

Chapter 121: Nathaniel Sloan Finds Out Zachery Is His Biological Son

Nathaniel Sloan paused, raising an eyebrow slightly. "You're... not at Evernight Tower?"

Estelle Lockwood twirled a pen between her fingertips and said faintly, "If your eyes are bad, go get them treated."

Had he really seen it wrong? Nathaniel didn't overthink it and naturally changed the subject. "Would I have the honor of inviting Miss Lockwood to dinner?"

Estelle rejected him without a second thought.

Nathaniel let out a low chuckle. "Mia and Zachery are here too."

"..." Estelle gritted her teeth. "Mr. Sloan, do you know that you sound exactly like a human trafficker right now?"

Nathaniel remained noncommittal.

After hanging up, he carried the cake back to his office. Before he even walked through the door, he saw 'Zachery' sitting with a perfectly straight back at the coffee table, reading a document. The document was outdated and was originally meant to be shredded, but Nathaniel had been in a rush when he left and had simply tossed it onto the coffee table in the reception area.

Seeing 'Zachery' reading it so intently, Nathaniel actually felt a momentary daze. He couldn't shake the feeling that he was looking at Christian. No... rather, Zachery and Christian were incredibly similar. But they had completely different personalities. How could they be so alike?

The two little ones in the office clearly hadn't noticed Nathaniel's return and were talking among themselves. 'Zachery' was still reading the document. Mia leaned closer. "Can you even understand that?"

'Zachery' nodded. "It's not hard."

Mia took a serious look and instantly felt dizzy. Full of admiration, she asked, "That's not hard?"

"Yeah." 'Zachery' truly seemed unfazed. He spoke in a serious tone, "Though this document should be outdated. The quoted price on it doesn't fit the budget."

Nathaniel subconsciously raised an eyebrow. To think Zachery had such a sharp business sense.

Mia tilted her head, leaning in to ask, "Why?"

'Zachery' explained earnestly, "A plot of land quoted at forty-five thousand per square meter is a bit too high. You have to understand that land and houses aren't the same concept. Right now, both the profit margins and room for growth in real estate are declining. Buying the land for forty-five thousand and then building commercial housing on it carries too much risk."

Mia was surprised. "But aren't housing prices really high right now?"

'Zachery' shook his head. "It still depends on demand. In this area, at this location, if they're planning to build a high-rise over twenty stories tall with apartments over a hundred square meters each, then that means..."

Mia's head was spinning. She couldn't understand a single word of what the young master was saying. They were the exact same age, both five years old, so why did his words sound like absolute gibberish?

Nathaniel listened at the door for a while. 'Zachery' actually understood all of this! Had he specifically studied it? If it were Christian analyzing this contract so logically, Nathaniel wouldn't be surprised. But... as far as he knew, Zachery had never been exposed to any of this abroad. Furthermore, he wasn't interested in business. How did he know so much? A smile touched the corners of Nathaniel's lips. If Zachery was truly interested in this, there was no harm in teaching him a thing or two.

He was just about to step into the office when Mia suddenly dropped the contract, flopped back onto the sofa, and let out a frustrated cry. "Ah! I don't get it at all! Stop reading it. Why isn't Uncle Sloan back yet? I'm so bored, Young Master—"

Nathaniel's footsteps faltered, his head snapping up. He thought, "Young Master?"

Mia had never once called Zachery 'Young Master.' Yet, there had been many times when Nathaniel had heard her address Christian that way. Then, he noticed that the 'Zachery' on the sofa showed no surprise whatsoever at being called 'Young Master'!

'Zachery' turned around, his expression helpless. "If you're bored, want me to take you somewhere else to walk around?"

Mia's interest was instantly piqued. She bounced up from the sofa. "Where to?"

'Zachery' said, "The lounge, the break room, anywhere is fine. Oh, right, there's also an arcade here for the employees to decompress, but there might be people there right now. Do you want to go to the break room? There are lots of snacks."

Mia didn't doubt 'Zachery's words in the slightest and had zero objections. "Okay, okay, let's go quickly."

'Zachery' checked left and right to make sure no one was around, then led Mia out through another door in the office.

As their footsteps faded away, Nathaniel slowly closed his eyes. Zachery had only been to Evernight a few times; it was impossible for him to be this familiar with it. Yet this 'Zachery' knew exactly where the break room was without even needing to look at a map. Combined with 'Zachery's earlier analysis of that contract, a sudden hypothesis leaped into his mind.

BEEP BEEP BEEP. Just then, the intercom rang.

It was Luke White calling. Luke asked in confusion, "Sir, the fingerprint lock on the tower's back door was opened once today. But when I checked the security footage, I found that the person who used it was Mr. Zachery. Did you register Mr. Zachery's fingerprints as well?"

Nathaniel paused silently. "... " After a two-second pause, he gave a hum of affirmation. "I registered them. Leave it be."

"Understood, sir."

Hanging up the phone, Nathaniel gripped the receiver and chuckled softly. So, the situation was crystal clear now. Zachery and Christian had somehow managed to swap identities. This current 'Zachery' was actually Christian, which explained why he could open the fingerprint lock and why he was exceptionally familiar with Evernight Tower. He just didn't understand why these two kids would perfectly well swap identities out of nowhere.

Then, he remembered something else. Nathaniel suddenly recalled that Laura Jennings had plucked Christian's hair to run a paternity test for the two of them. He and Christian were undoubtedly biological father and son, which was why his aunt had sharply

reprimanded Laura Jennings once the results had come out. But thinking about it now... was the 'Christian' back then truly Christian himself? If Zachery and Christian had swapped identities without anyone noticing, then was the Christian whose hair got plucked actually Christian, or was it Zachery pretending to be him?

If it was Zachery... then didn't that mean... Nathaniel's heart skipped a beat, and an indescribable surge of emotion overwhelmed him. He planted both hands on his desk, his breathing ragged. If... if the person back then was Zachery, then that meant he and Zachery were unquestionably biological father and son! Zachery and Mia weren't just some unwanted burdens from a past relationship. They weren't Estelle's children with another man.

More importantly, it meant that Estelle hadn't set the fire to murder her two children back then! If Estelle hadn't intentionally committed arson, then... had it been a murder attempt? But if it was a murder attempt, why hadn't any evidence been found all these years? He had even received a video recording of Estelle—in it, she stated that she could no longer go on living and wanted to set the fire to end her life. Nathaniel's lips tightened into a thin line.

"Uncle Sloan~" Mia ran back in after finishing her snacks.

Nathaniel reigned in his emotions. "Shall I take you to find your mommy?"

Mia shook her head, waving the smart watch on her wrist. "Mommy said she's busy tonight. Uncle Sloan, let's head back first."

Estelle was busy tonight... For some unknown reason, Nathaniel was seized by a sudden impulse to go find Estelle right this second. He couldn't quite articulate what this feeling

was; he only knew that his heart was throbbing with a dull ache. He felt as if he would never see her again if he didn't go to her tonight.

"Mia..."

"Sir!" Luke White knocked and entered, his face etched with worry. "Chapman is having a heart attack."

Nathaniel's brow furrowed. "What happened?"

Chapter 122: It's on Fire! She Heard Nathaniel Sloan's Voice in the Fire

Luke White said, "Mrs. Sloan went to Imperial Crest looking for you, but you weren't there, so she took her anger out on Chapman. I don't know exactly what was said, but Chapman is now in the hospital. Mrs. Sloan followed him there and isn't letting him recover in peace."

It was Laura Jennings again. Nathaniel Sloan's eyes turned icy. "Understood. I'm heading to the hospital now."

At 7:00 p.m., Estelle Lockwood received a call from a client, setting up a last-minute meeting at the fabric market.

Estelle navigated through the labyrinth of fabric stalls until she finally reached the agreed-upon location. However, instead of her client, she found Noelle Lockwood. Estelle's eyes darkened, and she turned to leave immediately.

"Yara!" Noelle trotted over, looking thoroughly aggrieved. "Yara, I didn't expect to run into you here. I was in the wrong last time. Please don't be mad at me, okay?"

Estelle felt a wave of disgust, her stomach churning slightly. Before she could speak, several young people in flashy outfits stepped forward. "Noelle, is this Yara Lockwood?"

"Hey, Noelle is talking to you! Are you deaf?!"

"What's there to apologize for? It's not like she was hurt. Noelle, you're just too kind!"

Estelle had heard this kind of rhetoric a thousand times before; her ears were practically callous to it. Only... who were these people? She narrowed her eyes, briefly sizing up the speakers. It was obvious they weren't Noelle's usual socialite friends.

Noelle feigned helplessness. "Alright, stop it, you guys. Yara, they're my fans, so they can get a bit emotional. Please don't mind them."

So they were fans. How strange. Was Noelle out of her mind, choosing to meet her fans at a fabric market?

Just then, BEEP BEEP. Estelle's phone chimed twice. It was a message from the client, saying something had come up and he wouldn't make it. What a coincidence. Estelle's intuition told her something was wrong. The client had arranged the meeting, but Noelle had shown up instead, and then the client claimed to have an emergency.

Estelle's gaze sharpened. She turned to leave, only to be surrounded by the fans.

"Don't go, let's chat some more."

"Noelle went out of her way to make time for this, and you won't even give her the time of day?"

"Move," Estelle said, her tone freezing.

Looking at Estelle's face, Noelle's expression twisted viciously for a split second. But thinking about what was going to happen next, her mood instantly lifted.

"Yara Lockwood, I'm sorry for misunderstanding you before, but I was only doing it for your own good. Can you stop acting so defensive?"

Estelle's voice was calm. "What exactly do you want?"

Noelle smiled helplessly. "Fine, I'll be blunt. Yara Lockwood, please stay away from Nathaniel."

Estelle narrowed her eyes. Noelle shook her head. "You know that the Sloan Family is fueling the rumors online. Tell me, Mrs. Sloan and Chairman Sloan both despise you so much, yet you still insist on pestering Nathaniel. What's the point? Do you honestly think you can marry into the Sloan Family?"

Estelle laughed. "Miss Lockwood, from what position are you saying this to me?"

Before Noelle could speak, her fans yelled indignantly, "From the position of the future Mrs. Sloan, of course!"

"Have you no shame? Are you addicted to being the mistress?! Noelle is Mr. Sloan's rightful fiancée. If it weren't for you, they would have been married a long time ago!"

"Why don't you go die?!"

"Yeah, go kill yourself!"

Passersby began to look over.

Estelle sneered. BEEP BEEP. Her phone chimed, continuing its recording. "Since Miss Lockwood wants to be Mrs. Sloan so badly, why are you still a 'pending fiancée' after all these years?"

Noelle choked on her words.

Estelle continued leisurely, "Because Nathaniel likes pretty women. It can't be helped that Miss Lockwood's looks leave much to be desired; you simply can't catch Nathaniel's eye. Instead of blocking my way, you should spend your free time figuring out if that face of yours can still be saved."

Although Noelle was a major star, her "A-list" status was heavily inflated. It was entirely propped up by the marketing funds poured in by the Lockwood Group and the Sloan Group. With eight hundred trending topics a day, even a pig could become famous, let alone someone like Noelle, who excelled at playing the innocent victim. Her features were inherently plain. Forget the entertainment industry; she couldn't even compare to average, pretty civilians. Yet Noelle held a grudge against anyone better-looking than her. The reason she had set that fire back then was simply because "Estelle Lockwood" possessed outstanding beauty, so even when condemning her to death, Noelle wanted to destroy her face.

"You!" Noelle gritted her teeth.

Estelle pocketed her phone and turned to walk away. Suddenly, screams erupted around them.

"Ah, fire!"

"Oh no, it's a fire! Run!"

"How did a fire start? What about all these fabrics..."

Estelle whipped her head around. The flames were spreading like wildfire. Her pupils contracted sharply as if she had been thrust back to five years ago. If a fabric market caught fire, the consequences would be unimaginable.

Everyone was scrambling to escape. Estelle instinctively searched for an exit, but she was suddenly shoved backward.

"Push her back inside!"

"Don't let her out! It's best if she burns to death!"

"Noelle, let's get out of here!"

A wave of sheer euphoria washed over Noelle. "Yara, I didn't want things to come to this either. But who asked you to be so ungrateful? Now, you can just die in the fire!"

"Oh, and don't worry. The outside world will just assume this fire was your doing. Tsk, tsk, how pitiful. Even in death, you'll be cursed and reviled!"

Noelle fully displayed her vicious side, yet her fans didn't stop her. Instead, they found it deeply satisfying. To them, Noelle committing arson and murder was perfectly justified, and dying at her hands was an honor!

Guarded by her fans, Noelle fled outside. Estelle clutched her chest, coughing twice. The blistering heat seemed intent on swallowing and destroying everything in its path, bringing out a sheen of sweat on her forehead. The scene unfolding right now felt like an exact replica of what had happened five years ago. Killing her once wasn't enough for Noelle; she was actually going for a second time! The first time was in the hospital, and the second was here in the fabric market. She was lucky the first time that there were no other casualties. But what about now?! Noelle was showing absolute disregard for human life! Unfortunately, she no longer had the strength to dwell on that...

"Sir, you can't go in there! It's too dangerous!"

"Get out of my way!"

Estelle's mind grew hazy, but a man's voice suddenly pierced through the fog. Was she hallucinating? How could she be hearing... Nathaniel Sloan's voice?

Nathaniel had gone to the hospital, only to find Laura Jennings throwing an unreasonable tantrum at Chapman, who begged him to take her away. Yet, for whatever crazy reason, Laura threw herself onto the hospital floor, making a scene and accusing her son of being unfilial. Nathaniel originally intended to personally arrange for bodyguards to escort Laura back to the Sloan Family home, but he was suddenly hit by a sharp pang in his chest. It felt as if something terrible was happening—as if he would regret it for the rest of his life if he didn't make a decision this instant.

So, for the first time, Nathaniel ignored Laura's hysterics. He also turned a blind eye to Chapman's request to stay at the hospital. He marched straight out the hospital doors, tracked down Estelle's location, and drove there at breakneck speed.

He never expected that the moment he stepped out of his car, he would be greeted by a raging inferno.

Chapter 123: Nathaniel Sloan Quietly Waits by Her Bedside

There was no sign of Estelle Lockwood anywhere, and her phone went unanswered. Nathaniel Sloan's chest heaved with panic. The wail of fire engines approached, accompanied by the complaints of bystanders. "How did a fire break out? What terrible luck today!"

"Are you hurt? My god, a fire at the fabric market! With all that cloth, the flames won't die down anytime soon... What on earth happened?"

"I heard it was arson! Someone was supposedly pushed to the brink and tried to commit suicide."

"What a psycho! If they want to die, couldn't they find a quiet place to do it?!"

Nathaniel clenched his fists. As the flames devoured everything, it felt as though time had reversed to five years ago. He hadn't been able to find Estelle then, either. His wife had been trapped in the fire, while he was helplessly held back outside. Back then, all he could hear were the complaints of doctors, nurses, and patients' families.

"What exactly is going on with the patient in Room 204..."

"Rumor has it she was jealous of the superstar Noelle Lockwood and decided to end her life."

"Could she have picked somewhere else to commit suicide? This is a hospital!"

"Apparently, that pregnant woman who killed herself... her husband never even visited her. He stayed by Noelle Lockwood's side the whole time."

"If you ask me, she had it coming..."

Nathaniel snapped his eyes open. He had missed his chance once; he absolutely would not miss it a second time! The deeper he went, the fiercer the blaze became. Nathaniel pushed forward, step by step. He remembered that the room where Estelle was meeting her client was just ahead. As long as he—

"Nathaniel, is that you?" A figure rushed out. Noelle Lockwood's face was streaked with tears, weeping piteously. "Nathaniel, you came to save me... I knew you would. Let's get out of here, hurry." She had already arranged for reporters to be waiting outside. The moment Nathaniel carried her out of the burning building, the trending topics would explode. Then, everyone would know that Yara Lockwood had trapped her in the fire, and Nathaniel had disregarded his own safety to rush in and rescue her!

Nathaniel's expression darkened. He roughly shoved her aside and continued walking deeper into the flames.

"Nathaniel!" Noelle grabbed his sleeve, her eyes brimming with tears. "It's so hot in here, I can barely breathe. Take me with you. There's no one else inside..."

"Nathaniel, don't go any further, it's too dangerous! I just came from over there; there's really no one left, I promise. Let's leave now, you can't get hurt..."

"Shut up!" Nathaniel snapped coldly.

Noelle trembled all over, tears streaming down her face. "Nathaniel, you won't save me? Do you want to watch me die?"

"Where is Yara?" Nathaniel demanded, his tone dripping with hostility as he enunciated every word. When he heard about the fire, knew Estelle was trapped, and then saw Noelle at the scene, the memories of five years ago had flooded back! But time was of the essence. Without waiting for Noelle's answer, he turned and marched straight in.

"Nathaniel, Nathaniel! How can you be so cruel? Why don't you care if I live or die? If you go save Yara, what about me?!"

"We're childhood sweethearts! If you don't save me, I'll die right here! Nathaniel, if I die, do you have any idea how the public will crucify Yara?!"

At that moment, Nathaniel's disgust for Noelle reached its absolute peak. He tapped his phone twice, and soon after, firefighters rushed in to drag Noelle away. Then, amidst the ruins, he saw Estelle lying on the ground. Her eyes were tightly shut, and she lay completely motionless.

Nathaniel's heart leaped into his throat. Moving faster than his mind could process, he vaulted over the obstacles without a second thought and pulled the woman he loved most into his arms, giving her a hug that was five years overdue. Without pausing for even a single second, Nathaniel scooped her up and swiftly carried her out.

Meanwhile, social media trends, national news outlets, and major platforms blew up instantly. An intentionally set fire sent shockwaves across the internet. Coupled with the fact that superstar Noelle Lockwood was among the injured, public opinion spiraled into a frenzy, keeping the topic pinned at the top of the trending lists.

[The arsonist is completely heartless! Severely punish the perpetrator!]

[If the fire department hadn't arrived in time, I shudder to think what the casualty count would be!]

[Starting a fire in a fabric market? Do they have any conscience at all?]

These comments were relatively normal, but from then on, anything involving Noelle sent her fans into a rabid frenzy.

[Noelle is hurt! Which goddamn bitch did this?! Go to hell, go to hell, go to hell!]

[I heard someone tried to commit suicide and trapped Noelle before doing it, wanting Noelle to die with her!]

[A few fans were with Noelle at the time. The woman who started the fire is named Yara Lockwood!]

[I'm going to doxx her!]

[Isn't Yara some kind of psychologist? How can a person like that be a doctor? Why didn't that bitch just die sooner?! If she wanted to die, why couldn't she just hang herself? Why did she have to drag Noelle down with her? What was her motive?!]

[Our Noelle is so noble! One of her lives is worth ten of Yara's worthless ones! How dare she! Lowlife! Peasant! The Lockwood Group needs to blacklist Yara immediately!]

[It reminds me of five years ago. Another bitch set a fire to kill herself and dragged Noelle into it. Can't all these bitches just go to hell?]

[If the police do nothing and don't sentence Yara to prison, I'll commit suicide along with my entire family!]

[Me too! I'm a teacher. If Yara doesn't get prison time, I'll kill all my students first and then we can all go together!]

Occasionally, random passersby would leave quiet comments.

[Noelle Lockwood's fans, calm down. Didn't the authorities say they're still investigating the cause of the fire? That Yara woman is still in a coma, and the police haven't even said she was the one who started it. Don't go cursing out the wrong person.]

[You're using your lives, as well as the lives of your families and students, to threaten the police into a conviction? Are you insane? What if it really wasn't Yara? This is the definition of a witch hunt.]

Very quickly, the passerby's comments were swarmed by Noelle's fans. Many even sent abusive private messages, cursing him to die.

[How can you empathize with an arsonist? Are you an arsonist too? Despicable, despicable! Go to hell, go to hell, go to hell!]

[Anyone who hurts Noelle deserves to die! Who the hell are you to compare yourself to Noelle? The lives of everyone in the world combined aren't as important as Noelle's!]

[It was Yara! It was Yara! Whoever speaks up for her, I curse them to burn to death too! Burn in the lowest level of hell!]

The passerby received over eighteen thousand hateful replies and a flood of private messages. He had no choice but to silently delete his posts.

But... he had been right. If Yara really had started the fire, the police would have announced the results immediately. Instead, even after investigating her, they continued to state that the cause of the fire was currently undetermined and under investigation. However, there was no reasoning with the rabid fans of a trending celebrity.

Estelle's studio faced a massive boycott. Noelle's fans repeated their old tricks—slander, verbal abuse, sending people to block the entrance, and splashing paint on the doors. As a result, the studio's employees couldn't commute safely, plunging Star Group into turmoil once again. Henry Kendrick had no choice but to give all the employees a few days off.

The online abuse never ceased; in fact, it only escalated. Even the hospital where Yara was admitted was besieged by fans, disrupting the patients' normal treatments and rest.

Two days later, Estelle still remained unconscious. Nathaniel sat quietly by her bed, keeping watch. Worried that she would see the online vitriol when she woke up, he had removed all phones, laptops, and similar devices from the room. But after two days of waiting, she showed no signs of waking up.

Chapter 124: This Fire Won't Be Hastily Closed Like the One Five Years Ago

Nathaniel Sloan's fingertips gently traced her brows and eyes, landing on a tiny scar at her temple.

The scar was barely noticeable, usually hidden by her hair. Zane Grant had said it was a post-surgical scar from plastic surgery. However, after reviewing her medical files, Nathaniel discovered that this scar had two layers—meaning she already had a scar there before the surgery.

How did she escape that fire five years ago? How much suffering had she endured? How much of her body was burned for her to have no choice but to undergo plastic surgery? And five years ago, he hadn't been by her side.

Nathaniel slowly closed his eyes. "Estelle Lockwood..."

The two children who Noelle Lockwood claimed had burned to death were currently alive and well. The Estelle who Noelle claimed had wanted to commit suicide had returned five years later, and the very first thing she did was acquire the Lockwood Group. And Christian, whom Noelle claimed to have saved through immense hardship, actually despised her completely.

The Lockwoods claimed they were never biased, yet they weren't even willing to properly investigate the fire that supposedly killed their own biological daughter. In the end, they pinned all the blame on Estelle and hastily closed the case.

Was Noelle telling the truth? Did Estelle really want to end her own life back then? And...

Nathaniel suddenly remembered the phone call he had with Estelle right before that fire.

Back then, when Noelle and Laura Jennings went on a trip, Noelle was assaulted and became pregnant. She didn't know who the father was, yet she insisted on keeping the baby. To compensate Noelle, Laura publicly claimed that the child belonged to Nathaniel, all to protect Noelle's reputation.

Noelle and Estelle were pregnant at the same time and were due at the same time. On that day, Noelle and Rose Lowell had shown up crying at his door, claiming that Estelle had pushed Noelle down the stairs, causing a miscarriage.

Reporters had surrounded the Evernight Group inside and out. With a major celebrity like Noelle showing up, the news spread immediately. Online and in real life, everyone was cursing Estelle as a useless Mrs. Sloan—a woman who, unable to win her husband's affection, took her anger out on her sister.

Nathaniel had no choice but to stabilize Noelle's emotions first and accompany her to the hospital. And then... one wrong step led to another.

At that time, Estelle must have been completely heartbroken. She had said goodbye to him over the phone, and after that, she truly disappeared from his life.

If she hadn't wanted to take revenge on Noelle and the Lockwoods, she might never have returned to the country. In that case, the only thing she would have ever left for Nathaniel was that single "goodbye."

Nathaniel's heart suddenly trembled.

"Nathaniel." KNOCK KNOCK. Zane knocked on the door from outside.

This hospital was Zane's private high-end facility. He had arranged the quietest premium VIP ward for Estelle, ensuring that rabid fans couldn't cause trouble here.

"I came to check on her," Zane said as he walked in. Checking the monitors, he frowned. "Logically, she should be awake by now. If she still doesn't wake up, I'm worried..."

He left the sentence hanging. "Over at the Lockwood family, Rose Lowell is highly agitated and wants to condemn Yara. Austin, on the other hand, hasn't made any moves."

Nathaniel's eyes turned icy. "Rose really is desperate to protect her daughter."

Five years ago, while Nathaniel was still insisting on investigating the incident, Rose had privately gone to the police. She provided a pile of so-called evidence and, speaking with a mother's tone, claimed that Estelle had long shown suicidal tendencies and had even said she would choose a crowded place to set a fire and kill herself.

With no other evidence, Rose and Noelle—these two so-called relatives—firmly insisted that Estelle brought it upon herself. Acting as the family of an arsonist, they went around apologizing and making amends to everyone involved. As a result, everyone believed that Estelle had set the fire to commit suicide. Otherwise, why would her mother and sister apologize and pay compensation?

After that, Estelle's reputation was instantly ruined. Even in death, she was cursed by countless people. Noelle even took the opportunity to publicly declare herself Christian's biological mother, hypocritically claiming she did it to protect the boy from getting hurt.

Zane also couldn't understand what kind of magic potion Noelle had fed Rose. "Also, Mrs. Sloan isn't backing down either. She caused a huge scene at Star, accusing everyone in the Star Group of being murderers..."

Nathaniel's gaze darkened. He enunciated word by word, "Find someone to send her back to Sloan Manor. If she refuses, tie her up and drag her back.

"And assist the police with investigating the cause of the fire. The ignition point was right next to Estelle... Yara and Noelle. Find out if anyone else was near them at the time.

"I believe she wasn't the arsonist. So, there has to be a clue."

Zane agreed. "Don't worry. This time won't be like that fire... getting brushed off so hastily."

After Zane left, Nathaniel checked his phone. Ignoring the countless notifications and the frantic texts flooding in from Laura Jennings, he read through the messages from Luke White. Then, he tossed his phone back onto the table and returned to the bedside.

She still hadn't woken up. Why? Did she not want to wake up?

He gently leaned over and pressed a cherishing kiss to her lips, resting his forehead against hers. "Estelle, wake up, okay?"

Meanwhile, in her subconscious, Estelle felt as if she were drifting through a void.

She couldn't see her surroundings clearly, only feeling that all the people and things were rapidly fading away. Raging flames engulfed her, making her feel like she couldn't breathe. This was the second time she had been surrounded by fire. The last time, she had barely escaped with her life. What about this time?

She realized this was a dream—she was trapped in a nightmare.

The hideous faces of Rose and Noelle appeared before her, while Laura's disgusted insults echoed in her ears. She saw doctors, nurses, patients' families, netizens, and bystanders all pointing at her and hurling abuse. They asked her why she set a fire in the hospital, why she couldn't just die cleanly, why she didn't just die when the Lockwoods abandoned her, and why she had to come back to harm others.

Estelle seemed to be transported back to five years ago, reverting to her timid former self.

What had she done wrong? She hadn't set the fire. She had returned to the Lockwood family only hoping for familial love. She had married Nathaniel because they had an arrangement. Noelle had usurped her place, stolen her husband, and tried to burn her to death. Why was she the one taking the blame in the end?

For the past five years, everyone had called her strong. She had fooled everyone else, and even herself. But it turned out that being thrown into a fire once again made her feel just as helpless and lost.

Estelle couldn't understand it. In her dream, she crouched down and hugged her knees. The tough facade she had maintained for five years shattered in an instant. Ever since her grandfather passed away, it felt as if she had been completely alone. No one would stop for her, no one would stay by her side, and no one would care for her or fight for justice on her behalf.

Meanwhile, in reality.

Old Mr. Kendrick and Old Mrs. Kendrick caught the earliest flight. Mr. Kendrick and Mrs. Kendrick paused all their work, and Second Young Mr. Kendrick turned down two variety show invitations. All of them rushed back to Crestfall as quickly as possible.

Christian's eyes were red from crying, Mia couldn't stop whimpering, and Zachery had red-rimmed eyes as he cried while simultaneously arguing with people online.

Nathaniel had a good idea of what was weighing on her heart. Resting his forehead against hers, he spoke slowly.

"Estelle, so many people care about you. You've never been alone."

Chapter 125: You Do All This, and You're Not Afraid of Retribution?

Estelle Lockwood felt as though she could hear someone calling her name. She had been drowning in darkness when a hand reached out to her.

Her eyes fluttered open.

The sight before her made her pause. She was clearly in a hospital room. The searing flames that had been burned into her vision faded away, replaced by warm sunlight streaming through pristine glass windows. As she took in her surroundings, her gaze landed on a familiar figure.

"Nathaniel?"

A genuine flash of relief and joy crossed Nathaniel Sloan's eyes. He stood up gently. "It's good that you're awake. I'll have Zane come do another checkup."

Estelle's throat felt terribly dry and raw, and she couldn't help but cough a few times. Zane Grant hurried into the room. "Don't worry, it's just smoke inhalation from the fire. You'll be fine after a few days of rest. I'll prescribe some medicine to soothe your throat."

Estelle let Zane hook her up to various medical instruments for his examination. "How long was I out?"

Zane paused before replying, "You weren't just asleep, you were in a coma. It's been three days."

Estelle was startled. "Three days? So the fire happened three days ago?"

Zane shrugged. "Yeah. Nathaniel risked his life charging in there to save you. If he hadn't, who knows what would've happened."

Estelle instinctively looked at Nathaniel. The voice she had heard back then wasn't a hallucination—he had really come for her. However, another pressing issue quickly came to mind. She narrowed her eyes. "What's the internet saying about the fire right now?"

Zane was about to answer but quickly realized it was a loaded question. Thankfully, Nathaniel smoothly and gently took over.

"People are saying all sorts of things online. The cause of the fire is still under investigation. For now, you just need to focus on recovering in the hospital."

Having finished his checkup, Zane promptly left the room.

Estelle pursed her lips and turned on her phone. A flood of notifications instantly poured in, but she ignored them, moving straight to open Twitter and a few news apps.

The next second, the phone was snatched from her hands.

Nathaniel's warm palm gently wrapped around her hand. "The circumstances of the fire are highly suspicious. The police are thoroughly interrogating everyone who was present at the scene. It'll take some time to get results, so don't worry."

Estelle looked up at him, her gaze resolute. "Nathaniel, I'm not that fragile."

She hated being kept in the dark; it made her feel powerless. She wondered what exactly she was so afraid of. Perhaps she feared a repeat of what happened five years ago, when Noelle Lockwood and the rest of the Lockwood family spread rumors online to frame her. Back then, she had been severely injured and comatose, unable to prove her innocence. But this time, she refused to be a sitting duck.

It didn't take a genius to figure out that Noelle had started the fire on purpose, all to force her into the exact same situation as five years ago.

Nathaniel's jaw tightened. "I said you can't look at it." He paused, his tone softening slightly. "At least, not right now."

Estelle had just woken up. He was terrified that the shock of the news might cause her to pass out again. He couldn't afford to lower his guard even for a second.

Estelle puffed out her cheeks, wanting to argue, but then she remembered how Nathaniel had risked his own life, charging into the blazing inferno to save her.

He had said he believed her. But if that was true, why did he let Noelle pin the label of "attempted suicide by arson" on her five years ago, allowing the case to be hastily closed?

"Mrs. Sloan, this is a hospital! Please do not disturb my patient's rest! Mrs. Sloan, if you keep making a scene, I'm calling security!"

Zane's furious voice rang out, breaking Estelle's train of thought.

A split second later, an even more ear-piercing screech shattered the peace.

Laura Jennings stood with her hands on her hips, her face contorted in rage as she screamed at the top of her lungs, "Patient?! Oh, a patient?! So what if I disturb her? She sets a fire and gets out completely fine, while my Noelle went deaf in her right ear because of it! She's a shameless, vile little tramp!"

"Get out of my way! I'm going in there to teach her a lesson myself! If she wanted to die, she should have just dropped dead! That vicious little bitch actually tried to drag Noelle down to hell with her!"

For the ten-thousandth time, Zane wondered how Ethan Sloan could have possibly fallen for such a shrew.

"Mrs. Sloan, the police haven't released their investigation results yet. It's too early to say if Yara Lockwood started the fire. You're storming in here accusing her of being a murderer—haven't you considered how humiliating this will be for you if it turns out she's innocent?!"

Mrs. Sloan felt entirely justified. "Not her? How could it not be her?! Noelle's fans all said it was her! I even asked Noelle, and she told me to just let it go and not hold it against Yara. Why the hell shouldn't I hold it against her?!"

Zane thought Noelle's words sounded incredibly manipulative. If she knew Yara hadn't started the fire, why not just come out and state it clearly? Instead, she purposely used vague, ambiguous language to mislead Laura and make the woman fight her battles for her.

Seizing a moment when Zane was distracted, Mrs. Sloan slipped past him and barged into the ward. "Nathaniel, what are you doing here?!"

Nathaniel lifted his gaze, his expression indifferent. "Where else do you think I should be, Mother?"

Mrs. Sloan shrieked, "Why aren't you by Noelle's side?! Do you have any idea how badly she's hurt? And it's all this vile woman's fault! You're actually staying here with her? What about Noelle?!"

As she yelled, Mrs. Sloan marched over and grabbed Nathaniel's sleeve, pulling at him with all her might. "I don't care! You need to go be with Noelle! She needs you so much right now!"

Unfortunately for her, despite her relentless tugging, he didn't budge an inch.

Sitting on the hospital bed, Estelle tilted her head, finding Mrs. Sloan's antics rather amusing.

She drawled slowly, "Ms. Jennings, what a strange thing to say. If Nathaniel isn't accompanying me, who else would he be with? Noelle is the sister of his wife. He has to avoid arousing suspicion. Do you understand?"

Ms. Jennings erupted like a lit powder keg. "Arouse suspicion?! Avoid what suspicion?! Who the hell did Estelle Lockwood think she was? Even when she was alive, she should have obediently stepped aside for Noelle! Besides, back then, whenever Noelle fell ill, Nathaniel would abandon Estelle to rush to her side! Why can't he do that now?!"

Estelle tapped her phone a few times, then cast a meaningful glance at Nathaniel, raising an eyebrow at him.

"Ms. Jennings, you coming all the way to this hospital to find me must have attracted quite a bit of attention, right? Or rather, you deliberately leaked the information about which hospital I'm staying at to Noelle's fans."

A flicker of guilt flashed in Ms. Jennings's eyes, and she looked away for a second. But she quickly regained her brazen confidence, planting her hands on her hips. "So what if I did?!"

Estelle let out a soft laugh. If she guessed correctly, the hospital entrance was probably swarming with camping reporters and fans right now. Because of Ms. Jennings's actions, the fans had discovered her location. They would undoubtedly swarm the place under the banner of "getting revenge for Noelle." Furthermore, the majority of the mob would likely be minors.

If, during the chaotic shoving, they accidentally killed her—a woman who had just survived a massive fire—it would merely be chalked up as a tragic accident. Given that it would be the collective action of a group of minors, the criminal charges would likely be incredibly light.

It was a brilliant calculation, except for one thing. The security at this particular hospital was so formidable that even if ten times as many fans showed up, they wouldn't be able to breach the doors. They would be stuck fuming outside.

"Ms. Jennings, doing all of this... aren't you afraid of retribution?"

Ms. Jennings looked as though she had just heard a hilarious joke. She sneered arrogantly, "Why should I be afraid of retribution? The only one who's going to suffer retribution is you! Who told you to start that fire? You'll die a miserable death!"

Estelle tilted her head again. "Ms. Jennings, do you know what high society thinks of you these days?"

Chapter 126: Nathaniel Sloan Opens the Car Door for Her, "My Heart Aches Only for You.

The opinions of high society? Of course Laura Jennings had heard some of them, and none of them were good. Even the socialites she usually hung out with had started avoiding her. "I don't want to know!"

Estelle Lockwood acted as if she hadn't heard her resistance. "They all say that even though you are the matriarch of the Sloan family and Nathaniel Sloan's biological mother, your true identity is actually Noelle Lockwood's—" She paused. "Dog."

It took a moment for Laura to process the words, but when she did, she flew into a violent rage. "What did you just say?!"

Estelle lifted her chin slightly. Nathaniel stopped the furious Laura, leaving her flailing wildly a meter away from the hospital bed.

"Be reasonable, Ms. Jennings. I'm not spouting nonsense. Who told you to act without any regard for the Sloan family's dignity or Nathaniel's reputation, only caring about Noelle?"

"Noelle said I started that fire, and you just believed her. You brought her fans and reporters here to corner a patient like me. When the truth finally comes to light, Ms. Jennings, have you considered the consequences?" Estelle said.

Laura inexplicably shivered. She was actually frightened by Estelle!

"Y-You're just making excuses! You were the one who started the fire. Noelle would never lie to me!"

Estelle smoothed her hair. "Why don't we make a bet? If I started the fire, I'll kneel and apologize to Noelle. If this fire has nothing to do with me, Ms. Jennings, you will kneel and apologize to me. Do you dare?"

Still fuming and trusting Noelle completely, Laura immediately puffed out her chest. "Why wouldn't I dare?!"

Estelle nodded and looked at the man beside her. "Did you hear that?"

Nathaniel, Zane Grant who was outside the door, and the group of doctors all fell silent for a long moment.

They wondered what was going on inside Laura's head. Estelle was clearly prepared when she proposed the bet, yet Laura actually accepted such terms all for Noelle's sake.

Nathaniel's expression remained calm as he coldly raised his eyes. The next moment, Laura's phone rang. Ethan Sloan furiously ordered her to get back to the Sloan family home and to cut all ties with those fans.

Although Laura was reluctant, her mood improved at the thought that it wouldn't be long before Yara Lockwood would have to kneel and apologize to Noelle.

After Laura left, the fans outside the door were dispersed by the police. The trending topics online quickly exploded once again.

Noelle's fans had gone to cause trouble for Yara. While some netizens felt the fans had crossed the line, within the fandom itself, they believed those dozens of fans who rushed to the hospital were carrying out justice.

Seeing Estelle scrolling through Weibo again, Nathaniel felt a slight tightness in his chest. "...Do you really want to read that?"

Estelle read the insults directed at her, looking completely unfazed. "Is that all you're going to ask me?"

Nathaniel lowered his eyes. "What else does Miss Lockwood think I should ask?"

Estelle drawled, "For example, reprimanding me for being too harsh on your mother. Telling me I should respect my elders, that I shouldn't have proposed that bet. And asking

where the Sloan family would put their pride if I really made your mother kneel and apologize."

Nathaniel looked at her intently. After a long while, the man finally spoke in a hoarse voice. "I won't."

Estelle didn't catch on right away. "You won't what?"

"Do whatever you want to do. I won't stop you, much less have any objections." Nathaniel glanced at Estelle's phone. "If you release the recording and ruin Laura's reputation, the Sloan family will naturally worry about it. It has nothing to do with me."

Estelle blinked.

Nathaniel's bond with Laura as mother and son was clearly different from what she had imagined. She remembered her aunt vaguely mentioning that the relationship between Laura and Nathaniel wasn't like that of an ordinary mother and son.

But why did Nathaniel always side with Laura and Noelle in the past, no matter what happened? It was because of this that she, as Mrs. Sloan, had been disappointed time and time again.

Just as she was lost in thought, Zane suddenly burst in without knocking, his face looking grim. "Nathaniel! The Lockwood Group has decided to hold a press conference tomorrow!"

Nathaniel's gaze darkened sharply. If the Lockwood Group held a press conference before the police had even identified the arsonist, everyone's attention would be on them. Speculation regarding the culprit's identity could be entirely manipulated by the Lockwood Group! Nathaniel knew exactly what their goal was in holding a press conference at this time. A surge of hostility suddenly rose within him.

Estelle, however, wasn't surprised in the least. It would be a miracle if Noelle didn't use this opportunity to viciously trample her. "What time is the press conference set for?"

Zane answered instinctively, "Huh? Two o'clock tomorrow afternoon..."

Estelle nodded. "Did the Lockwood family invite me?"

Zane was astonished. "You knew about that too?"

This was the exact reason why Zane had rushed in so frantically! The Lockwood Group's Weibo account had posted the time of the press conference and even included a specific line: 'We cordially invite Ms. Yara Lockwood to attend.' Wasn't this making it obvious that they wanted to pin all the blame on Yara?! Moreover, Noelle's fans were bound to be at the venue. If the fans acted impulsively and ended up hurting Yara, who would take responsibility?

Estelle curled her lips in a sneer. "Truly their usual tactics."

Zane didn't catch that clearly, but Nathaniel's fingertips curled inward. He knew that the 'usual tactics' she referred to meant what happened five years ago.

Estelle didn't care at all. "It's fine. I'll be there tomorrow."

"But..." Zane wanted to say more.

Nathaniel stood up, his gaze calm. "I'll go with you."

Zane was shocked. "No, with the current situation..." With Yara being treated as the culprit and having no way to prove her innocence, what was the point of going? To be someone's punching bag?

At the Lockwood family home, Rose Lowell grumbled, "Why invite that bitch Yara over? She's the one who started the fire and caused Noelle to lose hearing in her right ear. Oh, my poor daughter!"

"Mom, Yara looks so much like my sister, after all, and Nathaniel and Christian are also protecting her... We can't push things to the absolute limit," Noelle gently consoled her. She sighed, acting as if she were swallowing an immense grievance all by herself.

"Tomorrow, as long as Yara admits her mistake, I'll forgive her and urge my fans not to give her trouble..."

Rose hugged Noelle, weeping bitterly. "Noelle, you're far too kind!"

Austin Lockwood, on the other hand, hesitated for a long moment before asking seriously, "Noelle, are you absolutely sure that Yara was the one who started the fire?"

A trace of malicious resentment flashed through Noelle's eyes, accompanied by a guilty conscience, though she maintained her pitiful facade. "Dad, of course it was Yara. I saw it very clearly. Do you not believe me?"

Before Austin could reply, Rose interrupted, "What do you mean by that? Our daughter has suffered such a great injustice, and you're still questioning her!"

Austin looked at Noelle's tearful expression and felt he was overthinking things. "Alright, Dad will help you tomorrow too. I'll make sure Yara apologizes to you."

Noelle curled her lips. Apologize? How could that be enough! What she wanted was for Yara to lose her reputation entirely and die in utter despair!

The next day, at 1:50 PM. The press conference was scheduled to begin at two o'clock. By 1:50, the venue was already packed with a sea of people, with reporters and fans surrounding the area three layers deep.

Nathaniel parked the car in a hidden corner. Estelle stared calmly straight ahead. When Noelle appeared on stage, escorted by bodyguards, she slowly smiled.

"Mr. Sloan, arson is no small matter... Since Noelle dared to do this, I won't hold back. You won't feel sorry for her, will you?"

Nathaniel opened the car door for her. "I only feel sorry for you."

Estelle curved her lips and narrowed her eyes, watching the three people looking like a happy family on the stage. It was time for revenge.

Chapter 127: The Arsonist Wasn't Yara Lockwood...

The press conference officially began.

Noelle Lockwood stepped onto the stage, drawing the attention of everyone present.

Fans screamed from the audience as camera shutters clicked incessantly. Noelle bowed deeply to the crowd. "I apologize for taking up everyone's time. The main purpose of today's press conference is to discuss compensation for the fire with Yara."

Her fans were filled with righteous indignation. "Noelle, why should you have to pay compensation? You're a victim too!"

"Our Noelle has lost hearing in her right ear! It's all because of that Yara!"

"And she has the nerve to hide who-knows-where, pushing our Noelle into the line of fire! People who don't know the truth might even think Noelle started the fire!"

"Get Yara out here!"

"Get Yara out here!"

The voices from the crowd grew louder and louder. Having achieved her goal, Noelle feigned a worried expression and looked off to the side. "Yara, everyone is just a little emotional right now. Please don't mind them..."

Only then did the crowd realize that Yara had been there all along!

The fans' fury surged. A fan in the front row grabbed a plastic water bottle and, without a second thought, hurled it viciously at Estelle Lockwood's head!

A few fans exchanged tacit glances. Whatever the case... Noelle's manager had told them they were minors, and there was safety in numbers. Even if Yara died, she deserved it!

Estelle calmly dodged the projectile. The next moment, bodyguards stormed in from the right and forcibly dragged away the fan who had thrown the bottle.

Estelle gave her a meaningful look. "Miss Lockwood, this is a press conference being broadcast live. With so many people watching, it wouldn't be a good look to let your fans run amok, would it?"

Noelle sensed something was off. Today's press conference was clearly arranged by the Lockwood Group, but she didn't recognize those bodyguards. Could it be...

No, impossible. With Yara's ruined reputation, there was no way Nathaniel would still protect her!

Forcing herself to calm down, Noelle squeezed out a smile and said deliberately, "Please don't be angry, Yara. My fans didn't mean it. It's just because..."

She trailed off, looking utterly helpless, as if she were shouldering all the suffering in the world by herself. Then, she turned to the fans in the audience.

"Thank you all for your concern. I'm fine. I invited everyone here today to let you know that as long as Yara apologizes to me and to everyone who suffered losses in the fire, I will forgive her." Noelle played the part of an understanding, magnanimous, and considerate victim perfectly. "As for the compensation, I believe Yara definitely won't refuse either."

"Yara, please, apologize now."

A dark glint flashed through Noelle's eyes.

She knew there were reporters live-streaming the event right now, not to mention hundreds of marketing accounts on standby across the internet. As long as Yara apologized—the moment she opened her mouth—those accounts would launch an overwhelming smear campaign, branding Yara as a heartless monster who endangered people's lives.

Having been in the entertainment industry for so many years, she knew exactly how to manipulate public opinion. Just as she had driven Estelle Lockwood away in the past, she could use the exact same tactics to destroy Yara now.

However... ten seconds, twenty seconds, thirty seconds...

A full minute passed, but Estelle didn't move an inch.

Noelle bit her lip, deliberately stoking the crowd's anger. "Yara... it's just an apology. It's nothing much. Compared to what those who were injured went through, all you have to do is say you're sorry. Are you really unwilling to even do that?"

"I'm sorry, Yara, I really don't mean to force you. But I'm just worried that if you stubbornly refuse to apologize, you might end up going to prison.

"We've known each other for a while, and I just can't bear to see..."

"I will not apologize." Estelle calmly cut Noelle off.

The venue fell dead silent for two seconds before the crowd erupted in outrage!

Noelle's eyes turned red, and she swayed slightly on her feet. "Yara, why would you..."

"Why should I apologize for something I didn't do?" Estelle lifted her gaze, a half-smile playing on her lips. "If Miss Lockwood insists that the arsonist apologize... then you, of all people, should know exactly who started that fire, shouldn't you?"

A flicker of guilt crossed Noelle's eyes, but she quickly regained her confidence. She wondered how Estelle could possibly find out. It was impossible! So what if she had arranged for someone to start the fire? She had already bribed people to destroy all the security footage!

"Yara!" Rose Lowell shrieked as she charged forward. "Do you have any conscience left?! Noelle was severely injured because of you! She's giving you a chance to turn over a new leaf, and this is the attitude you show her?!"

"Oh, my poor daughter! What sin did she commit in her past life to run into someone like you?!"

The fans were equally enraged, burning with a fury that made them want to swallow Estelle alive.

With reddened eyes, Noelle lowered her head and wept silently, as if tacitly confirming Rose's accusations.

Watching Rose play the part of a fiercely protective mother, Estelle couldn't help but laugh. So this was her wonderful "mother."

"Miss Noelle Lockwood," Estelle drawled, having sufficiently enjoyed the mother-daughter duo's little performance. "I've always been curious. What makes you so sure I was the one who started that fire?"

Noelle pursed her lips, looking both helpless and utterly devastated. "Yara... you were right next to me at the time. I saw it with my own two eyes."

"Is that so." Estelle nodded. "So, the reason the entire internet is calling for my head and your fans are telling me to go die is all because you saw me commit arson with your own two eyes. However..."

Noelle's heart suddenly clenched. She wondered what was coming next. What on earth was Yara trying to say?!

"However, as coincidence would have it, I managed to recover a piece of security footage." Estelle chuckled softly and snapped her fingers. Moments later, the security footage from the mall on the day of the incident actually appeared on the massive screen behind them!

Everyone watched as the video showed Noelle and a few of her fans surrounding Yara. Right at that moment, a short distance away from them, a man in black used a lighter to ignite some pre-placed alcohol-soaked cotton and tossed the kindling onto a pile of nearby fabric!

Then, in a matter of seconds, flames shot into the sky!

This...

Everyone froze. The entire venue fell into a deathly silence.

Estelle unhurriedly broke the quiet. "Miss Lockwood, you saw it with your own two eyes?"

Those words—"with your own two eyes"—were like a resounding slap across Noelle's face!

The security footage captured the scene with absolute clarity. The fire had absolutely nothing to do with Yara! Yet Noelle and so many of her fans, who had been right there at the scene, still dared to spout the utter nonsense of having "personally witnessed Yara start the fire." What kind of malicious intentions were they harboring?!

If it weren't for this footage, if all the evidence had actually been destroyed in the blaze... wouldn't Yara have been forced to bear the brunt of this baseless accusation forever?!

Noelle's face turned deathly pale. Her earlier smugness and composure vanished in an instant, and she teetered on her feet.

"This... the arsonist wasn't Yara at all!"

"How could Noelle possibly mistake that?!"

Chapter 128: Face-Slapping Noelle Lockwood, How Do You Explain Yourself

No one had expected the truth to come out so quickly. From start to finish, this fire had absolutely nothing to do with Estelle Lockwood!

Noelle Lockwood's throat constricted in waves, rendering her completely speechless as cold sweat poured down her forehead.

"How could this be?" she wondered. "Where on earth did Yara get that surveillance footage?"

Estelle smiled and parted her lips. "Miss Lockwood, do you still want me to apologize now?"

The person who started the fire wasn't Yara... Of course, there was no need for an apology!

Noelle's lips were deathly pale. It took all her strength to squeeze out a smile. "It was... It was my misunderstanding..."

"Since you know it was a misunderstanding," Estelle said flatly, "how do you plan to handle the harassment and attacks your fans have subjected me to these past few days?"

Noelle's eyes brimmed with tears, and her whole body trembled as if she were the most pitiful person in the world.

"That's enough from you!" Rose Lowell stepped forward with her hands on her hips, roaring. "Who knows if this video is even real? Maybe some bitch forged it on purpose to frame our Noelle! Our Noelle was born fortunate and attracts jealousy. Some people will do whatever it takes to drag her down!"

Noelle's fans instantly gained confidence. "Yeah! Yara must have faked it to frame Noelle!"

"That bitch! She deserves to die a horrible death!"

"What did Noelle ever do wrong?"

Aside from the fans, the audience mostly consisted of reporters. A few of them furrowed their brows. "The police already issued a public notice. That man was the arsonist, and there are no signs of tampering in the video!"

The fans argued back stubbornly. "Then maybe Yara bought that man off! Either way, Noelle is absolutely innocent!"

"How could Noelle be at fault? You bastards better stop talking nonsense!"

"Besides, if Yara hadn't met up with Noelle there, how would Noelle have gotten hurt? It's Yara's own fault she got burned! She deserves it!"

Rose's face twisted with malice, wishing Estelle would drop dead right then and there. "She has a venomous heart! Bah!"

Seeing that public opinion was still on her side, Noelle couldn't help but reveal a small smile before putting on a hypocritical front. "Mom, don't say that. Yara is a victim too, after all..."

Rose scoffed disdainfully. "It's probably just a ploy to gain sympathy. Yara, let me tell you..."

"Look, what's that?" a reporter in the audience suddenly exclaimed. "Are those... transfer records?!"

Upon hearing the words *transfer records*, Noelle's face paled slightly. She subconsciously tried to stop it. "This has nothing to do with the press conference. Someone, turn it off quickly..."

Before she could finish, someone gasped in shock.

"Wait, the recipient's name matches the arsonist in the police report!"

"Someone paid that man to start the fire?"

"And the sender, Rosalie Carter... I-I remember Noelle's manager is also named Rosalie Carter..."

As soon as those words fell, a dead silence swept through the venue. As the manager of a major star like Noelle, she naturally wasn't a nobody. Almost everyone knew that her manager's name was Rosalie Carter!

"Wh-what does this prove..." Rose choked out. "Even if someone paid that man to set the fire, it... it doesn't mean it's Noelle's manager! There are so many people named Rosalie Carter. Wh-what makes you think it has anything to do with Noelle?!"

The more Rose spoke, the more emboldened she became. "Maybe you've just offended too many people, and they wanted you burned to death! You brought this upon yourself! You even dragged my Noelle down with you. Oh, Noelle, you've suffered so much!"

Estelle's lips curled up. "It proves nothing? Miss Noelle Lockwood, the reason I appeared at the fabric market that day was because President King of Apex Enterprises invited me to meet. Coincidentally, on the morning of the fire, this very account named Rosalie Carter transferred one million dollars to President King."

Estelle waved her phone, and an audio recording played aloud.

"Ms. Carter, bringing Yara to the fabric market... can I ask why?"

"Don't worry about that. Just bring her there. You don't need to show up yourself; I have my own arrangements."

"Alright, Ms. Carter, I'm only agreeing to this out of respect for you. If Yara comes looking for trouble later, you have to back me up."

"Relax. It's hard to say if she'll even have her life to come looking for trouble."

The venue practically exploded. "Rosalie Carter bought off the arsonist, and then had President King deliberately lure Yara there?"

"No matter how you look at it, it was premeditated!"

"The official Star account just posted another video!"

"My god... Noelle deliberately tried to kill Yara, didn't she?!"

The video came from a security camera with audio. The crowd watched as firefighters and Nathaniel Sloan conducted search and rescue operations in the blazing fire. Right then, Noelle stumbled out and desperately blocked their way.

"Nathaniel, save me! There's no one left inside..."

"Nathaniel, Yara ran out ages ago. Save me...

"How can you be so heartless? Why won't you save me? Is Yara really that important?! Nathaniel, Nathaniel... you can't leave! You can't leave!"

A few surveillance videos and a couple of transfer records were all it took. With the truth laid bare before their eyes, what was left to misunderstand? All the color instantly drained from Noelle's face!

Estelle sneered coldly, stepping closer and closer. "Noelle Lockwood—

"Your manager paid off an arsonist and deliberately lured me to the fabric market. When the fire broke out, your fans blocked me and wouldn't let me leave. After the fire started, you purposely claimed there was no one left inside. And after it was put out, even though you knew full well I had nothing to do with it, you still announced to the public that I was the culprit.

"And now you're telling me you don't know anything, that you're innocent, and that I deserve all of this. Is that right?"

The reporters were filled with righteous indignation. "She knew perfectly well that Yara was still in the fire, yet Noelle deliberately held back Mr. Sloan and the firefighters. It's obvious she wanted Yara dead!"

"And she calls herself a major star? That's far too vicious!"

"The fire was clearly started by Noelle's manager, but she pinned the blame on Yara. Do you know how much abuse Yara has taken these past few days?"

"Exactly! The shop owners at the fabric market, the customers who were there, Noelle's fans—who didn't grit their teeth in absolute hatred of Yara? And look at how things turned out! The arsonist is someone else entirely! It was even orchestrated by Noelle!"

"What a brilliant move by Noelle. Not only did she almost get Yara burned to death, but she also dragged Yara's reputation through the mud. Meanwhile, as the true mastermind behind the fire, she reaped endless praise and public sympathy!"

"I can't believe such a despicable person exists in this world!"

"Hey, Noelle's fans! Didn't you say the arsonist deserves to die? Now that your master is the one who set the fire, shouldn't Noelle drop dead?!"

The fans stubbornly fought back. "Nonsense! It's a coincidence, definitely a coincidence! Noelle doesn't know anything!"

Tears welled up in Noelle's eyes as she shook her head frantically. "No, Yara, I... I was just too nervous at the time, so I forgot who actually started the fire. How could I ever try to hurt you..."

Suddenly remembering something, she turned her head in panic. "Nathaniel... Nathaniel, you know me. I've always been terrified of fire. If I really wanted to harm Yara, I would never choose this method. You know that, right?!"

Noelle's words were thick with underlying implication.

Chapter 129: "I Gave Her That Evidence."

She was hinting to Nathaniel that during the fire five years ago, she had risked her life to save Christian, which left her with psychological trauma.

So, how could she dare use arson to harm others?

Noelle Lockwood finished speaking, her eyes harboring a hidden glimmer of anticipation.

Estelle looked at Nathaniel with a half-smile, raising an eyebrow as she leisurely waited for his answer.

Nathaniel's face was ice-cold. "You wouldn't dare?"

Thinking he believed her, Noelle hastily said, "Nathaniel, of course I—"

"But I only believe in evidence." Nathaniel interrupted faintly, his voice slightly hoarse but devoid of any emotion.

Noelle clenched her hands into tight fists, gritting her teeth desperately to keep her face from contorting hideously.

"Why?!" she screamed inwardly. "Why won't Nathaniel help me? I already brought up the fire from five years ago. Why won't he help me?!"

"What should I do? I absolutely cannot admit that this fire has anything to do with me..." she thought.

Suddenly, Noelle's eyes flashed. She whipped her head around and viciously slapped her manager across the face!

"It was you! You lied to me!"

The entire venue fell dead silent.

Noelle acted as though she couldn't control herself, her face streaked with tears.
"Nathaniel, those fans back then were all sent by my manager. They said there was no one left in the fire, so naturally, I believed them. I truly didn't know that Yara was still inside!

"I never expected that this fire was intentionally set by Rosalie Carter. I'm so sorry to Yara, and to everyone... I'm sorry, it's all my fault..."

After speaking, Noelle abruptly turned back to Rosalie, silently signaling with her eyes, "What else do you have to say for yourself!"

Estelle let out a mocking sneer.

When she saw that the person who bribed the arsonists was the manager and not Noelle herself, she knew Noelle would pin everything on her. This manager was Noelle's right-hand woman who regularly helped her handle all sorts of dirty work. She was truly ruthless to throw her under the bus so easily.

Having been slapped out of nowhere, Rosalie was completely dazed. She wanted to deny it, but her entire body suddenly ran cold.

Her family still worked for the Lockwood Group, and Noelle had blackmail material on her. She... had to confess, whether she wanted to or not!

Rosalie's gaze darted away evasively. "Y-yes, it was me..."

Noelle let out a huge sigh of relief. Feigning sorrow, she said, "I understand now, Rosalie. At Aunt Iris's banquet, you were the one who prepared that counterfeit *Purple Sun Mountain Residence Painting*. Yara exposed you, so you harbored a grudge. Isn't that right?"

Rosalie gritted her teeth fiercely. "Yes..."

Noelle's eyes were red. "How... how could you do such a thing?"

Rose Lowell charged forward, punching and kicking Rosalie. "Noelle trusted you so much, yet you harmed her! It's all your fault! Nathaniel, the truth is out now. This... this truly has nothing to do with Noelle!"

The venue instantly quieted down.

After a long while, Nathaniel slowly raised his cold gaze. "You're saying that you were the mastermind behind this fire?"

Taking the blows, Rosalie gritted her teeth. She knew her value to Noelle, and she knew that even if she went to prison, Noelle would find a way to bail her out! Thus, she stubbornly insisted, "It was me. It was me. It has nothing to do with Noelle."

Nathaniel suddenly let out a light chuckle. "In that case, let's settle the accounts with Ms. Carter right now."

He casually raised his hand, and Luke White bowed slightly before speaking. "The area affected by the fire is quite large. Fortunately, the evacuation was timely, so there were no casualties. However, the direct property damage amounts to nine hundred million, and the indirect property loss is as high as three and a half billion. All of this..."

Luke paused. Before he could continue, Nathaniel spoke up.

"All of this will need to be compensated by you, Ms. Carter."

Rosalie stiffened, her eyes widening in sheer disbelief.

"So... so much?!" she thought.

She subconsciously looked toward Noelle, who guiltily averted her gaze.

Estelle was somewhat surprised by Nathaniel's actions. She blinked but said nothing.

Nathaniel continued, "Aside from that, this fire also requires compensation for the emotional distress of all the guests and shop owners present. That will be another massive sum.

"How much in assets does Ms. Carter currently hold? If you cannot pay off this money, the debt will be borne by your family."

Nathaniel paused, a half-smile on his lips. "I recall that Ms. Carter's family is quite well-off."

Rosalie sprang to her feet. "Ah! No, no!"

Nathaniel feigned confusion. "What are you saying 'no' to, Ms. Carter? Since you are the mastermind, you naturally have to pay the compensation. Oh, and by the way, there's also prison time awaiting you next."

Estelle curled her lips and chimed in, "That's right. You shouldn't hold onto any delusions, Ms. Carter. The entire country is keeping an eye on this case. It won't be that easy to get out. In fact, once you go in, you might never come out for the rest of your life."

Rosalie looked at Noelle once again, her eyes brimming with disbelief.

If she went to prison and could never get out, and if her family had to pay billions in compensation on her behalf, then what was the point of confessing to everything and taking the fall for Noelle?!

Upon realizing this, Rosalie sprang to her feet with a shriek. "Noelle Lockwood!! You promised me! You can't go back on your word! You can't just abandon me—AH!!"

Rose shouted in panic, "Somebody, drag her away! Quickly! Don't let this woman go crazy!"

True to her status as a superstar, Noelle's acting skills exploded. On the verge of tears, she sobbed, "Ms. Carter, what are you even talking about? You made a mistake yourself, yet you're trying to pin it on me. I... I misjudged you..." She broke down crying.

"Noelle, Noelle, oh my poor daughter! You've been so wronged!" Rose plopped down onto the floor, hugging Noelle as they both wailed loudly, acting as if the two of them were the real victims.

Rosalie was forcefully dragged away by the bodyguards. A flash of anxiety crossed Noelle's eyes, though her face maintained a weak and kind expression.

"Nathaniel, I truly don't know what Ms. Carter meant..."

Rose shielded Noelle behind her. "That's right, Nathaniel! This was all Rosalie's doing! It has nothing to do with Noelle! Just now... Noelle was just too anxious, which is why she mistakenly thought Yara was the culprit. In reality... Noelle is very kindhearted!"

As Rosalie's screams gradually faded into the distance, Rose felt safe again. Her tone couldn't help but carry a hint of resentment.

"All those transfers, the bribery, those videos—maybe they were deliberately released by someone with an ulterior motive to frame our Noelle! Since *certain people* are so capable, why couldn't they find out that Rosalie was the culprit? Why did they insist on dragging our Noelle down?!"

As she said this, Rose glared daggers at Estelle, making sure everyone knew that the "certain people" she was referring to was Estelle.

"Noelle only acted that way because she was too worried at first. But certain people..."

"Ms. Lowell," Nathaniel suddenly interjected. "I was the one who gave her that evidence."

The rest of Rose's words caught completely in her throat.

Noelle's expression changed drastically!

Estelle smiled. With an ice-cold voice, she said leisurely, "Ms. Lowell, the press conference is over. You may take Noelle and leave."

"However, even though Rosalie confessed, whether or not she is the true mastermind... I believe everyone here can weigh the facts for themselves."

Chapter 130: The Results of the Last Paternity Test Are Out

Noelle Lockwood gritted her teeth.

She was a massive star, the pampered daughter of the Lockwood family, and the future daughter-in-law of the Sloan family. Her reputation could not be ruined!

That's right, there was no evidence. There was no proof of anything Rosalie Carter had done! When she had given Rosalie the orders in person, she had specifically made her leave her phone outside. There were no recordings. Yara had no evidence!

However, seeing the increasingly suspicious gazes of the audience, Noelle gritted her teeth again and suddenly collapsed straight to the floor.

"Noelle!" Rose Lowell cried out.

The venue instantly devolved into chaos.

Rose wept bitterly. "Because of the fire, Noelle hasn't been able to eat or sleep for days. She has to rely on sleeping pills every night. She's been going everywhere to visit the

victims and negotiate compensation, and yet... yet you're all bullying her like this!" She burst into loud sobs.

The fans were also filled with righteous indignation, worked up into an absolute frenzy.

Estelle Lockwood scoffed, her gaze shifting mockingly. She knew it was impossible to completely convict Noelle today. However, securing a definitive conviction wasn't her goal right now anyway. After all, there was still another fire to settle the score over.

This time, Noelle had used her manager as a meat shield. Who would she push into the line of fire next?

Without another word, Estelle turned and left. Nathaniel Sloan cast a cold glance at the unconscious Noelle on the floor before turning to follow Estelle.

With Rose wailing and lamenting, the crowd gradually dispersed.

Outside the press conference venue.

Nathaniel caught up to Estelle. "Is Miss Lockwood satisfied with my performance today?"

Estelle stopped and raised an eyebrow. "Performance?"

Nathaniel smiled gently. "I said I believed you."

"Oh..." So that was what he meant.

Estelle gave him a profound look. "Mr. Sloan, whether I'm satisfied or not isn't important. What matters is whether the person you care about still has the chance to be satisfied."

If she hadn't been saved by the Kendricks five years ago, she would be dead by now. Nathaniel wouldn't even have the opportunity to ask her if she was "satisfied."

"Oh, and one more thing," Estelle added pointedly. "Although the mastermind is currently Rosalie, I haven't settled the score for the overwhelming barrage of PR articles these past few days that deliberately led netizens to suspect me."

With that, Estelle got into her car and sped off into the distance, leaving Nathaniel without a chance to reply.

Nathaniel rubbed his fingertips together. She was right; this score was far from settled.

At the Lockwood family home.

Noelle didn't feebly "wake up" until she was safely back at the house.

Looking at Rose and Austin Lockwood through tear-filled eyes, she whimpered, "Dad, Mom..."

"Oh, my precious daughter, hush now, don't speak. That wretched Yara just had to target you..."

Noelle maintained her kind-hearted facade. "Mom, Yara is a victim too. It's just my right ear... I'm afraid it will never recover."

"An internationally renowned ear specialist will be coming to Crestfall in a few days. I'll take Noelle to see her then," Austin interjected.

Rose had also heard of this ear specialist. Everyone spoke of the doctor with reverence. Rose had shared that sentiment at first, but upon accidentally discovering that the doctor was a woman, her respect had soured into disdain. A woman ought to stay home, serve her husband, and raise her children. Why was she out practicing medicine? Who knew if she actually had any real skill.

Austin furrowed his brows, seeing right through his wife's thoughts. "Put away those ignorant ideas of yours! That doctor is highly respected. Even I might not be able to book an appointment with her. Everyone has to wait in line! Right now, we have to find a way to get on her good side. Otherwise, do you expect Noelle to join the queue and wait for years?"

Rose clamped her mouth shut.

"Also, Noelle." Austin took a deep breath, finally voicing the question he had been pondering the entire way home. "Since this fire was set by your manager in collaboration with your fans, then what about five years ago?" He stared directly into Noelle's eyes. "Did Estelle's suicide really implicate you in that fire five years ago?"

Noelle's throat tightened, and her pupils shrank violently.

Five years ago... Why was her dad asking about five years ago?!

Estelle was already dead! Why were they bringing up a dead person again?! She was the true daughter of the Lockwood family. She was the treasured darling of her parents and grandparents. Could those shameless bitches who tried to steal her place just stay dead and gone?!

Rose shrieked, "Austin, why are you asking this?! What do you mean by that? Are you saying our daughter is lying?! If Estelle didn't set that fire, who else could it be? You can't possibly think Noelle deliberately tried to kill that country bumpkin!"

Austin didn't even glance at Rose. "Tell me, Noelle."

Noelle was incredibly nervous. She didn't know where she had made a mistake. Why was her dad getting suspicious? What gave her away?

Despite her inner panic, Noelle feigned surprise. "Dad... why would you ask that? I don't want to believe the fire five years ago was caused by Estelle's deliberate suicide either, but all the evidence pointed to it. If you think there's something suspicious about her death, why don't we track down the doctors and nurses from back then and ask them?"

She secretly rejoiced. Thank goodness she had already bribed and dealt with all the medical staff involved.

Austin stared intently at Noelle's face. After a long while, he finally looked away. "Alright, Noelle. I believe you."

Noelle breathed a heavy sigh of relief, though her hatred for Estelle only deepened. There had to be many people who still suspected her now. Perhaps it would be best to leak the events of five years ago...

Back at Imperial Crest.

As soon as Estelle returned, she was met with the red, teary eyes of her three little ones.

She hugged them one by one. "Alright now, Mommy's fine. I'm really fine, don't worry."

Zachery pursed his lips, his bright, dark eyes gleaming like glass marbles coated in a layer of moisture. "Mommy, we wanted to visit you at the hospital, but Grandpa Chapman wouldn't let us go. We missed you so much."

Estelle was briefly puzzled, but she quickly reasoned that Chapman was probably worried the fans and reporters lurking outside the hospital might hurt the children, which was why he had kept them from visiting.

"Mommy knows my precious Zachery was very worried, so how about we stop crying now, okay?"

Zachery whimpered softly. "Okay." He then clenched his little fists. "Next time that bad lady comes around, I'll definitely protect you, Mommy!"

Estelle's heart warmed. She shared some good news with the children. "By the way, Grandma Vance will be coming over in the next couple of days. Are you excited?"

Mrs. Kendrick, whose maiden name was Eleanor Vance, was an internationally renowned ear specialist who had been invited to Crestfall to attend a medical seminar.

"Yes! Oh, right, Mommy!" Zachery remembered something, his eyes lighting up. He pulled Christian over to his side and cleared his throat. "AHEM. Mommy, I have something to tell you!"

Estelle crouched down and looked at Zachery and Christian. Hmm? What was so important that he had to drag Christian over? Did it have something to do with Christian?

Then, she heard Zachery say, "Mommy, the results for the paternity test we did at kindergarten that time are out!"

That time at kindergarten...

Right, during that science popularization event at the kindergarten, Zachery had dragged her into taking a DNA test.

But what did that have to do with Christian?

Chapter 131: Liam Sloan: Bro, How About Some Self-Reflection?

Besides, her and Zachery's paternity test results were out. What was there to make a fuss about?

Zachery was clearly excited, rubbing his hands together. "Mommy, actually, back then with you..."

"Young Master, so you're here!" Mr. Chapman suddenly walked over, carrying a bedsheet. He said apologetically, "Young Master, the new servant didn't know better. They went into your room and soiled your bed, including the plush toy on it.

"It's quite dirty, and I'm afraid it'll be hard to wash clean. Do you want to go up and take a look?"

Christian's expression instantly changed.

Seeing Mr. Chapman arrive, Zachery didn't continue. Realizing something was wrong, he asked, "Young Master, is that toy very important?"

Christian's lips pressed into a tight line. After two seconds, he replied, "Daddy gave it to me. I'll go take a look."

Seeing this, Estelle Lockwood also followed him.

Zachery and Mia realized this wasn't a good time to bring up the test results. Zachery curled his lips, but Mia gave Mr. Chapman a meaningful look.

"Grandpa Chapman, you should go out less recently. Your face says you're about to hit a massive streak of bad luck."

Mr. Chapman knew Mia could read fortunes, but he didn't think much of it, simply smiling at the two little ones.

Mia snorted. Mr. Chapman's face indeed showed signs of impending disaster. What should have been a peaceful, worry-free old age was now turning into destitution and constant bad luck. Combined with her intuition when observing people, she felt something about Mr. Chapman had changed.

Zachery was still muttering softly, "What a pity. I guess there's no way to tell Mommy today..."

Mia was puzzled.

Was Grandpa Chapman's action just now meant to interrupt Zachery from telling the truth about the paternity test? Or was it really just a coincidence?

The next day.

Liam Sloan didn't know what to discuss with Nathaniel Sloan, having entered the study early in the morning.

Estelle, meanwhile, stood dazed outside the study.

Last night, when Christian saw the plush toy all dirty and even torn, his eyes turned red, and he had been in low spirits the entire night.

So Estelle decided to ask Nathaniel where the toy was bought, wanting to go and buy another one for Christian.

Unexpectedly, the door to Nathaniel's study hadn't opened once.

In the study.

The self-proclaimed love guru, Liam Sloan, was analyzing the situation. "Estelle said it doesn't matter if she forgives you. What matters is whether the person from back then is willing to forgive you.

"But Estelle is the person from back then. For her to say this... it's obvious she still hasn't let go of her past trauma!"

Nathaniel knitted his brows, his face practically screaming, "Isn't that obvious?"

Estelle didn't commit suicide back then. So why was there a suicide note and that video? What exactly did she go through, and why did she refuse to tell him?

Liam coughed twice. "Ahem. Nathaniel, listen to me.

"A person's trauma might stem from the scars left by their environment at the time. For instance, when the fire broke out five years ago, you didn't arrive in time. After the fire, you didn't find her either, so..."

BEEP BEEP BEEP.

Liam's phone suddenly rang. He glanced at it and saw it was a client from their law firm, so he gave Nathaniel a hand gesture.

"Nathaniel, I need to take this call first. Work is work," he said. "Hello? Yes, it's me. Hello, Ms. Seymour. Go ahead.

"Yes, I'm the best at handling divorce cases in our firm, and I've reviewed your case... What? You don't want any assets and just want a quick divorce? That won't do. If you walk away with nothing, wouldn't you just be letting the other party off easy?"

Nathaniel had no interest in listening to the private matters of Liam's client and intended to step out. Unexpectedly, Liam accidentally pressed some button on his phone, and Ms. Seymour's voice instantly connected to the study's Bluetooth speaker—

"Ms. Sloan! I really can't hold on anymore. No matter how I explain, he won't believe me. What else can I do? I just want to leave him."

"What's the specific situation?" Liam asked.

"We had three children five years ago," Ms. Seymour said.

Nathaniel's footsteps paused.

Liam subconsciously looked back at Nathaniel. "Uh, and then?"

"Back then, I was pregnant with triplets and went through unimaginable hardships to give birth to them. Yet, he actually suspected that my second son and youngest daughter weren't his biological children!" Ms. Seymour cried.

"What? That's going too far!" Liam couldn't help but glance at Nathaniel again, feeling as if their situations were eerily similar. "Please continue."

"Don't you think he's a total dumb—ass? I gave birth to the triplets all at once. How could two of them not be his? What's even more outrageous is that his family despised my humble background and actually wanted to give my eldest son to my cousin to raise!

"I knew his mother looked down on me, but it wasn't like I begged him to marry me, right? He was the one who insisted on marrying me with all his sweet-talking, yet now he's silently agreeing to his mother's actions! To the outside world, they claim my cousin is my child's mother. I can't even acknowledge my own biological child. What kind of bullshit is this!"

Liam was completely silenced.

He didn't dare to speak anymore.

Ms. Seymour, those who knew better understood you were seeking help for a divorce. But to those who didn't, it sounded like you were describing Nathaniel down to a tee.

The study plunged into an unparalleled, deathly silence.

Having finished her rant, Ms. Seymour asked, "Ms. Sloan, are you listening?"

"Yes, yes..." Liam replied dryly. "So, your current demand is that you're willing to walk away penniless, but you must take the three children with you?"

Ms. Seymour snorted. "Exactly! That piece of trash, I don't want him anymore!

"Ms. Sloan, tell me, what's the use of keeping a man like that? He goes out wining and dining, yet has the nerve to look down on me!

"You don't know this, but when I was pregnant, my cousin was also pregnant. My mother-in-law was so thrilled back then, acting as if my cousin was the one carrying her grandchild!

"Throughout my entire pregnancy, he never cared about me. When I gave birth, I was all alone!

"And him? He stayed by my cousin's side the whole time. I told him if they loved each other so much, he should've just married her instead! It made me look like an outsider!

"I should have divorced him right after giving birth. Then I wouldn't have been in so much pain these past five years. There are plenty of fish in the sea, so why should I get hung up on him!

"Ms. Sloan, tell me, wouldn't it have been better if I left five years ago? Isn't faking one's death a popular trope nowadays? I should've just taken my children and left. The scumbag, the bitch, and the wicked mother-in-law can go live with whoever they want!

"Damn it, I suffered such a huge loss! The more I talk about it, the more I regret it. If I could go back five years, I'd definitely walk away!

"Ms. Sloan? Ms. Sloan? Say something."

Liam was speechless.

Liam gently dropped to his knees.

He thought, "Ma'am, how am I supposed to say anything after that?"

In a dry tone, he joined Ms. Seymour in condemning the scumbag. After comforting her and hanging up the phone, he wanted to tell Nathaniel, "The person Ms. Seymour described is her husband. Nathaniel, it has nothing to do with you!"

But when he opened his mouth, it came out as:

"Nathaniel, the person Ms. Seymour described is exactly you. You are not a good husband!"

Chapter 132: Estelle Lockwood Goes to Buy Couple's Watches

It took two seconds for Liam Sloan to realize what he had just said. His mind reeled.

"No, wait, I didn't mean it like that! Haha, Nathaniel, just pretend I was talking out of my ass. Yeah, completely full of it."

To his surprise, Nathaniel Sloan just gave him a profound look. "Does this Ms. Seymour really want a divorce?" he asked, his voice hoarse.

Liam didn't understand why Nathaniel was asking about this, but he was just glad his slip of the tongue was being ignored.

"Well, definitely. Even though her husband keeps saying he loves Ms. Seymour, outsiders like us really can't see any love there. Ms. Seymour has been trying every trick in the book to get a divorce. Honestly, if it weren't for the children, she would have run off ages ago."

Nathaniel lowered his gaze, lost in thought.

After a long time, he finally spoke in a raspy voice. "Help her out. If the Draper family comes making a fuss, tell them it was my decision."

The Ms. Seymour who had asked for help had married into the Draper family, a prominent name in high society, which made the divorce difficult. However, with Nathaniel's help, things would be entirely different.

Liam fell silent. He wondered if Nathaniel was projecting his own situation onto hers.

He couldn't bring himself to say that out loud, however. After all, Ms. Seymour's situation was quite different from Estelle's. Ms. Seymour's husband was a genuine playboy who slept around with plenty of women, whereas Nathaniel was completely devoted to his wife!

Nathaniel was lost in his own thoughts, and the study plunged into silence. Liam cautiously broke the quiet to change the subject.

"By the way, Nathaniel, how did you get that surveillance footage?"

Estelle Lockwood, who was just about to knock on the door, overheard the question.

Nathaniel didn't hide the truth from Liam. "I restored it. The footage was destroyed, but the underlying files were still there. It just took time to repair, which is why it was delayed by three days."

Liam nodded in realization. "Right, you're definitely good at that sort of thing."

Estelle froze. Nathaniel had restored the footage himself?

But he had told her that someone else gave it to him, never once mentioning his own involvement. If Nathaniel had gone to such great lengths to recover the surveillance video, then perhaps what he said was true—he really hadn't been shielding Noelle Lockwood in this matter.

Remembering how she had stormed off immediately after the press conference, Estelle felt a flush of embarrassment spread across her face. She had clearly misunderstood him. What was she supposed to do now?

"Estelle?!" Liam opened the door after hearing a noise in the hallway. Startled, he quickly corrected himself, "No, wait, I mean Miss Lockwood!"

Estelle got straight to the point. "Where did you buy the plushie on Christian's bed?"

Nathaniel paused for a second before replying. "Celestar Commercial Center."

"Oh." Having gotten her answer, Estelle turned to leave. But suddenly, Liam's earlier words echoed in her mind: Nathaniel was the one who restored the video!

Estelle felt as if her feet were glued to the floor. She remained silent for a long moment before clearing her throat. She was just about to ask if Nathaniel wanted a gift while she was out shopping.

Before she could even open her mouth, she noticed that Nathaniel's wrist was bare. Her mind raced. "Where is your watch?"

The man lowered his eyes, his expression calm. "It broke."

Estelle's eyes darted around as an idea sparked in her mind. If his watch was broken, didn't that mean he needed a new one? Buying him a watch at the mall would be a perfect way to thank him!

Nathaniel raised an eyebrow as he watched her expression shift from hesitant uncertainty to a bright, blossoming smile. He wondered what was going on with her.

His usual watch was actually still in the walk-in closet. He had just grabbed a random one before heading out today, but Liam had pointed out that it was a couple's watch. That was when Nathaniel remembered the watch had been a gift from Laura Jennings. It was obvious whose watch it was supposed to pair with.

Even though he had only worn it once, Nathaniel had no desire to be associated with Noelle Lockwood in any way, so he had someone get rid of it immediately.

Estelle was a woman of action. She headed out right away. Before Nathaniel could even process what had just happened, Liam slammed his hand onto the desk with a loud BANG. "Nathaniel, this is great news! Really great news!"

Nathaniel looked at him. "What great news?"

"Did you see Estelle smile just now? She found out you threw the watch away, and she smiled!" Liam analyzed the situation with absolute certainty. "She definitely knew it was the couple's watch Noelle gave you. Hearing that you tossed it made her happy!"

"And now that she's headed out, she's probably going to buy you a new watch. In fact, it's highly likely she'll buy a couple's watch!" Liam slammed an imaginary gavel. "Nathaniel, she has feelings for you!"

Nathaniel was left speechless.

Hearing the phrase that she had feelings for him made him feel like things were taking a weird turn. Something about the logic felt strange. Was that really the case?

Still, Liam's words seemed to make a lot of sense.

Deciding to help Nathaniel out, Liam made a quick phone call to the Celestar Center.

Estelle headed straight to the Celestar Commercial Center.

After buying the plushie, she visited the men's watch section, only to find that several of the nicest standalone men's watches were out of stock.

A sales associate approached her with a recommendation. "Miss, are you looking for a gift for your significant other? You might want to take a look at this one. It's a newly released couple's watch featuring a sun, moon, mountains, and rivers motif on the dial. It's been incredibly popular."

Estelle's expression stiffened. A couple's watch? She shook her head. "I just need a single men's watch."

"Ah, well..." The sales associate looked troubled.

Just moments earlier, upper management had called and sent over a photo of Estelle. They had explicitly instructed the staff that if this woman came in to buy a men's watch, they were to insist that all standalone men's watches were completely sold out, and only couple's watches were available for purchase.

The sales associate feigned an apologetic smile. "You see, Miss, we're currently running a promotion on our couple's watches. You can get the pair for the price of a single men's watch.

"A lot of our customers buy the couple's set—they give the men's watch as a gift and keep the women's watch for themselves. As long as you don't say anything, no one will even know they're a matching set."

For a moment, Estelle actually thought that made sense. She picked up the "Sun, Moon, Mountains, and Rivers" watch and examined it for a while before shaking her head. "Never mind. The matching design on this couple's set is too obvious. I'll pass."

Through his earpiece, the sales associate heard his boss screaming at the top of his lungs, "Sell it to her! Sell it! If Miss Lockwood buys it, I'll give you a two hundred thousand dollar bonus!"

Taking a deep breath, the sales associate forced a bright smile. "Actually, Miss, this watch has a hidden dial feature. Just press right here."

Estelle moved her finger, and the face of the women's watch instantly transformed.

The sales associate maintained his smile. "See? This way, no one can tell it's a couple's watch. You can still give the men's watch as planned and keep the women's watch for yourself without it going to waste.

"And right now, not only are you getting the set for the price of a single watch, but this specific model is also discounted by twenty... er, eighty percent off! Yes, an eighty percent discount."

Cold sweat rolled down the sales associate's back. He thought their boss had to be out of his mind. Slashing the price of a multi-million-dollar watch by half and then knocking another eighty percent off? How was Miss Lockwood supposed to find this believable?

However, Estelle simply raised an eyebrow and gave a faint smile. "Let me listen to your earpiece for a second."

Chapter 133: Couple's Watches, Isn't This a Surprise?

The salesperson was rendered speechless. Before he could even process what was happening, he subconsciously handed over his earpiece. Unsurprisingly, Estelle heard the Celestar Commercial Center manager roaring through the device.

"Did Miss Lockwood buy it? Did she? If she doesn't want to buy it, we can just give it to her for free! Mr. Liam gave me strict orders. If I mess this up, I won't be able to explain it to him!"

Estelle raised an eyebrow. She returned the earpiece to the salesperson and took out a card. "I'm buying it. Here, swipe my card."

The salesperson was overjoyed. The manager also hurried downstairs. Just as Estelle was about to leave, he cleared his throat and offered a sycophantic smile. "Wishing you and Mr. Liam a lifetime of happiness together!"

The salesperson quickly followed suit. "Wishing you and Mr. Liam a lifetime of happiness together!"

Estelle was utterly speechless.

Amused, she weighed the beautifully packaged watch in her hand. She suddenly realized what they were misunderstanding. With a mischievous glint in her eyes, she asked the staff for a voice-recording greeting card and had the manager repeat what he just said into it. She then wrote a few large, flamboyant words on the card before asking, "You guys offer home delivery, right?"

"Yes, yes, we do."

Estelle smiled slyly. "Good. Deliver this to Imperial Crest for me."

...

Half an hour later, at Imperial Crest.

The couple watches were delivered straight to the door. Liam was shocked when he found out, but his shock was quickly replaced by the immense joy of knowing his life was spared.

"Nathaniel, what did I tell you? Estelle went to buy you couple watches! Look, here's your surprise!"

He silently praised his own brilliance for telling the manager to find a way to sell the couple watches to Estelle at a discount. Extremely satisfied with his masterful maneuvering, Liam looked at his brother like a puppy seeking praise. "Nathaniel, these are the couple watches she got for you. You should be the one to open them!"

Surprisingly, a flutter of anticipation rose in Nathaniel's chest. He wondered if her buying couple watches was a sign that she wanted to reconcile. Though his expression remained impassive, an undeniable joy blossomed in his heart, making his hands move a little faster as he unwrapped the gift box. Upon opening it, he found a greeting card resting on top of the watches.

Liam eagerly hyped it up. "Wow, there's even a card! Estelle really put a lot of thought into this for you!"

Nathaniel couldn't stop the corners of his lips from ticking upward. The watches were gorgeous, a completely different style from what he usually wore. Without any hesitation, he immediately took out the men's watch and strapped it onto his wrist. Only then did he contentedly open the accompanying greeting card.

Liam thought he was truly a saint. If it weren't for him, how could his brother and sister-in-law be wearing couple watches right now? He deserved to be enshrined in the hall of fame! But he didn't say a word. After all, he was just the kind of unsung hero who did good deeds without seeking recognition!

Liam looked expectantly at Nathaniel's face, and then—

"Wishing Mr. Liam and Miss Lockwood a lifetime of happiness together!"

An excited male voice blared through the recording, echoing loudly throughout the study.

At that moment, Liam felt as if he had just seen the Grim Reaper. Wait, wait! Wishing who a lifetime of happiness?!

Nathaniel asked coolly, "What is this?"

Liam was just as dumbfounded. He wanted to know what this was, too! Did that manager hate him so much that he decided to throw him under the bus?! At this moment, a certain Ms. Sloan, who did good deeds without leaving a name, quietly shattered into pieces.

After a long pause, Nathaniel adjusted his wristwatch, grabbed the women's watch to take with him, and slowly stood up. "I'm making a trip to the hospital."

"What are you going to the hospital for?" Liam was instantly alarmed.

"That world-renowned ear specialist is starting her visiting consultancy at the hospital today," Nathaniel replied, his lips curling into a faint smile. "It's only right that I go and welcome her."

Liam finally caught on. "Oh, right, Dr. Eleanor Vance. I heard Dr. Vance is no simple figure. Not only are her skills exceptional, but she also married into a super-wealthy family—I think it was the Kendrick Family..." He paused. Wait a minute. The Kendrick Family? Wasn't Estelle saved and adopted by the Kendrick Family five years ago? So that meant...

Nathaniel held the other couple's watch tightly in his palm. Without answering Liam, he walked out of the study.

Liam silently finished his thought—his brother was going to meet the parents!

...

Eleanor wouldn't be staying in Crestfall for long. She had come here primarily because she was worried about Estelle, and secondarily to attend an international otology seminar. Because of this, she was working as a visiting consultant at a relatively high-end private hospital.

When Estelle arrived, Eleanor looked at her with deep concern. "Estelle, come here and let me see how you're doing. You didn't get hurt anywhere, did you? Have you been examined?"

Nathaniel had already arranged a full-body checkup for her the very day she escaped the fire. "Don't worry, I'm fine."

"You always tell me not to worry. That's the only reason I agreed to let you come back and get your revenge, but look at what happened..." Eleanor couldn't help but scold her a bit before furrowing her brows. "Is something wrong with your ears?"

Estelle knew she couldn't hide it. "It's just a little inflamed, but it's not a big deal. You really don't have to worry. When the fire broke out this time, I didn't panic, nor was I afraid."

Having taken care of Estelle for the past five years, Eleanor knew her condition inside and out. In the beginning, Estelle would turn pale and her pupils would dilate just seeing the small flame of a gas stove, let alone recalling the massive inferno. Even though five years had passed, there was no way Eleanor could truly put her mind at ease. "I don't care. You're coming with me to do another checkup. And as for your ears—I'm an ear specialist. If there's really an issue, you have to tell me."

A warm feeling filled Estelle's heart. "I understand."

The hospital was very quiet, so the moment there was a commotion at the door, Estelle heard it. "What's all the noise outside?"

The doctor conducting her checkup curled his lips in disdain. "Someone wants Dr. Vance to treat them but refuses to line up properly. She's going on about how precious her daughter is and how the whole world needs to make way for her."

For some reason, Estelle felt that this domineering and unreasonable attitude sounded exactly like Noelle.

...

Outside the door.

A nurse jogged after Rose Lowell. "Ma'am, Dr. Vance is busy right now. If you need her, you can take a number and wait in line. You can't just— Ah!"

Rose spun around and slapped the nurse across the face without an ounce of hesitation. "Wait in line? What line? Don't make me laugh! Do you even know who I am?!"

The young nurse covered her stinging cheek. "I'm sorry, but you really can't go in... Dr. Vance is currently examining another patient..."

Rose immediately threw a tantrum. "What other patient?! Who is more important than my Noelle? My Noelle's life is more precious than all of yours combined! If anything happens to her, can you afford to take responsibility?!"

Nearby, Laura Jennings walked over, supporting Noelle. She had heard that they actually had to wait in line to see this Dr. Vance. What a joke! Noelle was the dignified heiress of the Lockwood Group, the very daughter-in-law Laura had her eyes on. How could she be expected to wait in line for a doctor like the rest of these peasants?

Laura raised her voice. "Which lowly wretch is Dr. Vance treating right now? Let me tell you, my son invested in this hospital! If you're not careful, I'll have all of you kicked out!"

The nurse gritted her teeth, realizing that this situation was beyond what a lowly nurse like her could handle. Just then, she turned around and saw Eleanor standing there.

Eleanor stared coldly at Rose. So this was Estelle's biological mother. Eleanor cherished Estelle more than anything, yet the girl's own mother was constantly throwing around words like "bitch" and "lowly wretch." Fine. She wanted to see exactly who the real lowly wretch was here.

Eleanor stepped right up to them, going entirely on the offensive. "I was wondering why I could hear a dog barking from so far away. Look here, whose dog is barking now?"

Chapter 134: Mrs. Kendrick Slaps Noelle Lockwood and Stands Up for Estelle

Rose Lowell paused for a moment before it suddenly dawned on her that this doctor in the white coat was insulting her!

She immediately lashed out. "Who the hell do you think you are?!"

The nurse used to work at Old Mr. Kendrick's hospital. Most of the time, she addressed Eleanor Vance as "Mrs. Kendrick." Flustered by the commotion, she reverted to the familiar title. "Mrs. Kendrick, I'm so sorry. I couldn't stop them..."

Before Eleanor could speak, Rose suddenly spoke up. "Mrs. Kendrick?" She seemed to connect the dots, sharply raising her voice. "So you're that Mrs. Kendrick who has been protecting Yara!"

Laura Jennings caught on immediately as well. "Oh, I see! No wonder Dr. Vance has been refusing to treat Noelle! It turns out she was instigated by you and that bitch Yara! Do you have any medical ethics at all?!"

The nearby doctors and nurses were so furious they almost laughed. Even the King of Heaven would have to register for an appointment at this hospital. A top-tier specialist like Dr. Vance was nearly impossible to book. If everyone just cut the line, what would happen to the actual patients? How did this have anything to do with medical ethics?

Eleanor casually tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. "Medical ethics is a concept exclusive to human society. It doesn't apply outside the realm of humans."

Rose struggled to understand what that meant at first. She furrowed her brows in deep thought, then her eyes suddenly went wide as she shrieked, "Are you saying we aren't human?!"

Laura trembled with rage. "You're just some lowly doctor! Do you have any idea who I am? You're asking for death!" She raised her voice. "I am the wife of the Head of the Sloans! The matriarch of the Sloan Family! Who the hell do you think you are, crossing me on my turf?!"

Eleanor raised an eyebrow. "Everyone here calls me Mrs. Kendrick. Do I really need to know who you are?"

The only title Laura had to throw around was "wife of the Head of the Sloans." That status might have been enough to intimidate ordinary people, but as Mrs. Kendrick, Eleanor wasn't fazed in the slightest. She didn't usually care to compare whose husband was more powerful, but since someone was shoving it in her face, she wasn't about to just roll over and take it.

"You... you..." Laura sputtered, clearly infuriated.

"Mom, Aunt Laura, please calm down." Only then did Noelle step forward with a gentle, helpless expression. She bowed to Eleanor, her tone sounding utterly sincere. "I'm so sorry, Mrs. Kendrick. My mother and my aunt are just too worried about me. My right ear sustained some damage during the fire last time. Although it had nothing to do with Yara... I am truly sorry for causing trouble for the hospital. It's fine. Dr. Vance can just see me in order. There is no need for any special treatment."

Her words were practically flawless. Contrasted with Laura and Rose's hysterical screeching, Noelle appeared even more gentle and understanding. A nearby doctor almost spoke up to comfort her.

However, Eleanor beat them to it with an icy retort.

"Miss Lockwood, your apology is certainly perfectly timed. You didn't apologize a second sooner or later. Instead, you waited until your mother made a massive scene and cursed out eight generations of my ancestors before finally stepping up. If you truly wanted to apologize, what exactly were you doing just now?"

"Furthermore, that fire had absolutely nothing to do with Yara to begin with. It was your manager and your fans who committed arson. If anything, you're the one bearing the most responsibility. Stop implying that you being trapped in that fire was Yara's fault!"

Eleanor heavily emphasized the word "your."

The realization suddenly hit the onlookers. It was true. Noelle had been standing quietly in the background the entire time. If she had wanted to stop them, she could have intervened long ago. Waiting until Rose finished her tirade before putting on such a hypocritical show—who was she trying to perform for?

And as for that fire, Yara was the only innocent party. Why was Noelle still trying to shift the blame onto her? If that wasn't deliberate, what was?

Noelle's face paled slightly. She wondered why this trick, which had always worked flawlessly in the past, was failing now.

"I'm so sorry, Mrs. Kendrick. I just couldn't process what was happening just now. I didn't know my mother would go this far for my sake. I'm sorry..." Tears streamed down Noelle's face.

Her eyes darted around slightly as an idea came to her. Yara was Mrs. Kendrick's adopted daughter. Since Mrs. Kendrick clearly doted on her own adopted daughter, wouldn't they have some common ground?

Noelle spoke with pointed intent. "Mrs. Kendrick, I am truly sorry. My mother was simply too worried about me... You might not know this, but I'm not the Lockwood Family's biological daughter. I'm just a lowly adopted daughter."

Rose began to bawl. "Oh, my poor daughter!"

Mrs. Kendrick looked at them in disbelief. She thought, "Why are they suddenly throwing a pity party? Are they insane? If you're so 'lowly,' then what about the true heiress you chased out of your house? Is she not lowly?"

Desperate to build rapport with Mrs. Kendrick, Noelle bit her lower lip slightly. "Mrs. Kendrick, you have an adopted daughter as well, so you must understand. An adopted daughter is rarely welcomed or truly valued in a family... I've always been overlooked in the past, which is why my mother got so worked up over my injury this time."

Rose chimed in, suddenly catching on. "That's right, Mrs. Kendrick! Yara is your adopted daughter, and Noelle is mine. Put yourself in our shoes—don't you think my Noelle is pitiful?!"

Mrs. Kendrick was practically laughing at the sheer absurdity of their logic.

The Lockwood Family had driven Estelle out entirely for Noelle's sake. Mrs. Kendrick's heart had ached for Estelle, which was why she had taken her in. To hear them tell it now, were Estelle and Noelle supposed to be the exact same type of "unpresentable adopted daughter"? Why exactly was Estelle left with no home to return to, unable to reunite with her biological parents?

How did this mother and daughter have the audacity to spout such shameless garbage?

Mrs. Kendrick scoffed. "Miss Lockwood, there is quite a difference between you and my Yara.

"First, my Yara didn't change her surname to Kendrick. Second, she hasn't monopolized the Kendrick Family's assets. And third, she has never caused any conflict with my biological children.

"However, I've heard quite a different story about you, Miss Lockwood. The biological eldest daughter of the Lockwood Family actually returned home, yet she was chased out simply because you didn't like her."

The surrounding nurses' expressions immediately shifted. Scandals involving wealthy families were always a juicy treat.

So, not only was this famous celebrity an adopted daughter, but she was also so jealous of the true heiress that she had her driven away! An adopted daughter chasing out the rightful heiress, only to turn around and cry about being "lowly"? Was she out of her mind?

Eleanor scrutinized Noelle, her gaze so sharp it could have pierced a hole right through her. "You may both be 'adopted daughters,' but my Yara has integrity and high moral character. The two of you are completely incomparable. If you can't grasp that concept, Miss Lockwood, I certainly don't mind teaching it to you."

Noelle's expression instantly froze. She never expected Mrs. Kendrick to show her so little respect in public!

She thought, "Who is she to call me unpresentable? Why would she say I can't compare to Yara? So what if I look down on Estelle? So what if I think Estelle deserves to die? Every man for himself!"

Still needing to maintain her gentle, polite persona, Noelle had no choice but to swallow her pride. Gritting her teeth, she forced a stiff smile. "...I apologize, Mrs. Kendrick. I wasn't thinking things through just now... Thank you for your guidance."

"Mm." Eleanor nodded.

Normally, any reasonable person would reply with "you're welcome." But Eleanor didn't bat an eye. "You should be thanking me."

Noelle choked on her own fury!

The more Laura watched, the more outraged she became. They had brought Noelle here for medical treatment, not to be publicly humiliated!

"Talk all you want, but you aren't Dr. Vance! Are you, the esteemed Mrs. Kendrick, going to strong-arm the doctor into refusing us? I refuse to believe Dr. Vance won't treat our Noelle. My Noelle is so incredibly kindhearted—I'm sure Dr. Vance knows that!"

Having had her fill of putting them in their place, Eleanor signaled for security to throw them out.

Just then, however, she caught a glimpse of a figure out of the corner of her eye. Eleanor paused, her eyes narrowing thoughtfully.

It was Nathaniel Sloan. She wondered just how genuine Nathaniel's concern for Estelle truly was. If Nathaniel were forced to make a choice right now, what would he do?

Chapter 135: A Thorough Offense from the Beginning

Eleanor rolled her eyes. "Mrs. Sloan, with your lack of class, calling people bitches left and right, you're dreaming if you expect Dr. Vance to see you."

"You—!" Furious, Laura lunged forward, raising her hand to slap Eleanor!

"Nathaniel!" Noelle called out just in time. She looked fragile, her eyes welling with tears. "You're here."

Nathaniel?

Laura abruptly stopped her hand mid-air and turned around. Sure enough, she saw her son.

Her eyes lit up, immediately feeling emboldened.

Mrs. Kendrick had just insulted her in front of everyone. As her son, surely Nathaniel couldn't just stand by and not help his own mother, right?

Laura placed her hands on her hips, lifted her chin, and put on a haughty air. "Do you know who my son is? He's a shareholder of this hospital! All of you, get out of my way! Tell that Dr. Vance to come out here right now, or she can kiss her job at this hospital goodbye!"

Nathaniel's expression instantly turned cold.

While Laura was still throwing her weight around, Nathaniel's icy voice cut through. "I didn't realize my name carried so much weight that it allows you to act like a tyrant in a hospital."

Fully expecting Nathaniel to help her vent her frustration, Laura nearly choked on her breath when she heard his reprimand instead.

"Nathaniel, what do you mean by acting like a tyrant? It's these doctors who are being unreasonable! Noelle is in such a pitiful state. I brought her here to see a doctor, and they actually want me to take a number and wait in line? With my status, how can I be treated like those commoners out there?!"

"You don't know this, Nathaniel, but who knows what that Yara did! She actually coaxed Dr. Vance into refusing to treat Noelle and even had Mrs. Kendrick mock her! I just couldn't swallow this insult—"

Nathaniel's face grew increasingly darker. "Enough!"

Laura instantly snapped her mouth shut.

Nathaniel's cold gaze swept over Noelle. "The hospital has clear regulations: everyone must wait in line, regardless of who they are. This is a hospital. By making a scene here, do you want me to tear the hospital down just to vent Noelle's anger? Or do you want me to drive Mrs. Kendrick away and force her to apologize to Noelle?"

Unconvinced, Laura retorted, "The hospital belongs to you anyway! I can do whatever I want, and no one has the right to interfere! So what if you tear it down?!"

Noelle and Rose kept their heads down and remained silent, but it was obvious that the mother and daughter shared the same sentiment.

This was a hospital under Nathaniel's name. No matter how powerful the Kendrick family was, they would have to scram if told to.

Never mind whether this would affect the relationship between Evernight International and the Kendrick Group; in Rose's mind, Mrs. Kendrick was just a woman. How much of an impact could she possibly have?

Nathaniel's expression remained unchanged. "Point one: I am not the largest shareholder of this hospital. The largest shareholder is the Kendrick family. The only way to drive the Kendrick family away is if the hospital goes bankrupt and shuts down. Mother, do you truly believe Noelle is that important?"

Noelle's face turned deathly pale, but Laura remained stubborn. "It's just a hospital! So what if it goes bankrupt? How much money could you possibly lose? You're not short on money anyway!"

Nathaniel didn't even bat an eyelid. "The loss would be around ten billion. If you can afford to pay that sum, Mother, fine. I will announce Evernight's immediate withdrawal."

Laura's words instantly got stuck in her throat, and she looked sheepish.

Ten billion... Where—where would she get that kind of money? But she still wasn't willing to let it go.

"But what right does Mrs. Kendrick have to mock Noelle? Noelle is pure and kind-hearted; she just wanted to meet Dr. Vance. Yet Mrs. Kendrick claimed that Noelle had offended Dr. Vance. Isn't that pure nonsense? She's clearly trying to frame Noelle on purpose!"

Nathaniel coldly raised his eyes. "Nonsense? Mother, didn't you thoroughly offend Dr. Vance right from the very beginning?"

They had thoroughly offended Dr. Vance from the very beginning?

Laura was dumbfounded. It took her a long moment to process this before a sudden realization hit her. A horrifying thought darted into her mind, and her eyes widened in shock as she stared at Mrs. Kendrick. "You... you're..."

Eleanor drawled slowly, "Well, normally, as a doctor, I wouldn't refuse a patient. I fully intended to take a look at Noelle's ear.

"However, I don't have the best of tempers. Mrs. Sloan here has been cursing my Yara left and right, implying with every word that my Yara deserves to be a stepping stone for Noelle.

"You know how it is. As a parent, seeing your own child suffer an unprovoked disaster and then get insulted on top of it... it really puts me in a foul mood. And when I'm in a foul

mood, my medical skills tend to plummet. Once my skills plummet, who knows? Perhaps Noelle, who was only temporarily deaf, might end up permanently deaf after I treat her."

Her words echoed down the hallway, leaving Rose and Laura both furious and anxious.

Laura's face flushed red with anger. She wanted to hurl a torrent of abuse but ultimately swallowed it back.

Rose felt a deep disdain for Eleanor in her heart. She was just a woman; what gave her the right to become an internationally renowned expert?! But... but they said that only Dr. Vance could cure Noelle's condition. Then, then...

Rose's expression shifted repeatedly until she finally suppressed her disgust and squeezed out a fawning smile.

"It's a misunderstanding, Mrs. Kendrick. What happened just now was all a misunderstanding!"

"We just lost our heads out of concern. In truth, we care very much about Yara too! I know Yara got hurt and you're feeling terrible about it, but that fire really had nothing to do with Noelle! Noelle was a victim too!"

Eleanor felt disgusted. "She really knows when to yield," she thought. "To go to such lengths for an adopted daughter... how could she have the heart to indulge Noelle in burning her own biological daughter to death back then!"

Under Rose's expectant gaze, Eleanor spoke languidly, "Such a profound love for your daughter. I'm truly moved. It's not impossible for me to treat her."

Then, her tone shifted. "However, is Miss Lockwood's right ear truly deaf?

"Just now, I spoke softly on Miss Lockwood's right side, and she was actually able to hear every single word perfectly. Logically speaking..."

Eleanor paused, flashing a meaningful smile. "Logically speaking, if her right ear is completely deaf, she would instinctively turn slightly to listen clearly with her left ear before turning to face me.

"Miss Lockwood, would you like to take a hearing test? Since everyone is here, let's all go together. We can see just how severe this deafness in your right ear really is."

As Eleanor's voice faded, dead silence fell over the corridor.

Nathaniel raised an eyebrow. Mrs. Kendrick was vastly different from what he had imagined.

Noelle clenched her fists, beads of sweat continuously rolling down her forehead. She forced a facade of composure. "N-No need... I only go deaf occasionally. Most of the time, I-I can still hear."

"In that case," Eleanor said resoundingly, "Any ordinary doctor can treat your condition, Miss Lockwood. There's no need to waste public resources!"

With Eleanor putting it that way, who wouldn't understand?

The nurse who had been slapped earlier couldn't help but say sarcastically, "No wonder she's a big star. Her acting skills are truly stellar."

A doctor stifled a laugh. "Tell me about it. Just looking at Noelle, you can tell her ears are perfectly fine. To think the dignified Mrs. Sloan was actually played for a fool. It's hilarious..."