. Morgan smiled and said, "It has been a long time. You've grown up."

Estelle froze in stunned silence. She instinctively scrutinized Mr. Morgan, certain that she did not know this man. "Have we... met before?"

Mr. Morgan nodded. "We have, indeed, though you certainly wouldn't remember. You were only three or four years old at the time, and I was in my early twenties. Your grandfather brought you to the Morgan family."

After Estelle had been deliberately abandoned by Rose Lowell, she had been found and taken in by an old man. The old man was not wealthy, but he earned enough to keep them warm and fed. However, with an extra mouth to feed, he had to take on a second job. Estelle had once asked him about it, and Grandpa Lockwood had explained that he worked as a chef for a wealthy family. The pay was decent, and occasionally, he would bring Estelle along to play, sneaking her delicious treats from the kitchen.

It turned out that the wealthy household was the Morgan family. She wondered why the arrogant Young Mr. Morgan of that time still remembered her.

Knowing that Grandpa Lockwood had already passed away, Mr. Morgan did not dwell on the past. "I heard your grandfather entrusted you to the Kendrick family. The Kendrick family is a solid choice; your grandfather must be resting in peace."

Estelle blinked, completely baffled. She wondered what Mr. Morgan was talking about. When had her grandfather ever entrusted her to the Kendrick family? For starters, her grandfather and Grandpa Kendrick did not even know each other. Even if they had, their social standings were worlds apart. How could her grandfather possibly have entrusted her to them? And even if he had tried, the Kendrick family wouldn't have necessarily agreed.

Besides, it was entirely by accident that Henry Kendrick had saved her and brought her into the Kendrick family.

Estelle wanted to ask for clarification, but someone called out to Mr. Morgan. He gave her a polite nod and took his leave.

What Mr. Morgan chose not to mention was the real reason he remembered Estelle. Back when she was just three or four years old, she had been incredibly domineering and prone to violent temper tantrums, often kicking and hitting the poor old man. Consequently, Young Mr. Morgan had harbored a deep disgust for her at the time. Seeing her now, however, she bore absolutely no resemblance to her childhood self. He supposed that as people grew up, their personalities naturally evolved.

It was an old matter from over two decades ago; there was no point in bringing it up now.

Out on the balcony, Liam Sloan found Nathaniel standing by himself. "Nathaniel, what's the deal with Mr. Morgan and Estelle? They seem to know each other."

Nathaniel remained silent.

"Also, why didn't you step in when Noelle was going after Estelle just now? I was so mad!"

Nathaniel's gaze flickered.

When Iris had asked him this very question, he had given her a logical answer: he believed Estelle was fully capable of handling it herself. She wanted revenge, which meant she certainly wouldn't have wanted him interfering. However, as Liam asked the same question, Nathaniel slowly closed his eyes. Beyond his earlier reasoning, there was perhaps a much deeper, more painful truth.

Estelle didn't need him.

Even while being targeted and harassed by Noelle and Laura, from beginning to end, it had never once crossed Estelle's mind to look to him for help. Nathaniel didn't know how to articulate his current state of mind. His heart felt as if it were simultaneously boiling in scorching magma and plummeting into an endless, hollow abyss.

He realized that Estelle truly didn't need him. During the five years she had been gone, she had met new people and lived a life that was completely blank to him. Perhaps... she had even found someone new to rely on.

Closing his eyes, Nathaniel forced down the complex surge of emotions within him. When he opened them again, his gaze was once more noble and indifferent. "What are you trying to say?" he asked.

Liam quickly leaned in. "I was eavesdropping on Estelle and Mr. Morgan's conversation just now. It sounds like they knew each other from over twenty years ago! But wasn't Estelle only three or four back then, having just been abandoned by the Lockwood family? How on earth would she have known Young Mr. Morgan?"

The whole reason the Lockwood family despised Estelle was that they had investigated her background and found out she had spent the first eighteen years of her life growing up in the countryside. If she was just a "country bumpkin," how could she possibly have crossed paths with the vastly wealthy Morgan family, let alone leave a lasting impression on Mr. Morgan for more than two decades?

Standing off to the side, Zane Grant nodded in agreement. However, his thoughts went in a different direction than Liam's; he had considered an additional angle. Mr. Morgan had recognized Yara, which meant that Yara had always been Yara. In that case, was Estelle—the country bumpkin who had returned to the Lockwood family seven years ago and gotten divorced five years ago—truly the exact same person as Yara?

He wondered if Nathaniel had genuinely made a mistake.

Chapter 115: If You Pick Me Up, You Can't Pick Up Noelle Lockwood

Liam Sloan hesitated. "Should I look into it?"

Nathaniel Sloan didn't speak for a long time.

After quite a while, he calmly stood up. "No need. Leave it be."

He knew Estelle Lockwood still harbored many secrets. She had been gone for five years, and if she wasn't willing to talk... he couldn't force her.

By the time the banquet ended, it was already eleven at night. Rain had begun to fall.

The Sloan Family had prepared guest rooms for anyone needing to stay the night.

Iris Sloan suggested that Estelle stay, but since she wanted to take her three kids to kindergarten the next morning, she declined.

Estelle arrived at the entrance of Sloan Manor, where she received a message from her driver.

"Miss Yara, I'm so sorry. My daughter suddenly got a high fever, and I need to take her to the hospital. As for picking you up, I..."

The driver worked for the Kendrick Family. His daughter was only eight, and a child's fever couldn't be delayed. She hurriedly replied, "It's fine. Hurry up and go to the hospital."

"Thank you, Miss Yara!"

Estelle didn't think much of it and planned to hail a cab herself.

Not far away.

Nathaniel calmly watched Estelle. "Leo wants to go home?" he suddenly asked.

Liam froze for a second. "Ah, yeah. She said the manor feels suffocating, so she definitely wants to go home."

Leo had come alone today. Her parents were still abroad, and she had her own place in Crestfall.

Nathaniel nodded faintly. "Tell her to come over. I'll take her home."

Liam was speechless.

He was completely shocked. He wondered if his own brother had lost his mind.

Although Leo was Nathaniel's cousin, they had grown up seeing each other so few times he could count them on one hand. Moreover, the children of the branch families wouldn't dare let Nathaniel chauffeur them, even if they couldn't find a driver!

Nathaniel naturally noticed the shock in Liam's eyes. "What? Is there a problem?"

Liam snapped back to his senses. "No, no, no problem! Right away, right away!"

When Leo heard that Nathaniel was going to take her home, she was thrilled. She bragged to her friends before scurrying over to Nathaniel, unable to hide her smugness. "Nathaniel!"

She usually didn't dare act too familiar and would normally call him Mr. Sloan. But since he was taking her home, he surely cared about her as his sister!

Nathaniel merely gave her an unhurried glance. "Get in."

Nathaniel's car was incredibly luxurious. Luke White wasn't there, so it was just him and the driver. The passenger seat was empty, as was the back row. Usually, the front seats were for the driver and assistant, so Leo opened the rear door without a second thought.

Just as she was about to get in, the man's voice rang out again. "Sit in the front."

Leo's expression stiffened, but she didn't dare argue. She obediently got into the passenger seat and sat properly.

It didn't matter. Even if it was just the passenger seat, she was still crushing the rest of the Sloan Family's branch members!

Nathaniel nodded, signaling the driver to go.

Liam watched the car drive off, completely bewildered. Zane Grant, however, clicked his tongue. "What a schemer."

"Huh?" Liam asked.

"You don't get it?" Zane asked.

Liam shook his head. "I don't."

Zane scoffed. "Just watch. You'll understand in a second."

The car drove forward about fifty meters, arriving exactly at the main gates of Sloan Manor. "Stop the car," Nathaniel suddenly ordered.

The driver hurriedly braked. Leo had no idea what was going on.

Nathaniel had already rolled down his window. The veil of rain hid his features in the shadows, but he immediately spotted the person standing by the road with an umbrella, waiting for a ride.

"Yara, get in. Let's go home."

Estelle froze and looked up.

The way Nathaniel sat in the car looked exactly like he did five years ago—noble and aloof. He looked like an unattainable celestial being, completely out of reach.

Estelle didn't even think about it. "No."

Even though she was also heading back to Imperial Crest, she had absolutely no desire to share a ride with Nathaniel.

Nathaniel's expression didn't change as he calmly stated, "You won't be able to get a cab here."

Sloan Manor was situated in the prime spot of a highly exclusive neighborhood. Starting five kilometers down the mountain, all outside vehicles were prohibited from entering. Hailing a cab here was nothing but wishful thinking.

Estelle choked on her words. It was true—she had completely forgotten about that.

"I'll go find Aunt Iris. She'll arrange a driver for me."

Liam had already jogged over, deciding to lend his brother a helping hand. "Miss Lockwood! You really can't get a cab here. Most people have their own drivers to pick them up. With so many guests today and the rain on top of it, all the other Sloan Family drivers are already out dropping people off. If you want to wait for one, it'll take a very long time.

"As it happens, you and my brother are heading the same way. Why don't you just..."

Estelle quietly refused. "It's fine. I can wait."

Liam coughed and silently backed away. He realized he wasn't doing a very good job.

Zane, who had been watching the spectacle from the sidelines, chimed in. "You're just making unnecessary moves."

Liam wasn't convinced. "I'm helping my brother win back his wife! How is that unnecessary? If it weren't for me, how else would my brother get Estelle in the car?"

Zane gave the naive fool a look. It was hard to imagine someone with his brain could actually be a lawyer. Zane had seen through it all at a glance. "What do you think Leo is there for?"

Liam was completely lost.

With Nathaniel's car stopped at the gate, quite a few people were already looking over.

Laura Jennings had been harshly reprimanded by Ethan Sloan, who had ordered someone to send Noelle Lockwood away. Just as Noelle stepped outside, she spotted Nathaniel's car.

He... he was inviting Estelle into his car! And Estelle was actually refusing!

Estelle was practically dragging her pride through the mud!

Leo noticed Noelle immediately. "Noelle!"

Leo hadn't been present during the calligraphy appraisal earlier. She had only heard that Noelle had been reprimanded, but she didn't know the specifics and assumed it was nothing major.

"Nathaniel, Noelle is also by herself. Why don't you give her a ride..."

Estelle narrowed her eyes.

Noelle looked like a fragile white flower standing in the wind and rain. With her pale face and delicate posture, any man who saw her would feel a pang of sympathy.

Yet Nathaniel didn't so much as spare her a glance.

Leo grew anxious. "Nathaniel, are you really going to let Yara in the car? Noelle is watching! If you do this, she'll definitely be heartbroken!"

She glared at Estelle with hostility, as if Estelle had committed some unforgivable sin.

Estelle suddenly found the situation amusing.

She watched Noelle slowly approach, then turned to look at Leo in the passenger seat, who was brimming with righteous indignation...

Estelle suddenly smirked. She leaned down, bringing her red lips close to Nathaniel's ear, and breathed softly.

"Mr. Sloan, do you want me to get in?"

The man's Adam's apple bobbed slightly.

Estelle twirled a strand of hair around her finger. "But... if you let me in, you won't be able to give Noelle a ride."

Nathaniel remained composed. "Yes. Get in."

Leo was absolutely furious. "Nathaniel!"

Seeing the tears in Noelle's eyes while Estelle smirked and opened the car door, Leo grew even more enraged. Since she didn't dare yell at Nathaniel, she vented her anger on Estelle instead.

"You shameless seductress!"

Estelle happily accepted the insult. "Generally speaking, seductresses are quite beautiful. I'll just take that as a compliment."

Chapter 116: Someone Calls Her "Baby"

Leo Sloan's eyes widened, seemingly unable to believe that such a shameless person existed in this world.

Estelle Lockwood gracefully got into the car. Under Noelle Lockwood's ferocious glare, she lightly pulled the door shut.

It was incredibly satisfying.

The next moment, the car drove off, accompanied by Leo's impotent fury from inside.

Outside, Zane Grant nudged Liam Sloan's arm. "See that? This is Leo's purpose."

Liam was dumbfounded. "So Leo is... just a pawn used to provoke Estelle into getting in the car?"

A pawn? Yes, that was an apt description.

In the car, Nathaniel Sloan's lips curled up slightly.

Liam was right. On the road to winning back one's wife, one always had to employ a few little tricks.

Thinking of Noelle's expression just now, Estelle felt a deep sense of satisfaction.

On the way, Leo was highly indignant. "Nathaniel, you rejected Noelle in front of so many people to take this woman home. How... how is Noelle supposed to show her face in public now!"

Nathaniel narrowed his eyes. He was just about to speak when Estelle suddenly smirked. "Of course Nathaniel is taking me home. Little girl, do you know where I live?"

Leo had just returned from abroad. Everything she knew about "Yara Lockwood" had been told to her by Noelle, so naturally, she had no idea. "Who cares where you live? You're just shameless!"

Estelle gave a half-smile. "Your dear Noelle told you that I was a homewrecker, that I stole her man and took over her son. So how can you not guess where I live?"

"How would I—" Leo started.

Estelle said slowly, "I live at Imperial Crest. Mr. Sloan and I are heading the same way home. Tell me... shouldn't Mr. Sloan be the one picking me up and dropping me off?"

Hearing this, Leo immediately shrieked, "You live at Imperial Crest?!"

Estelle tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. "What's the matter?"

Leo was exasperated. "You're asking me what's the matter? Imperial Crest is obviously where Noelle lives! You have no legitimate right to be living there. What does that make you look like..."

Nathaniel's cold gaze swept over her.

Estelle, however, remained unhurried. "Well, so what? Does your Noelle have a legitimate right?"

Leo's face flushed with anger. "Of course! Noelle was originally..."

Before she could finish, Leo met Nathaniel's eyes.

For some unknown reason, a layer of terror welled up in Leo's heart. She shifted uneasily in her seat, but she still felt she hadn't said anything wrong. Noelle and Nathaniel had been engaged since they were children. Even if, even if...

This woman had actually moved into Imperial Crest. She was so furious she could die!

Estelle's original intention had been to anger Noelle and her lackeys. Seeing Leo enraged to the point of losing her mind brought Estelle immense comfort. She took out her phone and casually scrolled through her messages.

Just then, the car passed by a street. Leo's eyes lit up. "Nathaniel, do you remember this place? When we were kids, Noelle was bullied by two thugs here. As soon as you found out, you rushed over in a hurry."

As she spoke, Leo couldn't help but shoot a look at Estelle, her tone turning mocking. "Noelle was still in school back then, and she was the famous campus beauty. So many

people pursued her, but she didn't even spare them a glance. She was just waiting for you to come!

"Ah, why am I saying all this? Noelle and Nathaniel are childhood sweethearts, but a certain someone clearly isn't. When Noelle was studying, a certain someone was probably stuck in some godforsaken corner!"

Everything Leo talked about was from the time Noelle and Nathaniel were in school. Back then, neither Estelle nor "Yara" had ever been a part of it. It was as if she were intentionally—or perhaps unintentionally—ostracizing Estelle.

Nathaniel's fingers twitched, and he subconsciously looked at the woman sitting by the window in the back seat.

Estelle's lips held a smile. Whatever she was replying to on her phone, her smile only grew sweeter.

For some inexplicable reason, Nathaniel's heart suddenly clenched.

Leo doubled down. "Oh, and there's that bell tower! I remember you and Noelle came here before, Nathaniel. You even took photos together..."

Nathaniel had indeed visited this bell tower with Noelle, but it had been a large gathering with the entire Sloan and Lockwood families. Yet, coming from Leo's mouth, it sounded as if the two of them had been on a private date.

Nathaniel paused, not in a rush to explain. He... wanted to see Estelle's reaction.

But Estelle seemed to genuinely not have heard. Her fingers tapped rapidly across the screen, deep in conversation with whoever was on her phone.

Nathaniel only felt a surge of stifling irritation in his chest. "Stop the car," he said abruptly.

SCREECH.

The car jerked to a halt, and momentum threw Estelle forward. She looked up in confusion, her brows instantly furrowing.

Nathaniel spoke to Leo, "Get out."

Leo, who had been in the middle of her excited tirade and assumed Estelle was feeling ashamed of her own inferiority, was clearly stunned. "What?"

Nathaniel said coldly, "Back then, I merely bumped into Noelle by chance. I didn't know about the situation and rush over to save her.

"As for the trip to the bell tower, I only showed my face and left five minutes later. If that constitutes me treating Noelle specially...

"Then the number of people I have treated specially in this lifetime would be too many to count."

Leo's expression froze, her face turning pale. "B-But..."

But this was all what Noelle had told her. How could it be wrong...

"I have never treated Noelle specially." Nathaniel enunciated each word clearly. "Do you understand?"

Leo trembled. She had been pampered since childhood, spoiled by everyone in her family. Growing up, no one had ever yelled at her like this. She remained defiant. "Then who do you care about?! Nathaniel, don't tell me you care about Yara?

"Yara already has two children! Who knows which random bastard she had them with! Are you really going to play stepdaddy to some other man's kids?!"

Nathaniel's eyes instantly darkened. "I told you to get out."

Leo shuddered entirely, her eyes turning red. She glared viciously at Estelle, only to see the woman still looking at her phone. This made her even more infuriated.

After Leo got out, the driver silently raised the partition. In an instant, the back seat became a private, enclosed space.

Nathaniel's Adam's apple bobbed. "Yara, do you have nothing to say?"

Estelle was right in the middle of a lively chat with Mrs. Kendrick. Hearing Nathaniel suddenly call out to her, she looked up in displeasure. "What is it?"

Nathaniel wanted to ask her... after hearing Leo talk about his past with Noelle, did she not feel even a tiny bit upset?

Estelle looked back at him, her expression clearly saying, "Are you out of your mind?"

Did Nathaniel actually think she still cared about these things?

RING RING...

Just then, her phone rang.

Mrs. Kendrick had just asked Estelle for recent photos of Zachery and Mia. Having looked at them, she still didn't feel satisfied and had made a voice call. "Darling, how are the children?"

The rainy night was noisy, and Mrs. Kendrick had lowered her voice. After being processed by the phone's speaker, her tone carried a slight static, making it temporarily impossible to distinguish whether the caller was male or female.

Nathaniel only heard the person on the other end of the line call out, "Darling."

Following that, he saw Estelle's eyes curve into crescents, brimming with smiles. "They're doing great."

Mrs. Kendrick asked over the phone, "Calling you this late—am I disturbing you?"

Nathaniel only heard Estelle say, "Of course not. They're your children too, after all."

...Your children.

Nathaniel abruptly clenched his fists.

Tip: You can use left, right, A and D keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 117: New Boyfriend? I Can Be Your New Boyfriend, Too

Whatever the person on the other end of the line said next amused Estelle Lockwood. "Okay, got it. Bye-bye."

The phone call ended, and Nathaniel Sloan's face tightened slightly. "Who were you on the phone with?"

Estelle answered without a second thought, "My family. Is there a problem?"

Nathaniel recalled the word 'baby' and Estelle's gentle tone. An itch rose in his throat, and he parted his lips to speak in a slightly hoarse voice. "Family? As far as I know, Miss Yara Lockwood has no relatives. Where did this 'family' come from?"

Estelle was about to argue that the Kendricks were indeed her family. However, when she turned around, she met Nathaniel's indifferent, self-possessed gaze, which carried a trace of bloodshot intensity. Her interest was immediately piqued.

She deliberately flashed a sweet smile and gave an ambiguous answer. "Mr. Sloan, families come in two types: the family you're born into, and the little family you build later in life.

"What you investigated was my birth family. Yes, I was born without parents. A grandpa picked me up, and I grew up relying on the kindness of strangers. Now that he has passed away, I indeed have no blood relatives. But..."

Estelle had studied acting for a few months under Second Young Mr. Kendrick, a superstar in the entertainment industry. While her acting might not be award-winning, it was more than enough to fool Nathaniel.

"But... who says I don't have a little family that I built later on?" Estelle gave him a meaningful look. "I already have two kids. Mr. Sloan, the person on the other end of the line is also a guardian to my children. Tell me, who was I just on the phone with?"

Mrs. Kendrick was her guardian, which meant she was also a guardian to Mia and Zachery. The logic was flawless!

Nathaniel clenched his fists, his expression darkening bit by bit.

The car drove through the rainy night, accompanied by the PITTER-PATTER of heavy rain against the windows.

After a long while, Nathaniel slowly looked up and spoke hoarsely. "Miss Lockwood, if I remember correctly, you said that the grass on the grave of Mia and Zachery's 'father' is already three feet high."

Estelle tutted. "I already told you, that was a metaphor. Didn't Liam Sloan tell you that my ex-husband and I never divorced?"

Nathaniel caught the loophole. "Even if you aren't divorced, the fact that you call that man your ex-husband is enough to prove you wouldn't be on a call with him."

Estelle frowned, suddenly realizing her lie was riddled with holes. She decided to just make things up on the spot. "Actually, I was lying to you. The person I was on the phone with just now is my new boyfriend from abroad. He knows about Zachery and Mia, but he doesn't mind. Once I divorce my ex-husband, I'll marry my new boyfriend right away. So it's completely fine for me to call him a guardian to Zachery and Mia, right?"

Nathaniel closed his eyes sharply. Fine. Just fine.

This woman would truly go to any lengths to hide the truth. She had even fabricated a 'new boyfriend.'

He gave a cryptic half-smile. "I see. In other words, the person you were on the phone with just now isn't Zachery and Mia's biological father either."

Estelle felt this conversation was getting weirder by the second. "What does it have to do with you?"

Nathaniel rubbed his fingertips together and suddenly said something astonishing. "Since he's a new boyfriend, it means you're not married yet. Everyone still has a chance.

"Miss Lockwood... why not consider me?"

Estelle's eyes widened in shock. "What?"

Nathaniel acted as if he didn't realize how scandalous his words were. "Since Miss Lockwood's goal is to find a father for Mia and Zachery, I consider myself a pretty good catch. I should be much more competitive than your 'new boyfriend,' don't you think?"

If Liam Sloan were here, he would definitely say Nathaniel was hopelessly love-struck!

Estelle was equally stunned. She coughed twice. "I know you really like Zachery and Mia, but people are already saying that I deliberately brought them to approach you, just so the richest man in Crestfall could take on my baggage."

"Well, I am willing," Nathaniel replied unhurriedly.

Estelle was momentarily left speechless. She furrowed her brows. "Even if they aren't your children?"

Nathaniel gave a calm nod.

Right at that moment, the car arrived at Imperial Crest. Estelle had originally wanted to piss Nathaniel off, but now it seemed she was the one caught off guard. She hurriedly got out of the car and ran back to the villa without looking back.

Nathaniel remained deep in thought for a long time, watching Estelle's retreating figure. The person he wanted was Estelle, so he didn't care who Zachery and Mia's biological father was.

But... seeing how fiercely Estelle protected them, Nathaniel couldn't help but think of the two children who had died in the fire five years ago.

Everyone said Estelle had started that fire. She had even left a suicide note, proving she wanted to take her own life. People had cursed her—if she wanted to die, fine, but why harm others? Why drag her children into death with her? They said the woman was definitely insane, and it was no wonder the Lockwood Family disliked her.

But...

"Sir, we've arrived," the driver reminded him.

Nathaniel snapped back to reality and got out of the car without batting an eyelid.

The next day.

Estelle dropped the three munchkins off at the kindergarten. Just as she was about to leave, she suddenly heard other parents whispering nearby.

"She intentionally placed her kids here to play and go to school with Young Mr. Sloan. So calculating..."

Estelle narrowed her eyes.

"Who knows whose spawn those two little deadweights are. She's blatantly trying to make Mr. Sloan take on her baggage. Tsk, tsk."

"But Yara Lockwood is indeed gorgeous. No wonder she has Mr. Sloan completely mesmerized."

"She still shouldn't be bringing two little bastards along! Mrs. Sloan has already stated that she will absolutely never allow this woman to marry into the Sloan Family."

Estelle cast a nonchalant glance in their direction, and the gossiping parents immediately scattered. Her phone buzzed twice. Seeing a message from Penelope Sullivan, she let out a cold sneer.

It turned out that after returning home yesterday, Noelle Lockwood and Laura Jennings were still bitter. They deliberately spread rumors claiming that she had not only stolen Noelle's place as the future Mrs. Sloan but was also planning to drag two deadweights into the Sloan Family. They called her shameless and insulted Zachery and Mia too.

Estelle made a call. "The plan has changed. I'm making my return." She paused to listen. "Yes, as 'Estelle Lockwood'."

The person on the other end was surprised. Estelle chuckled. "What's there to be shocked about? How is the acquisition of the Lockwood Group coming along?"

Whatever the person said over the next two minutes made Estelle curl her lips into a smile. "Good."

Inside the kindergarten.

Most of the children were innocent, and Mia was incredibly popular among them. Despite the parents' gossiping, it hadn't affected the kids at the kindergarten. However, Mia had still figured out the whole situation.

She curled her lips and muttered softly, "Since we're trying to set Daddy and Mommy up, don't you guys think we should test Daddy first?"

"Huh?" Zachery asked.

Mia explained, "Since everyone is saying we're some wild man's kids and calling us burdens, we might as well see what Daddy thinks about it.

"If Daddy is disgusted by us too, then we shouldn't try to set them up."

Zachery asked worriedly, "But your fortune-telling said we have to set them up!"

Mia was utterly fearless. "Then that just means my skills aren't up to par!"

Zachery was speechless.

When it came to her 'subpar skills,' Mia had evolved from a little crybaby into someone who owned it with absolute confidence. What on earth had she gone through?!

Still, Zachery thought Mia's idea was viable. His eyes darted around as he pondered. "How should we test him?"

Chapter 118: Mia: Young Master, Your Identity Swap with Zachery Will Be Exposed Sooner or Later

This question instantly stumped Mia. She wondered how they were supposed to test him.

Christian spoke up calmly. "I have an idea.

"If the rumors have reached the kindergarten, they must have spread all over the company by now. We'll go to Evernight Tower to find Daddy and see how he reacts to the gossip."

Mia's eyes lit up. "That's a great idea!"

"But wherever there's gossip, there are bound to be ugly words, Zachery, Mia," Christian looked at them and said earnestly. "You two shouldn't go. Let me disguise myself as Zachery and go instead. Even if they hurl insults, you won't have to hear them."

Zachery was so touched he could almost cry, thinking the young master was truly a good person. But he wasn't emotionally fragile; he could handle it—

Just then, Mia nodded. "Young Master, let me go with you. Forget about Zachery—he's a little dummy anyway."

Christian pondered for a moment before humming in agreement. "That works. You're smart, Mia. If you come with me, we might be able to find out even more. And if anyone bullies you, I'll definitely protect you."

"Then we'll sneak over this afternoon!" Mia finalized the plan.

"Okay," Christian agreed.

Zachery was speechless. Then, absolute confusion set in. Mia could go because she was smart, so why couldn't he? Was it because he was a little dummy?!

Later that afternoon.

Nathaniel Sloan's face darkened when he heard about the rumors. "Who started this?"

The air in the office was suffocatingly heavy. His assistant bit the bullet and replied, "It's spreading everywhere outside, and there's a lot of chatter online... Since it involves Miss Noelle, a major celebrity, her fans are extremely riled up."

Nathaniel's eyes grew cold. "Didn't the PR department handle this the moment the news broke?"

The assistant was too terrified to speak. Luke White stepped forward. "Sir, the PR department did take action. But when the public opinion began to snowball again and they prepared to intervene, they received a call from Chairman Sloan."

Ethan Sloan had stopped them. In other words, the fact that everyone in the company now knew Zachery and Mia as "burdens" and "some random man's bastards" was largely due to his father's tacit approval.

Nathaniel lifted his gaze coolly. "Bring the PR Director here."

The PR Director had just received a hefty bribe from Ethan that morning and was still feeling rather smug. Hearing that Nathaniel was looking for him, he didn't think much of it.

However, the moment he stepped into the office, he was met with a freezing command. "Luke, process his resignation. Transfer his files to the Sloan Group, and promote someone who can actually get things done."

The PR Director was dumbfounded. "President Sloan, I..."

Nathaniel didn't even spare him a glance. Luke sneered as he explained, "Director—oh, excuse me, former Director. Evernight Group and Sloan Group are entirely independent entities. Since you chose to obey Chairman Sloan of the Sloan Group and accept his bribes, you no longer have the right to stay at Evernight."

"Seeing as you love the Sloan Group so much, you can go work for them instead."

The former PR Director stood completely paralyzed. All the color drained from his face as pure panic set in. He was being fired?! Every department in the Sloan Group was already saturated. Even if he transferred over, he wouldn't hold any real power—nothing compared to his prestigious position as the PR Director at Evernight! He had just accepted a tiny bit of compensation from Ethan, hadn't he?!

BEEP BEEP. Just then, an internal call rang on Luke's phone.

Luke's expression shifted. "Sir, Miss Noelle and Miss Mia have gotten into a conflict downstairs, but..."

Nathaniel shot to his feet, his face instantly darkening. "Noelle is bullying Mia? Is Mia okay?!"

Not waiting for Luke to finish, he stormed out of the office.

"Uh..." Luke mumbled. Watching Nathaniel step into the elevator, Luke slowly finished his sentence to the empty air. "...Miss Mia is fine, so you don't need to worry..."

Half an hour earlier.

Zachery had applied a disguise to Christian. Wearing Zachery's face, Christian headed to Evernight Tower alongside Mia. Afraid that walking through the main lobby would attract too much attention, Christian led Mia to the back entrance.

He unlocked the back door using his fingerprint. "This way, Mia."

Mia felt something was off. "Young Master, you're supposed to be 'Zachery' right now, but you just unlocked a fingerprint scanner. If anyone notices, your identity will be blown."

Christian blinked. There was no way his luck was that bad; they wouldn't get caught on their very first trip.

Mia decided they should first hit up the epicenter of all gossip: the employee break room. However, before they even reached it, someone walked right toward them.

Noelle Lockwood was dressed to the nines today. Although she had embarrassed herself at the Sloan family banquet yesterday, no one had leaked the incident to the public. In the eyes of Evernight International's employees, she was still the gentle and kind daughter of the Lockwood family. But seeing those two little mongrels here, Noelle's polite smile nearly shattered!

"Zachery, Mia?" Noelle feigned surprise.

The group of employees trailing behind her stopped in their tracks, their eyes instantly darting to "Zachery" and Mia.

Christian shielded Mia behind his back, looking up to meet Noelle's gaze directly. "Can I help you?"

A brilliant idea suddenly flashed through Noelle's mind. She thought, "These two little mongrels have shown up at the perfect time!"

Putting on a brave face, Noelle forced a smile and spoke to the surrounding employees. "Let me introduce you all. These are Yara's children. They... they are usually very clingy with Nathaniel, so..."

Hearing this, even those who didn't recognize Zachery and Mia immediately understood. These were the two little burdens!

The rumor that Yara had ousted Noelle, the true fiancée, to climb the social ladder while dragging along her two little burdens had spread throughout the entire group today. During the previous perfume collaboration, Yara had only interacted with Evernight's upper management. Today, Noelle had deliberately seeded these rumors among the regular staff. Since these employees had never met Yara, they naturally swallowed whatever Noelle fed them.

Now, seeing these two little bastards who dared to call Mr. Sloan their daddy right in front of his fiancée, while Noelle clearly had to force a smile through her heartbreak and disappointment, they were outraged.

One male employee immediately spoke up in accusation. "You two little bastards actually have the nerve to show up at Evernight Tower? What are you plotting?"

Christian's expression turned icy, but Mia gently tugged on his sleeve.

Maintaining her gentle, graceful facade, Noelle shook her head desperately. "Please, everyone, don't say that. Zachery and Mia are just children. They don't know any better."

Several employees chimed in. "Miss Noelle, you are too kind."

"Exactly. Even if the children don't know any better, their mother bullied you so horribly! I don't even know what to say, seeing how you can still tolerate Yara's kids!"

Noelle's lips curled into a satisfied smile. She thought, "These two little mongrels are such a nuisance! But since they delivered themselves right to my doorstep, it would be a waste not to use them!"

With this thought in mind, Noelle waved at Christian and Mia. "Zachery, Mia, are you here to find Nathaniel? You must not know the way. Let me take you to him."

Mia stepped forward, looking perfectly innocent.

Noelle sneered inwardly. She thought, "What an idiot!"

As long as Mia Lockwood walked up to her, she just needed to fake a fall. From everyone else's perspective, it would look exactly like Mia had shoved her to the ground. The daughter of that social-climbing slut, Yara, maliciously targeting Nathaniel's fiancée despite her young age—once that narrative spread, she'd love to see how these two little mongrels would ever show their faces again! Her fans would help fan the flames, too, pressuring the kindergarten to expel the bastards. If their mental fortitude was weak enough, they might even just kill themselves!

Noelle watched as Mia stepped closer and closer, and then—

"Aunt Noelle, are you planning to fake a fall?" a sweet, childish voice chimed right beside Noelle's ear.

Chapter 119: Nathaniel Sloan Picks Up His Daughter

Noelle Lockwood's expression stiffened, though she maintained a fake smile. "Mia, what are you talking about?"

"So what if I am?" she thought. "This little bastard should have died a long time ago!"

Mia cast a glance at her. A look of disdain appeared in the five-year-old's eyes. "We both know how to play the game, so drop the innocent act."

Terrified that Mia Lockwood's voice would attract the attention of bystanders, Noelle let out an awkward laugh. "Mia, I didn't know you had such a huge problem with me..."

"You didn't? Well, you're about to find out." Mia gave a sweet little warning. "Aunt Noelle, I'm going to fall down now."

Noelle didn't react in time. She wondered what the little bastard meant. What did she mean she was going to fall down now?

"Waaah..."

Suddenly, Mia fell to the ground with a loud THUD. Tears instantly welled up in her eyes. Her large eyes were filled with pure, innocent disbelief. With just a couple of blinks, tears streamed down her little face.

The bystanders were completely dumbfounded.

Mia secretly touched the cushion tied to her bottom. Although the fall hadn't hurt at all, her acting skills were incredible—she could cry on cue. "Aunt Noelle... boohoo..."

"Mia!" Christian was the first to rush forward. Following the script, he began his impassioned performance. "Aunt Noelle, how could you bully her!"

Feigning terror, Mia shrank back and grabbed Christian's hand. "Zachery, I'm fine. Don't blame Aunt Noelle. She probably just couldn't control her strength. It's all my fault..."

Several female employees nearby finally reacted and hurriedly rushed over. "Does it hurt, sweetie?"

"Can you stand up? There's a clinic over there. Do you want me to take you to see a doctor?"

Tears welled in Mia's eyes. She looked like she was in too much pain to speak, but she still managed to whimper politely in response.

The female employees' hearts melted. When they looked at Noelle, their gazes were no longer so friendly.

"Miss Noelle, we've heard some of the rumors going around, but no matter what, Mia is just a five-year-old child. How could you..."

"If she dares to lay a hand on a child in front of so many people, who knows what she does behind closed doors!"

"Oh, that's right. I heard Noelle was kicked out of Imperial Crest because she abused Young Mr. Sloan, not because Yara Lockwood forced her out."

"How can anyone bully a child? When it comes down to it, it's just a grudge between adults. Since she can't compare to Yara, she's taking it out on Yara's daughter..."

As Mia sat on the floor, wiping away her tears without a shred of real emotion, she recalled a conversation she had overheard outside her mommy's room half a year ago.

At the time, Uncle Henry Kendrick had learned that Mommy wanted to return to the country for revenge. He had been very supportive and mentioned an incident.

"Yara, back then, Noelle was so favored," he had said. "She faked a fall to frame you, and as a result, the entire Lockwood family and your scumbag ex-husband all protected her. I'm worried that even if you go back, getting revenge won't be that easy."

Later, Mia had pestered her uncle with many questions until she learned the whole story.

That day, also at Evernight Tower, Mommy had come to deliver lunch to her scumbag dad, only to run into Noelle and those biased parents.

Noelle had fallen in the hallway. Even though no one had seen how she fell, she looked at Mommy with teary eyes and deliberately said, "I'm fine, don't blame my sister." Rose Lowell had immediately stepped forward and slapped Mommy twice, telling her to remember her place.

Thinking of this, Mia doubled down on her performance. She cast a timid, fearful glance at Noelle and said, "Please don't say that, everyone. Boohoo... I know Aunt Noelle didn't mean to do it..."

Noelle finally realized what was happening. Her face drastically paled.

"This little bastard is actually framing me!!" she thought. She hadn't even touched Mia Lockwood just now. The girl had thrown herself down!

Usually, it was Noelle who framed others. To think she was now being framed by someone else! Gritting her teeth, she retorted, "Mia, how can you say that? I didn't..."

"Mia, let it go. Let's just leave."

Suddenly, Christian interrupted Noelle. He walked to Mia's side, and it was time for the little drama king to take the stage and begin his performance.

"Mia, Aunt Noelle once said that she is superior to us. She said we're just low-class people who aren't even fit to carry her shoes. Let alone pushing you, even if she did something far worse, she probably wouldn't face any consequences. We just have to swallow our grievances."

Noelle's eyes widened in shock. "You..."

Mia whimpered. She carefully tried to stand up but failed twice. In the eyes of the crowd, the little girl's figure seemed incredibly resilient.

"Boohoo, Zachery, I'll listen to you. If we offend Aunt Noelle, we'll get beaten, and I don't want to get beaten."

Noelle gritted her teeth. How could she not understand what was happening? These two little wretches were slinging mud at her! "You're sprouting absolute nonsense—"

"Noelle, this is going too far!" an employee who could no longer stand by interrupted loudly.

"You bullied a child right in front of all of us. Mia hasn't even demanded an apology, yet here you are, shifting the blame onto them!"

"If you didn't push her, did Mia throw herself onto the floor?"

"Don't treat us like we're blind!"

"Exactly! Falling hurts so much for a kid. How could Mia possibly do it on purpose?"

Noelle screamed silently in her heart. "That bastard did throw herself onto the floor! Why won't anyone believe me?" she thought.

Just as the employees finished speaking, the sound of approaching footsteps echoed behind them. The crowd turned around and instantly went dead silent.

"P-President Sloan..."

"Mr. Sloan, what brings you here?"

They panicked, wondering if Mr. Sloan had heard them criticizing Noelle and had come over specifically to intervene.

With tears in her eyes, Noelle looked as if she had finally found her savior. Overflowing with grievance, she cried out, "Nathaniel..."

However, Nathaniel Sloan seemed to look right past her. He strode forward and picked Mia up from the floor. His voice was gentle and filled with concern. If one listened closely, they could even hear a slight tremble in his tone.

"Mia, does it hurt?"

Mia tilted her head. She wondered why her scumbag dad had arrived so quickly. Was he genuinely worried about her?

Holding Mia in his arms, Nathaniel looked at "Zachery" standing nearby and comforted him. "Don't be afraid. Uncle Sloan is here. Uncle Sloan will make Noelle apologize to you two."

Noelle felt as if she had been struck by lightning. "Apologize?" she thought. "How are these two little bastards worthy of my apology?"

"Nathaniel, I didn't do it. You have to believe me..."

"If I believe you, then why did Mia fall?" Nathaniel asked coldly.

Tears welled up in Noelle's eyes. Looking frail and delicate, she cried uncontrollably, as though she had suffered an enormous injustice. "Nathaniel, I really don't know. Maybe Mia just doesn't like me, so... so she..."

"Are you saying Mia purposely fell to frame you?"

Something seemed to cross Nathaniel's mind, and a scoff of pure mockery escaped his throat. He articulated every word clearly. "Mia is just a child. She doesn't have that kind of manipulative mindset. Noelle, when you do something wrong, you must admit it."

Noelle's eyes snapped wide open. She felt like she had heard that exact phrase somewhere before.

But Nathaniel didn't give her a chance to speak. He turned to his secretary and asked, "Are President and Mrs. Lockwood here as well?"

"Yes, Mr. Sloan," the secretary replied. "President and Mrs. Lockwood are currently in the lounge."

Nathaniel shot Noelle a glance and calmly instructed the secretary, "Pass on a message to President and Mrs. Lockwood for me."

With that, he carried Mia into the elevator, with Christian following closely behind.

Mia buried her face in his chest, wailing, "It hurts so much, Uncle Sloan! It hurts so much, boohoo... That bad woman..."

"...There are no outsiders here. You can drop the act," Nathaniel interrupted.

Mia's crying came to an abrupt halt. "Huh?"

Chapter 120: Am I Some Kind of Monster?

A dead silence fell over the elevator.

After a long while, Mia lowered her head. "Uncle Sloan, I don't understand what you're talking about."

Nathaniel Sloan chuckled silently, pinching the soft cushion she had tucked behind her back. "You don't know what I'm talking about?"

Caught red-handed, Mia's expression stiffened for a second. She immediately lowered her head again, feigning shyness. "Boo-hoo, you caught me."

Then, she passionately defended herself. "But if that bad woman hadn't tried to frame me, I wouldn't have deliberately framed her back!"

Nathaniel nodded. "I'm not saying you were wrong. However, you could come up with a better plan next time. If you didn't have this cushion today and actually took a hard fall, your mommy's heart would ache for you. And so would... mine."

Mia froze in stunned silence.

HUH? Was her scumbag dad teaching her how to do bad things in the future?

Sensing something amiss, she asked, "Aren't you going to discipline me?"

Nathaniel cast a glance at her. "I don't plan on it."

Mia rolled her eyes thoughtfully. "Uncle Sloan, you're so indulgent with me. Is it true what others say? You really don't mind that Zachery and I are extra baggage?"

Nathaniel paused, his voice turning slightly husky. "You're not extra baggage."

He didn't know which man had fathered Zachery and Mia, but since they were Estelle Lockwood's children, he would treat them as his own.

Mia fell deep into thought. She felt that her scumbag dad was quite different from the rumors outside.

An idea popped into Mia's head. She let out a small cough and decided to push her luck. "Uncle Sloan~ I want to eat the cupcakes downstairs, and I want you to go buy them for me yourself!"

Outside the elevator doors, the secretary thought, "This Miss Mia really knows how to push her luck, but Mr. Sloan would never—"

Nathaniel smiled gently. "Alright."

The secretary was speechless.

In the lounge of Evernight Tower.

Quite a few people were covertly observing Noelle Lockwood.

The secretary wore a gentle, polite smile. "President Lockwood, Mrs. Lockwood, please take Miss Lockwood home. Furthermore, we hope you properly educate her. One must never harbor malicious intentions. If she offends again, a simple apology won't be enough to smooth things over."

Austin Lockwood and Rose Lowell had already been informed of what had transpired earlier. Both wore grim expressions.

"Noelle didn't do it on purpose..." Rose said stiffly.

The secretary's smile remained unwavering. "How does Mrs. Lockwood know Miss Lockwood didn't do it on purpose? Years ago, when Miss Noelle fell, she claimed the true daughter of the Lockwood family pushed her. Miss Estelle insisted she didn't, yet Mrs. Lockwood forced Miss Estelle to apologize, citing that 'one must never harbor malicious intentions.'

"Since Mrs. Lockwood was so strict with the biological daughter—demanding an apology without any proof—then you should treat the adopted daughter with the same standard, shouldn't you?

"Oh, right. Back then, Mrs. Lockwood also told Miss Estelle, 'Noelle is inherently kindhearted. She's not a schemer. Estelle Lockwood, you must admit when you've done something wrong.' Since Mrs. Lockwood is such a champion of justice, I'm sure you won't play favorites."

With that, the secretary gave a slight bow and gestured toward the door. "President Lockwood, Mrs. Lockwood, Miss Lockwood, please."

The three Lockwoods were publicly thrown out.

Noelle's face drained of color. Her body swayed unsteadily as the whispers of the crowd behind her reached her ears.

"The Lockwoods must be blind. 'Inherently kindhearted,' my foot... She's even willing to lay her hands on a little kid..."

"Noelle isn't a schemer? If she really wasn't a schemer, how could she have completely fooled the Lockwoods into abandoning their biological daughter to coddle and spoil an adopted one?"

Austin's expression remained rigid. The Lockwood Group's shares were currently being bought up by a mysterious individual. He had come to seek Nathaniel's help today, only to be kicked out.

For the first time, he snapped at his beloved daughter. "Noelle! It's not like you don't know the situation at home. Did you really have to pull a stunt like this today..."

"Noelle didn't do it on purpose!" Rose shrieked. "What do you mean by that? Are you blaming our daughter now? Nathaniel is clearly blinded by that Yara Lockwood. How can you blame Noelle?"

Furious, Austin stormed right into his car. Only after he left did Rose lower her voice.

"Noelle, when the time comes, just act cute and coax Nathaniel a little. And really, if you can't stand that little bastard, you could have just finished her off in private. Why did you have to make a move in front of so many people?"

Noelle felt sick to her stomach. "Mom, I told you, it wasn't me! That little brat fell on her own!"

"Alright, alright," Rose placated. "Mom isn't blaming you. I'm just telling you to be more discreet next time."

Noelle was completely speechless. A heavy lump formed in her chest. She was forced to swallow a bitter pill in silence!

Rose added, "Don't blame your father, either. We've already made the arrangements. Ten days from now, on the anniversary of Estelle's death, we will hand the company over to you."

Hearing this, Noelle finally felt her mood improve.

At Star Corporation.

Henry Kendrick mentally calculated for a moment. "We've acquired just about enough shares. When do you plan to make a move against the Lockwood family?"

Estelle Lockwood took a calm sip of her tea. "Ten days from now."

Henry looked puzzled. "Ten days? Why then?"

Was there something special about ten days from now? His train of thought abruptly halted as sudden realization dawned on him.

Ten days from now was the anniversary of Estelle's "death."

Henry had found out that the Lockwoods planned to make a public announcement on that exact day: since their biological daughter had been dead for five years, they decided to pass the company down to their adopted daughter.

As for why they insisted on announcing it on their biological daughter's death anniversary, Rose's excuse was that Estelle had "always cared" about the Lockwood family and her sister while she was alive. Announcing it on that day was supposedly meant to put her soul at ease.

In reality, Henry knew exactly what Rose was doing. She was just doing it to spite Estelle!

He simply couldn't understand it. Estelle was their flesh and blood. Even if she had been separated from them for eighteen years, did they really need to harbor such deep-seated hatred? They treated her as if she were their sworn enemy.

Estelle, however, didn't care what the Lockwoods thought. "By the way, did you get any results from the surveillance footage I asked you to check?"

Henry pulled himself from his thoughts. "I asked a few assistants. They all said someone did indeed show up that day, but they didn't see her face. From the back, they assumed it was you, so they let her through.

"As for who this woman is... we don't have any answers yet."

Estelle furrowed her brows in deep thought.

RING RING RING.

Suddenly, her phone started ringing. Estelle arched an eyebrow at the caller ID.

Nathaniel Sloan?

Downstairs at Evernight Tower.

Nathaniel had just bought the cupcakes and was about to head back when he suddenly caught sight of a familiar figure from behind.

The man arched an eyebrow. Why was Estelle here?

She had clearly seen him, yet she walked right off without even saying hello.

With a light chuckle, Nathaniel dialed her number. "Miss Lockwood."

Estelle, who was working in her office at Star, answered in an even tone. "Speak."

Holding the cupcakes, Nathaniel leaned against the glass window of the bakery and laughed softly. "Miss Lockwood saw me but turned around and walked away. Am I some kind of monster?"

"..."

Estelle pulled her phone away slightly to double-check the caller ID. It was indeed Nathaniel Sloan.

What was going on? Nathaniel said he saw her? She was sitting perfectly fine in her office at Star!

She chose her words carefully and asked in a cordial tone, "Is there something wrong with your eyes?"