

Mommy, Daddy Has Already Regretted It

Nathaniel's footsteps paused. "A keepsake?"

Rose's face crinkled into a sycophantic smile. "Yes, it's a diary. The maids were careless and hadn't found it until now."

Nathaniel swept his gaze over the group. "Where is it?"

"Oh, what's the rush? The diary is right there, it won't grow legs and run away." Laura Jennings ignored her son's indifferent expression and warmly beckoned him. "Let's eat first. Come, Nathaniel, sit next to Noelle."

Noelle Lockwood stood up with a bashful smile, pulling out the chair beside her. "Nathaniel..."

The next moment, Nathaniel casually picked a random seat and sat down. Far from being next to Noelle, he was entirely out of arm's reach.

Noelle's face paled, her body swaying as if she might faint.

Nathaniel showed absolutely no regard for her feelings. "There's no need to eat. Mother just mentioned that Estelle's death anniversary is approaching. Having lunch with Estelle's sister would inevitably invite misunderstandings."

Noelle's eyes rimmed red.

"Nathaniel!" Laura immediately stood up. "Fine, you want to see the diary? I'll let you read it. See for yourself what Estelle wrote in it."

A slightly yellowed notebook was tossed in front of Nathaniel.

Nathaniel's gaze softened for a fleeting second before he slowly opened it.

Laura was still frowning. "Estelle begged you to take care of Noelle. Have you done that? In the past, you always had excuses to avoid marrying Noelle, but look now. Look at Estelle's own wishes.

"She clearly stated in her diary that by marrying you, she felt she had stolen Noelle's engagement. Plagued by a guilty conscience, she hoped to return the position of Mrs. Sloan to Noelle in the future.

"Nathaniel, I'm asking you. Estelle is dead; are you still going to refuse to fulfill her dying wish?!"

In the adjacent room.

Christian pressed himself tightly against the wall, listening to Laura's words.

"So Daddy brought Noelle into our home because of Mommy's 'wish'?" he thought. "How despicable! Mommy isn't dead at all. These people are spouting total nonsense! Mommy hates Noelle so much, why would she ever willingly hand over her engagement?"

Suddenly, Christian's small phone flashed twice. It was a phone his daddy had given him, specifically meant to ensure he could always be reached when he was out.

Just then, the butler sent a voice message. "Young Master, where are you? A lot of reporters have gone to Dewdrop Garden. I'm worried about you."

A gleam flashed through Christian's dark eyes. "A lot of reporters have come to Dewdrop Garden? What is there to report about at Dewdrop Garden today?"

Even with his five-year-old brain, it was obvious enough. Those reporters must have been called over by Noelle and his wicked grandmother.

However... Christian's eyes lit up. "They came at the perfect time!"

Inside the private dining room.

Nathaniel flipped through the diary at an excruciatingly slow pace, page by page. It was Estelle's handwriting. Judging by how much the ink had faded, it had likely been written five or six years ago.

There weren't many pages. They mostly contained Estelle's observations and experiences right after she had returned to the Lockwood family. And she had indeed written that she worried marrying him meant stealing Noelle's marriage.

It took no more than twenty minutes to read through the entire diary. Nathaniel gently traced the words with his fingertips.

Seeing that he had finished reading, Rose sneakily shot Laura a sycophantic look.

Laura cleared her throat. "Nathaniel, I can't control you anymore. I have no objections if you don't listen to me, but are you going to ignore Estelle's words too?"

"Five years ago, she wanted you to marry Noelle, but you refused. Now that we've found her diary... you've disappointed her for five whole years. Are you going to continue letting her down?"

"Besides, you and Noelle have known each other since childhood. You know her inside and out. She has given her whole heart to you, and she's both obedient and gentle. Take advantage of today to set a date for the engagement. It'll also serve as an answer to Estelle on her death anniversary."

Noelle pursed her lips into a faint smile.

"That's right," she thought. "Announcing my engagement to Nathaniel on that bitch Estelle's death anniversary would indeed be a fantastic answer. I must marry Nathaniel!"

Rose chimed in with a sigh of pity, "This is my daughter's dying wish, Nathaniel. To fulfill her sister's request, Noelle hasn't even considered marrying anyone else for the past five years. Do you... do you truly have the heart to let Estelle rest uneasily in her grave?"

Nathaniel let out a light scoff, his cold gaze landing squarely on Rose. "You want to fulfill Estelle's wish?"

For some inexplicable reason, a chill ran down Rose's spine under his stare. "Y-yes..."

"You really are quite fascinating, Mrs. Lockwood. When Estelle was alive, she never received an ounce of a mother's love from you. You showered all your affection and pampering on Noelle, the fake heiress. Yet now that she's dead, you're constantly clamoring about 'fulfilling her dying wish'."

Both Noelle and Rose instantly froze!

Rose's facade nearly crumbled. She let out a few awkward laughs. "That... That was indeed our failing. Estelle was inherently insecure and didn't want to get close to us, so we... we ended up neglecting her..."

"But she's passed away now. As her mother, how could I not be heartbroken? Because of that, I want to compensate her doubly!"

Nathaniel shot her a glacial look before turning directly to Laura. "Mother, I've told you before that I don't need you meddling in my affairs. It seems you haven't taken my previous warnings to heart."

Having been completely ignored, Rose's face stiffened in embarrassment.

Laura's expression faltered. This was her own son, yet he was openly declaring she had no right to interfere in his life. People already whispered behind her back, calling her a failed mother, but everything she did was clearly for his own good!

"Nathaniel, even if you won't consider Estelle, you have to think about Christian! Do you have the heart to let people keep whispering that he's a motherless child?"

"Look at Noelle. She's treated Christian like her own flesh and blood all these years. Plus, she's his aunt. She's the only one who will treat him this well. What if you marry someone else and they despise him?"

Treats Christian well, treats him like her own flesh and blood, and is someone Christian actually likes...

Somehow, Nathaniel found himself thinking of Yara.

He furrowed his brows sharply, forcing Yara out of his mind.

Noelle bit her lip. She couldn't let today's opportunity slip away. Steeling herself, she stood up and walked over to Nathaniel. "Nathaniel, I know you've always held misunderstandings about Mom, Dad, and me. You think it was my presence that made my sister lose hope in our parents and our family, leading to her early death...

"But my sister's passing was unavoidable. Because of that, Nathaniel, Christian deserves to have a complete family even more. Do you want Christian to follow in my sister's footsteps?"

Nathaniel's gaze darkened instantly.

Noelle's eyes flickered. "Nathaniel, Christian is only resisting me now because he's sick. Once he's better and starts wanting a mother, he'll naturally warm up to me..."

"Daddy!"

Before Noelle could finish her sentence, a childish voice suddenly cut her off. Everyone instinctively turned to look.

Christian pushed open the door and ran straight into Nathaniel's arms, acting as if he hadn't heard a thing. "Daddy, what are you all talking about?"

Chapter 32: The Three Little Ones Help Mommy Get Revenge

Everyone's expression froze. Why was Christian Sloan here?!

Nathaniel Sloan hugged Christian's small body. "What made you want to come to Dewdrop Garden for a meal? Who brought you here?"

Christian rolled his eyes slightly, though his face maintained that pure, innocent look. "It was Luke White. I saw you earlier, Daddy, so I told him to go back." After saying that, he turned his head, feigning curiosity. "Grandma and Aunt Noelle are here too?"

Laura Jennings reached out. "My darling Christian, come here, let Grandma give you a hug! Have you eaten? How about eating with Aunt Noelle?"

Christian's eyes flashed with a hint of disgust. He wondered if this bad grandma really had a screw loose, still trying to play matchmaker for his daddy and Noelle Lockwood at a time like this. However, this was exactly what he wanted.

Christian nodded. "Sure, but this private room is too small. I don't like it. Daddy, Grandma, can we go out and eat in the main dining hall?"

Noelle Lockwood immediately formed a plan in her mind. Although she didn't understand how this private room was small, if they went to the main hall, more people would see the scene of their "family of three" dining together. Thus, Noelle Lockwood smiled gently. "Mrs. Sloan, Mom, Christian isn't in good health. The ventilation in the main hall might indeed be better, so let's go there."

Rose Lowell and Laura Jennings naturally thought of the reporters they had called over. They had released news on Weibo saying Nathaniel was going to get engaged to Noelle. If the reporters could capture the scene of Noelle and Christian eating together now, Noelle would undeniably be Mrs. Sloan in the public's eyes!

Laura Jennings looked smug. "Nathaniel, even Christian wants to eat with Noelle, so don't try to stop us."

Nathaniel Sloan narrowed his eyes slightly, staring at Christian.

Christian flashed him a bright smile, then turned his head and whispered into his phone to Zachery, "Everything is set. I'm counting on you later, little hacker."

Meanwhile, at the hospital.

Estelle Lockwood had taken her medicine and fallen back asleep. Fearing they might disturb her rest, Zachery and Mia quietly exited the ward and stayed in the hospital corridor.

Young Mr. Sloan had said there were many reporters at Dewdrop Garden. He had already come up with a way to teach Noelle Lockwood a lesson and hoped Zachery could add fuel to the fire online when the time came.

Zachery, the genius little hacker of the Lockwood Family, expressed that this was absolutely no problem. He was fully prepared!

Just then, a man in a suit, in his forties or fifties, walked past them. Mia suddenly frowned and poked Zachery's arm. "That man looks so familiar."

Zachery nodded. He indeed looked very familiar. He suddenly gasped. "This is Mommy's scumbag father! The one who wanted the fake heiress over the true heiress, the one who told her to get an abortion for her own good, the one who called her inherently inferior and unworthy, and the one who forced her to give up her engagement to make her sister happy!"

Mia was speechless. She wondered if their mommy knew he had made up such a rhythmic chant. However, Mia quickly calmed down. "This scumbag grandpa probably wants to cause trouble for Mommy. I'll go find someone to help."

Zachery nodded, then swiftly typed into his chat interface with Christian: *[How to quickly play the innocent victim?]*

The entire Lockwood Family was full of two-faced manipulators, so he was going to beat them at their own game!

Meanwhile, back at Dewdrop Garden.

Christian Sloan, the master of playing the innocent victim himself, glanced at Zachery's message and expressionlessly ended the call. He then put on a sweet smile and chose the most conspicuous, central seat in the main dining hall.

"Daddy, let's sit here."

Nathaniel Sloan naturally had no objections. He sat down next to Christian. Noelle Lockwood was just about to sit on Nathaniel Sloan's other side when Christian suddenly spoke up. "Aunt Noelle, please sit next to me."

Noelle Lockwood felt a surge of joy. It seemed this little bastard was quite sensible and knew how to curry favor with her. She was already a celebrity, and combined with the fact that Laura Jennings frequently attended major social events, they were quickly recognized by the crowd.

The surrounding guests began to whisper among themselves.

"Are those Mr. Sloan and Young Mr. Sloan?"

"It must be. There's also Mrs. Sloan, Mrs. Lockwood, and Noelle Lockwood. Is this a family dinner?"

"The internet said they were getting engaged. I thought it was fake, but it looks like it's actually true."

"Why is the young master calling Noelle Lockwood 'Aunt'? Isn't she his biological mother?"

"Rumor has it that the young master was born to Mr. Sloan by another woman, but Miss Noelle doesn't mind and treats him as her own."

"That makes sense. It seems the young master really likes Noelle Lockwood too, otherwise he wouldn't have asked her to sit next to him."

The reporters bribed by Rose Lowell also began secretly recording videos. Some even stealthily started a live stream, all to let everyone know that Noelle Lockwood and Nathaniel Sloan were as close as a real family, and that Nathaniel Sloan's child only recognized her as his "mother."

Nathaniel Sloan naturally heard the discussions. He frowned slightly and was just about to speak when the food was served.

Knowing that reporters were filming, Noelle Lockwood naturally had to appear incredibly attentive. Her eyes flickered, and she prepared to stand up to serve Christian a bowl of fish soup. Even if she wasn't his biological mother, going to such lengths would surely earn her plenty of praise from the public.

And indeed, it did. Noelle Lockwood's fans had already started flooding the live stream comments, saying it was a true blessing for the young master to have such a mother.

However, someone was one step faster than Noelle Lockwood!

Seeing that she wanted to get up, Christian immediately stood up first. Because he wasn't tall enough, he shakily climbed onto his chair, took the soup bowl from the waiter, and placed it in front of Noelle Lockwood.

The little master of playing the victim spoke in a trembling voice, filled with equal parts eagerness to please and genuine fear. "Aunt Noelle, your soup."

The surroundings suddenly plunged into dead silence.

Nathaniel Sloan's brow furrowed sharply, his gaze sweeping over Noelle Lockwood like a sharp blade!

Noelle Lockwood was completely stunned. Wait, what was Christian Sloan doing?

Before she could react, tears had already welled up in Christian's eyes. As if he knew what kind of punishment awaited him, his entire body trembled in fear.

"Aunt Noelle, d-do you not like it? I'm sorry, I'm so sorry! I didn't know you didn't like this. I'll get you a different dish right away!"

Young Mr. Sloan's acting skills reached the absolute peak of his life. He picked up a piece of meat with his chopsticks and carefully brought it over to Noelle Lockwood's bowl. But at that exact moment, his grip slipped. SPLAT! The braised pork dropped right onto Noelle Lockwood's pristine white dress.

Christian's eyes instantly turned red, and tears fell like broken strings of pearls.

"WAAAH, I was wrong! Aunt Noelle, please don't hit me! I was really wrong. Grandma said I had to please you, but I'm so stupid. What should I do... Daddy, Daddy, I'm so scared..."

Nathaniel Sloan's expression darkened completely. He pulled Christian into his arms. "Christian, Daddy is right here. Don't cry."

Christian choked back a sob. "But when you leave, Daddy, Grandma is going to punish me again, and Aunt Noelle will hit me too. They... they all said Aunt Noelle is your future wife and told me I have to serve her well."

Nathaniel Sloan's eyes grew colder by the second, a storm brewing within their depths.

The onlookers were absolutely floored. They looked at each other in utter disbelief.

What in the world was going on?! Young Mr. Sloan's own biological grandmother was forcing a five-year-old child to wait on Noelle Lockwood hand and foot?!

Didn't Noelle Lockwood claim that she did her absolute best for the young master and treated him as her own? Was this what treating him as her own meant? Beating and scolding him constantly?

Just look at this! At dinner, he had to serve her soup, fetch her food, and worry sick about whether Noelle Lockwood liked it or not.

Seeing Young Mr. Christian acting like this, it was obvious he was no stranger to physical abuse! Was this really the kind of woman one would marry and bring into their home?

Nathaniel Sloan wiped away Christian's tears, his voice chillingly cold. "Noelle Lockwood, explain."

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Noelle Lockwood was losing her mind. What was this manipulative little brat doing!

Meeting the disdainful gazes of the people around them and Nathaniel Sloan's icy eyes, Noelle shuddered and hurriedly tried to explain, "Nathaniel, listen to me, it's not like that! Christian... Christian just likes playing games with me lately..."

Noelle was frantic, desperately trying to blame everything on "Christian playing games with her."

Christian curled his lip. The manipulative little brat decided to add fuel to the fire. With a slight tremble in his voice and the words "I was forced to do this" practically written across his face, he said submissively, "Mhm, yes, Daddy. I was just playing a game with Aunt Noelle. Please, everyone, don't misunderstand."

Nathaniel's expression darkened even further.

Sensing that things were going south, Rose Lowell stammered as she tried to smooth things over. "Nathaniel, this is a misunderstanding, it must be a misunderstanding! You've seen how well Noelle treats Christian on a daily basis. Besides, Mrs. Sloan is Christian's grandmother! There's no way Mrs. Sloan would mistreat Christian either, right?"

Laura Jennings suddenly snapped back to reality. "Right, this is a misunderstanding! Nathaniel, someone must have put Christian up to this. Don't be misled!"

Christian's tears began to fall one by one again.

The bystanders couldn't stand it anymore. "Mrs. Sloan, your grandson is crying his eyes out, and you're still calling it a misunderstanding! How can there be so many misunderstandings in the world?"

"I seriously doubt if Mr. Sloan is your son and if Young Mr. Sloan is your grandson!"

Laura seemed to have her sore spot poked as she raised her voice. "Of course they are!"

"If they are, then why can't I see your care for them? Instead, Noelle looks more like your daughter!"

"Exactly! If she loves Noelle so much, why doesn't she just marry her herself and cut out the middleman?"

"The Sloan family is a prestigious household, after all. How did they ever take a liking to her in the first place?"

"I don't get it either. Could it be that the Sloan family was drawn to her pettiness, her knack for stirring up trouble, her mean-spiritedness, and her vicious arrogance?"

"Well, then I sort of understand why Mrs. Sloan wants Noelle as her daughter-in-law."

"Because Noelle is even more petty, vicious, arrogant, and mean-spirited than she is. By letting Noelle marry into the Sloan family, it just goes to show that Mrs. Sloan isn't quite as terrible in comparison."

These remarks made both Laura and Noelle grind their teeth in anger.

Rose was truly dizzy with panic, speaking without thinking. "Nathaniel, they're all slandering my daughter! My daughter is kind-hearted by nature. How could she possibly bully Christian? It's all them..."

Nathaniel kept a dark expression. "Are you saying that Christian is lying?"

Rose felt as if she were being choked, instantly losing her voice. "No, no... I'm just, I'm just..."

"Enough already! Young Mr. Sloan is still so young and in poor health. How could you bear to abuse him? And to think Noelle constantly markets herself as a kind person, yet she could be so cruel to a child!"

"It's the inherited hypocrisy of the Lockwood family. Just look at the news and see what President Lockwood has been up to!"

"Gasp... President Lockwood caused a scene at the hospital for no reason, disturbed the patients' rest, and got kicked out? Is this really the CEO of a listed company?"

"Now I know why Noelle is both stupid and wicked. After all, she is the biological daughter of President Lockwood and Rose. The apple doesn't fall far from the tree!"

Noelle glanced at the news notification on her phone and nearly fainted. Heaven knew how badly she wanted to tell everyone that Estelle Lockwood was Rose's daughter, not her! Aaaargh!

As the farce came to an end, Nathaniel left directly with Christian.

Once they got in the car, Luke White spoke up. "Sir, there was a bit of trouble on Miss Lockwood's end. She might have been startled. Do you want to go over and take a look?"

Nathaniel massaged his temples. "Did Austin Lockwood go looking for her?"

Since Austin Lockwood was President Lockwood, Luke nodded.

Nathaniel secretly frowned. His intuition told him that the woman wouldn't allow herself to be bullied, but she was sick and running a fever...

The man said in a hoarse voice, "To the hospital."

Christian sat in his seat, secretly texting Zachery, when he suddenly heard Nathaniel call out, "Christian."

He immediately put his phone away. "Daddy."

Nathaniel didn't scold him. He simply looked at him with an impassive gaze. "Who taught you to put on that act today?"

He wasn't an idiot. How could he not see that Christian was deliberately scheming against Noelle?

Even though he had been caught, Christian wasn't afraid in the slightest. Meeting Nathaniel's eyes, he said frankly, "Aunt Noelle leads by example. I've seen it so much that I just picked it up. Daddy, do you want me to brew you a fresh cup of fake innocence?"

The driver and Luke White, who was in the passenger seat, almost burst out laughing.

Luke nodded inwardly. The young master was right. Noelle Lockwood was the absolute embodiment of fake innocence!

Nathaniel remained silent for two seconds, feeling somewhat helpless. "Learn something good for a change."

Christian curled his lip. "I can't do that. You letting Aunt Noelle 'take care' of me is just you wanting me to learn from her, isn't it? And this is only just the beginning."

Nathaniel didn't answer, simply narrowing his eyes. For some reason, his thoughts suddenly drifted to Yara.

If the woman taking care of Christian had always been Yara...

"Sir, we've arrived at the hospital," Luke suddenly spoke up.

Nathaniel pulled himself out of his thoughts and slowly stepped out of the car. "Christian, Daddy is going to go see Dr. Lockwood."

Christian immediately followed. "Daddy, I want to go too!"

At the same time, he sent Zachery a text message, "Zachery, we're here."

Zachery excitedly replied, "!!! Is your daddy here too? Great, great, great. Hurry up and come over. The wife-chasing groveling arc has officially begun!"

Christian replied with a speechless ellipsis, "..."

What groveling arc? No, wait, why was there a groveling arc? Just what had happened at the hospital anyway?

Half an hour ago.

"Sir, Miss Lockwood just took her medicine and went to sleep. You can't go in," the nurse urged.

A male voice responded, leaving no room for argument, "Step aside. I'm just going to say a few words to Miss Lockwood."

The nurse looked conflicted. "But Mr. Sloan ordered..."

"I am Nathaniel's father-in-law. If you delay our family matters, are you going to take responsibility?"

The nurse wanted to say something else, but Estelle had already been woken up. Shaking off her grogginess, she focused her gaze and got a clear look at the person who had arrived—Austin Lockwood. Her biological father. This was her first time seeing Austin since she returned to the country.

Estelle waved her hand, signaling for the nurse to leave first. Then, looking up with a half-smile, she said, "President Lockwood, trespassing into someone else's hospital room seems a bit ill-mannered, don't you think?"

Austin's pupils shrank.

Even though Rose had mentioned earlier that Yara looked a lot like Estelle, he had mentally prepared himself for it. But in this moment, he was still shocked! How could they look so identical?!

She was Estelle... No, impossible. Back then, they had watched Estelle burn to death. It absolutely couldn't be her. The dead couldn't come back to life!

A gentlemanly smile hung on Austin's face. "Showing up uninvited is my fault. However, Miss Lockwood, I came over just to give you a quick reminder. My daughter is going to marry Nathaniel very soon. Don't you think it's a bit shameless for you to be pestering a married man?"

Estelle suddenly thought of those news articles and let out a laugh, raising an eyebrow. "President Lockwood, I wonder which daughter you're referring to? Is it Noelle, or is it... Estelle, who has been dead for five years?"

Austin's expression froze.

Chapter 34: "Mommy, Daddy's Here to See You!"

But Austin Lockwood's expression only darkened for a split second before quickly returning to its usual refined demeanor. "You must be joking, Miss Yara. The daughter I'm referring to is, of course, Noelle. Estelle has already passed away."

Estelle nodded. "Oh, then President Lockwood treats Noelle quite well. After all, you didn't go around warning others for Estelle's sake back then."

Austin sighed. "There's something you don't know, Miss Lockwood. Having Noelle marry Nathaniel was actually entirely Estelle's idea."

Estelle thought with a sneer, "My idea? Even in death, I'm being thoroughly exploited by the Lockwood family."

"Estelle's idea?" she said aloud. "If you put it that way, President Lockwood must have cared about her quite a bit."

Austin chuckled and nodded. "Of course."

Estelle gave him a meaningful look. "But why did I hear that Estelle was actually President Lockwood's biological daughter? Since you cared so much, why is Noelle the only Lockwood family heiress now?"

Outside the door, the nurses also glanced over in curiosity.

Austin showed not a hint of embarrassment at being exposed, remaining as suave and polite as ever. "Estelle was indeed our biological daughter. However, after coming back from the countryside, she suffered from an inferiority complex and acted timidly. She didn't want to go public, so we could only respect her wishes."

Estelle's eyes gradually grew cold.

She knew Rose Lowell looked down on her, so when Rose wanted her dead, she hadn't felt much emotional turbulence. But Austin had always maintained the image of a loving father, and she had once genuinely respected and loved him.

It was only later that she realized they were just playing good cop, bad cop, finding every possible way to suppress her. In their hearts, there was only Noelle. They had even single-handedly orchestrated the death of their own biological daughter.

Looking entirely sanctimonious, Austin continued, "Miss Lockwood, please understand the painstaking efforts of a father, and stay away from my daughter's husband.

"Otherwise, with so many people in the hospital today, if everyone finds out that Miss Lockwood is seducing a married man, it won't look good for you, will it?"

Estelle scoffed. "Are you threatening me?"

"How can you call it a threat? I'm merely reminding Miss Lockwood to have some shame and not spend all day pestering—"

"Mommy, Daddy is here to see you!" Mia suddenly called out in a sweet voice, cutting Austin off.

Daddy?

Everyone froze in surprise.

Just moments ago, President Lockwood was claiming that Yara was a mistress. Yet now, Yara's daughter had brought her "Daddy" over. What was going on?

Estelle instinctively looked up. When she saw the person approaching, she raised an eyebrow.

Jasper Kingston was holding a child in each hand, wearing a helpless smile.

Mia ran over. "Mommy, who is this gentleman? What was he just saying to you? Is he bullying you?"

Before Austin could even react, Mia began to sniffle. "WAAAH! Daddy, I told you to come earlier! Look, Mommy is being bullied!"

Jasper smiled and shook his head at Estelle, making a "shh" gesture. He then stepped forward and asked gently, "Yara, has your fever gone down? Are you still feeling unwell?"

Estelle blinked, immediately catching on.

Her two darlings must have seen Austin giving her a hard time, insisting on pinning the label of "mistress" on her. So, they simply dragged Jasper into putting on a show to humiliate Austin.

Estelle's cheeks turned deathly pale, making her look incredibly fragile. "I wasn't feeling unwell a moment ago, but then President Lockwood barged in out of nowhere and accused me of stealing his daughter's husband. Now I'm feeling a bit sick."

Hearing this, Jasper frowned. "President Lockwood, I must ask you to leave."

Austin furrowed his brows, utterly confused about the current situation. His face darkened as he spoke coldly. "Miss Lockwood, I'm just warning you to stay away from Nathaniel—"

"WAAAH, you're going too far! We already have a daddy, so why are you slandering Mommy? Just because you're old, unreasonable, and throwing your weight around, does that mean you can slander people however you please?" Mia's eyes welled with tears.

Zachery also nodded. "Our daddy is tall, handsome, dashing, and the absolute epitome of elegance! How could Mommy possibly be interested in anyone else? Sir, even if you want to slander someone, could you at least come up with a better excuse?"

The surrounding bystanders quickly extracted the key information from the two children's words.

"So she already has a family with kids! Then what is President Lockwood going crazy about? He sounded so righteous just now, I actually thought Yara was someone's mistress..."

"It's probably because Nathaniel Sloan hasn't shown any interest in Noelle for all these years, so President Lockwood is getting desperate."

"Even if he's desperate, he can't just go around slandering people! Miss Yara is still sick. Isn't this just causing trouble?"

"Have you guys seen the news? On one side, Noelle Lockwood publicly abused Young Mr. Sloan, and over here, President Lockwood is threatening the family doctor. Damn, this Lockwood family is rotten to the core."

Soon, the medical staff arrived. "President Lockwood, if you don't leave right now, we're calling the police."

"This is a hospital, not a place for you to throw your weight around!"

It was Austin's first time being pointed at and scolded like this. His expression shifted rapidly as he shot a venomous glare at Estelle.

Very well. He would remember this woman!

After Austin left in disgrace, the crowd of onlookers also dispersed.

Only then did Jasper offer a gentle apology. "Miss Lockwood, we were acting in a moment of desperation just now. I hope we didn't offend you."

Right at that moment, Zachery's phone went BEEP BEEP. It was a message from Christian.

His eyes lit up. The scumbag daddy was coming?!

Perfect. He was going to teach the scumbag daddy a good lesson and show him what it meant to grovel to win his wife back!

Zachery cleared his throat. "AHEM. Mommy, you can't blame Uncle Kingston. I was the one who begged him for help. Uncle Kingston is gentle and kind; you can tell at a glance that he's a good person. I really want a daddy like him."

Mia thought, "You little idiot, your acting is too fake!"

Pinching his throat to sound perfectly innocent, Zachery said, "Uncle Kingston, I like you so much. Can you be my godfather?"

Jasper had originally come to visit Estelle today. He hadn't expected to be dragged away by these two children the moment he stepped upstairs to pose as their "Daddy."

And their mommy just happened to be Estelle...

Jasper smiled warmly. "I certainly don't mind, but that would depend on what your mommy thinks."

Zachery immediately cheered. "Uncle Kingston, you're so nice! You're just like our real dad. The grass on our biological dad's grave is already taller than Mia, so I'll just call you Daddy from now on!"

As Nathaniel Sloan walked up to the outside of the ward, this was the exact sentence he heard.

It was the exact same thing Zachery Lockwood had said to him just a few days ago. Even his tone hadn't changed.

Nathaniel scoffed inwardly. Was this little brat going around claiming everyone as his father?

Mia felt the air suddenly turn quiet. Something seemed off, but Zachery was already continuing his speech.

"Uncle Kingston, you're the most reliable one. Sigh, if only Mommy had met you sooner. With you around, who would even spare a glance at Uncle Sloan, that cheating, womanizing, two-timing scum—"

Before he could finish, the ward door was pushed open.

Zachery's words came to a grinding halt as if he were being choked.

Nathaniel's already sour mood darkened even further.

His gaze swept over Estelle's porcelain-white face, and the corners of his lips suddenly curled into a smile.

"It seems I've come at a bad time?"

Chapter 35: This Is the Wife-Chasing Crematorium; Look, the Scumbag Dad Is Getting Desperate

A dead silence instantly fell over the surroundings.

Nathaniel Sloan had a smile on his lips, but it didn't reach his eyes. No one dared to speak.

How could anyone possibly follow that up?!

After half a minute, Zachery's eyes darted around. He suddenly coughed. "Uncle Sloan, how come I never noticed this great trait of yours before?"

Nathaniel had a gut feeling that this little brat wasn't going to say anything nice.

Sure enough, the next moment, Zachery looked at him with adoring eyes. "This trait is—you have incredible self-awareness!

"That's right, you really came at a bad time!"

It grew even quieter.

Luke White and the others wore expressions that screamed they were as good as dead. Yet Zachery acted as if he had no idea what was going on. "Uncle Sloan, I complimented you. Aren't you going to compliment me?"

Nathaniel was speechless. He nearly laughed out of sheer exasperation. "Such a smart mouth."

Zachery immediately hid behind Jasper Kingston.

Jasper shook his head, looking completely helpless. "The kid is just joking. Nathaniel, are you here to see Yara too?"

Nathaniel hadn't planned on holding it against the kid, but hearing Jasper's words made him furrow his brows slightly. He was calling her Yara now?

Jasper smiled and continued, "I thought Yara might not have anyone to take care of her alone in the hospital, so I came to check on her. I didn't expect you to care about her so much too, Nathaniel."

For some reason, those words sparked an inexplicable surge of anger in Nathaniel's chest.

What did he mean, he didn't expect him to care about her so much too? He was the one who had brought Yara to the hospital in the first place! If you were going to do a good deed, you saw it through to the end. What was wrong with him taking care of her all the way?!

"You're not needed here," Nathaniel stated. He gave Jasper a hard look before walking over to Estelle Lockwood. "I will stay. That's enough."

Estelle, who had just closed her eyes, opened them in irritation. "Mr. Sloan, I think it's best we keep our distance. Didn't you hear what your father-in-law just said?"

Jasper also nodded gently. "Nathaniel, Yara's fever hasn't broken yet. She really should get some proper rest. If you stay here and the Lockwood family comes to make trouble again, how is she supposed to recover?"

Nathaniel's lips formed a tight line, his handsome brows knitting together.

Zachery's little face flushed with excitement. He whispered to Mia, "Look, this is what I was talking about. He's groveling to get his wife back! The scumbag dad is panicking!"

Mia was speechless.

Seeing that Estelle's cup was empty, Jasper was about to pour her some water when Nathaniel suddenly stood up, blocking his way.

He forcefully took the cup from him. His tone was even, showing not a hint of embarrassment or awkwardness as he spoke calmly.

"Dr. Lockwood, I remember we set some ground rules. During the year you treat Christian, I am to act as your caretaker, responsible for your daily meals and looking after you.

"So when you're sick, it stands to reason that your 'caretaker' should be the one to look after you, doesn't it?"

Everyone froze. Even Jasper looked at Estelle in surprise.

Estelle raised an eyebrow. "Mr. Sloan suddenly remembers he's my caretaker?"

Nathaniel lifted his gaze, his eyes dark and heavy, his emotions unreadable.

Jasper laughed. "Nathaniel, you must be joking. You know how to take care of someone?"

Nathaniel cast a cool glance at him, only to hear Yara laugh.

"If he wants to serve people, let him. Mr. Kingston, aren't you tired of standing? Have a seat." She then shot a look at Nathaniel. "Go pour tea for me and my guest."

She emphasized the words 'my guest'. Resting her chin in her hand, she watched him with amusement. "Go on. Are you just going to stand there? What kind of caretaker acts like that?"

Nathaniel closed his eyes for a moment, suppressing all his emotions, before walking to the side to pour two glasses of water.

Estelle was displeased. "Why isn't it tea?"

Nathaniel replied calmly, "You're still nursing your stomach. You should drink less tea."

Estelle let out a soft hmph. "Then why didn't you brew tea for Mr. Kingston? He is a guest. Do you have no manners?"

Nathaniel coolly lifted his eyes. "You said it yourself—he's a guest. A guest must do as the host pleases."

The scent of gunpowder permeated the hospital room. Mia rubbed her arms and asked hesitantly, "Are you sure this groveling... is going to work?"

Zachery felt that even though reality deviated just a tiny bit from his expectations, it wasn't a big deal!

Estelle choked on her words. Before she could speak, Nathaniel turned to Jasper. "Our two families are collaborating on that piece of land in Sorhaven. Shall we have a chat?"

Jasper's gaze shifted between the two of them. After a long moment, he said meaningfully, "Alright. Yara, I'll step out for a bit."

Waiting until the two men left, Estelle lay back down on the bed as the three kids immediately swarmed her.

Outside the room.

A smile played on Jasper's lips. "You didn't ask me out here to talk about the Sorhaven land, did you?"

Nathaniel possessed an innate sense of nobility. Just by standing there, he exuded an intense, oppressive aura. "The Kingston Group has a transnational meeting today. Why did you come to the hospital?"

Jasper cut straight to the chase. "Because Miss Lockwood is sick, so I came to see her. Nathaniel, I told you last night—I want to pursue her."

Nathaniel's eyes darkened.

Jasper acted as if he didn't notice. "Miss Lockwood's children are very cute. I like them a lot. Besides, my family won't object to whoever I choose to pursue. Even if she has two kids, as long as I'm willing, she will be the rightful Mrs. Kingston."

Nathaniel said evenly, "Out of the question."

Jasper leaned against the wall. "Why not?"

Behind his gold-rimmed glasses, Nathaniel's eyes flickered. "Because she is very likely Estelle Lockwood."

Yara was an enigma. She had seemingly appeared out of nowhere five years ago, and there was absolutely no information on her before that. And Estelle had also disappeared five years ago...

Moreover, after returning to the country, Yara had purposefully approached him and the Lockwood family. Although a few attempts to probe her had failed, Nathaniel still couldn't shake the feeling.

Jasper had already spoken up. "Even if she is, you have no proof. Nathaniel, think about it. If she really is Estelle, why didn't she reveal her identity to you after returning?"

Nathaniel's dark eyes were deep and unfathomable. "That is none of your concern."

Jasper let out a silent chuckle. "Nathaniel, we've known each other since we were kids. There has never been anything I wanted that I couldn't get."

Nathaniel shot him a fleeting glance. "Then try it and see."

Inside the hospital room.

Zachery eagerly claimed credit. "Mommy, wasn't I amazing? It's a good thing Uncle Kingston showed up, or what would you have done? You wouldn't have been able to defend yourself at all!"

Estelle had no desire to answer and swiftly changed the subject. "Zachery, your vocabulary has gotten great. You've made progress."

Zachery happily stirred the pot. "Then Mommy, what do you think about letting Uncle Kingston be our daddy? I think it's a great idea! Mia, hurry up and do a reading to see if Uncle Kingston is our future daddy!"

Mia already had three copper coins ready. She closed her eyes and cast a divination.

After a moment, she gasped in pleasant surprise. "Mommy, the reading says your future husband is right outside the door!"

Zachery instantly grew excited. "Really? Uncle Kingston is outside too! It looks like you're spot on this time. Mommy, he's your Mr. Right!"

Estelle was speechless.

Mia nodded solemnly. "Mommy, there's no mistake this time. Your destined true love is right outside the door, and he's about to walk in."

It seemed like it really was Uncle Kingston. That was fine too; their biological daddy was a scumbag, so there was no need for Mommy to get back together with a trashy man.

The next second, the doorknob turned.

SWISH! Several pairs of eyes instantly shot toward the door. Mia said seriously, "Mommy, since the reading says you and Uncle Kingston will be husband and wife in the future, then..."

Before she could finish her sentence, Nathaniel walked in.

Chapter 36: The Three Little Ones' Shared Birthday Raises Nathaniel's Suspicions

Nathaniel Sloan raised an eyebrow. "Fortune-telling? What did you foresee?"

Zachery was speechless. His excited expression froze on his face.

Wait a minute. Shouldn't the person outside the door be Uncle Kingston? Mommy's true love, their future daddy—shouldn't it be Uncle Kingston?!

Why did their scumbag of a father walk in? Why had Uncle Kingston disappeared?!

Mia was also stunned. She stared at Nathaniel with her large, expressive eyes, looking as if she couldn't believe or accept it. She froze for two seconds before letting out a loud WAIL and throwing herself into Estelle's arms. "Mommy, I'm sorry! I'm not good enough at fortune-telling! BOO HOO!"

Nathaniel narrowed his eyes, glanced around the room, and figured it out. So, Mia was crying because she foresaw that he was Yara's future husband?

He was speechless. Was he really that despised?

In the corner, Christian curled his lips in disdain. He wondered if his daddy truly had no idea whether or not people despised him.

A few days later, Estelle was discharged from the hospital.

Nathaniel had her move back into the second-floor bedroom.

At nine o'clock that night, she was just getting ready to wash up when a cell phone started ringing in the room. It wasn't her ringtone.

Estelle raised an eyebrow and walked into the walk-in closet, only to find Nathaniel's phone. He had probably left it behind while helping her move her things. She originally planned to have the butler come and take it away, but then she caught a glimpse of the caller ID.

It was Noelle Lockwood.

Estelle picked up the phone. A cold glint flashed in her eyes as a memory surfaced, but it was quickly replaced by a soft, amused smile. She answered the call.

On the other end of the line, Noelle likely hadn't expected the call to be answered so quickly. Her tone even held a hint of pleasant surprise.

"Nathaniel, it was my fault the other day. Christian might have some misunderstandings about me. I've reflected a lot these past few days. It just so happens that Christian's birthday is coming up soon, so I bought him a gift. Is he—"

"I'm sorry, but Nathaniel isn't here right now," Estelle drawled, slowly interrupting her after listening for half a minute.

Noelle froze abruptly. Once she realized who had answered the phone, her voice instantly turned shrill. "Why do you have Nathaniel's phone?!"

Estelle twirled a strand of hair around her finger and replied casually, "Nathaniel is taking a shower in my room, so of course his phone is with me."

"Yara!! You're shameless!"

Noelle let out a shriek, sounding as though she couldn't even fathom the idea. Flushing red with anger, she demanded, "Give the phone back to Nathaniel!"

"Don't get so worked up, Miss Lockwood. Nathaniel is just showering in my room. There's nothing going on between us, so please don't get the wrong idea." Estelle smiled brightly. "It's so late. If you need something, Miss Lockwood, wouldn't it be better to wait until tomorrow?"

Trembling all over, Noelle's face turned completely red. She was so furious she could barely hold her phone. "You shameless bitch..."

Estelle simply chuckled. What right did Noelle have to be upset?

More than five years ago, when she had just gotten pregnant, a thunderstorm struck in the middle of the night. Feeling extremely anxious and unable to sleep, she had mustered the courage to call Nathaniel.

However, the person who answered the phone was Noelle.

Noelle had spoken in a cloying voice. "Estelle, it's so late. Why are you looking for Nathaniel? Even if you need something, just wait until tomorrow. Nathaniel is going to sleep.

"What? Where is he? He's taking a shower at my place. He really didn't ignore your call on purpose.

"Estelle... could you please stop being so unreasonable? What could possibly be going on between Nathaniel and me? He was just tired tonight and didn't want to go back to Imperial Crest, so he's resting at my place.

"We're family. Even if we stay in the same room, what does it matter? Estelle, if you keep throwing these tantrums, Nathaniel will get angry.

"Alright, Estelle, I'm not talking to you anymore. Nathaniel is done with his shower, and we're going to bed."

The memory faded as Estelle snapped back to the present.

Her smile deepened. She tapped her fingertips lightly against the table and spoke in a bashful tone that left plenty to the imagination. "Alright, Miss Lockwood. Nathaniel is done with his shower, and we're going to bed."

"Yara—"

Estelle hung up without hesitation. She tossed the phone aside casually and went to sleep in an excellent mood.

Meanwhile, Zachery and Mia huddled together.

Looking at the date on the calendar, Mia whispered, "Our birthday is in a month, you little dummy Zachery. What do you want for a present?"

The usually lively Zachery fell silent at the mention of the word "birthday." He curled his lips. "Mommy almost died that day. I don't want to celebrate my birthday at all."

The day they were born was the exact same day, five years ago, that Noelle had set the fire and Estelle had nearly lost her life.

Naturally, these things were never supposed to be told to the two children. But Zachery had pestered the head of the Kendrick Family until the old man, whose heart ached for Estelle, finally gave in and told them.

From then on, Zachery decided he would never celebrate his birthday again.

"Mr. Chapman, this is the gift the Lockwood Family sent for Young Mr. Sloan..."

Just then, a maid's voice echoed from outside the door, followed by the butler, Mr. Chapman, frowning as he asked, "Young Mr. Sloan's birthday is still a month away. Why is the Lockwood Family sending a gift now?"

"They said it's an apology to Young Mr. Sloan..."

"Alright, put it in Young Mr. Sloan's storeroom. I'll let Mr. Sloan know later."

As the footsteps faded away, Zachery and Mia exchanged a glance.

Zachery looked puzzled. "Young Mr. Sloan's birthday is also in a month? What a coincidence."

Before Mia could answer, he suddenly remembered. "Oh, right! Mr. Henry Kendrick said that Noelle and Mommy gave birth on the exact same day."

It was just that the wicked Noelle had gone into labor slightly earlier. After giving birth, she hired someone to set the fire, attempting to murder their mommy.

Hmph!

However, the young master was now their older brother. Since he was their older brother, he was one of their own. Now that he knew Christian's birthday, shouldn't he buy him a gift?

Zachery puffed out his cheeks, lowered his head, and began whispering with Mia.

The next day, when Estelle came downstairs, she saw Zachery and Mia already seated at the dining table.

Seeing her approach, they hurriedly pulled out a chair for her and respectfully served her a bowl of porridge. Zachery looked at her with a solemn expression. "Mommy, please dine."

Estelle choked slightly. She was at a loss for words. Looking at them strangely, she asked, "Have you been watching too many TV dramas?"

Zachery shot Mia a look, and she immediately scurried to Estelle's other side. "Mommy, I'll eat with you," she said sweetly.

Estelle raised an eyebrow, her gaze turning knowing. "Spit it out. What trouble have you two caused?"

Why else would they make such a grand gesture? Every time these two put on a theatrical display to butter her up, it meant they had done something wrong. Estelle was already used to it.

To her surprise, Zachery simply lowered his head, his cheeks blushing slightly. "Mommy, I'm sorry. Young Mr. Sloan's birthday is coming up soon, and I want to give him a gift. Can I?"

Estelle was surprised, but then she immediately understood why Zachery was apologizing. It was because Christian Sloan was Noelle's child, and Christian's birthday fell on the exact same day as Zachery and Mia's.

Birthdays...

She also wanted to celebrate her own children's birthdays, but Zachery and Mia were far too mature for their age. They always made sure to avoid celebrating on that day.

A wave of warmth swelled in Estelle's heart. "Of course. Mommy will also get you presents. Let's properly celebrate your birthdays this year."

Mia was just about to protest that they didn't want to celebrate, but before she could speak, a man's voice carried over.

"Your birthdays are also in a month?"

Nathaniel leaned casually against the doorframe, wearing a thin dress shirt and gold-rimmed glasses. His eyes were slightly narrowed, flashing with a momentary glint of scrutiny. "What a coincidence. On the exact same day as Christian's?"

Chapter 37: What, Not Calling Me Daddy Anymore?

Zachery's back stiffened. He was terrified of letting something slip and exposing their identities to their scumbag father.

Mia, however, blinked. "How is that a coincidence? Uncle Sloan, don't you know that an average of a million babies are born every day in the world? That means a million people share the exact same birthday. It's totally normal. Right, Zachery?"

Zachery finally caught on, his arrogance immediately flaring back up. "Yeah, exactly! Uncle Sloan, how come you're not even as smart as Mia?"

He noted their sharp tongues. Nathaniel Sloan narrowed his eyes slightly, his gaze sweeping over them. "What, not calling me Daddy anymore?"

Zachery curled his lip and muttered under his breath, "I already have Uncle Kingston. I can't go adopting a thief for a father."

Hearing Jasper Kingston's name, an inexplicable wave of irritation surged in Nathaniel's chest. But why bother arguing with two children? He looked up at Estelle Lockwood with a half-smile. "Dr. Lockwood's children want Jasper Kingston to be their father, but does Jasper himself know that you slept in my bed last night?"

The two little ones looked up in shock.

Estelle was also stunned for a couple of seconds. She was just about to curse Nathaniel out for being insane when she suddenly remembered the phone call she had answered last night. She had told Noelle Lockwood over the phone that Nathaniel was taking a shower in her room and was about to sleep with her.

She scoffed internally.

Estelle raised an eyebrow, feigning surprise. "Did Noelle already come crying to you? That was fast."

Nathaniel stared at her intently, his eyes dark with meaning.

That morning, Laura Jennings had called him, accusing Yara Lockwood of being shameless. She claimed Yara had used his phone to answer the call and made Noelle cry all night.

Nathaniel couldn't help but think back to five years ago, when Estelle was newly pregnant. He had been tied up with a multinational conference at the company and hadn't gone home, leaving his phone in the lounge. After the meeting, Noelle had told him, "Nathaniel, Estelle called earlier and I answered, but she seemed really angry... I think she misunderstood our relationship. When you go home, you should explain things to Estelle."

Later, when Estelle, with tears in her eyes, asked him what he and Noelle had been doing the night before, he hadn't thought much of it. He replied that he was in a meeting. She didn't press the matter, and it was simply dropped.

But last night... the exact same scenario had played out.

If Yara was Estelle, and she had said those things to Noelle, did that prove that Noelle had used similar words to provoke her while she was pregnant back then? But if she really was Estelle, why didn't she just say so? Why did she refuse to reveal even the slightest hint?

Nathaniel suddenly closed his eyes. Was it really as Jasper had said—that she simply didn't want to acknowledge him?

Estelle furrowed her brows. What was this? Was Nathaniel here to interrogate her? Even though she had long since let go of this man in her heart, the moment Noelle called in the dead of night, a wave of grievance had still washed over her.

Estelle mocked, "I didn't even say much to Noelle. What's with that look on your face, Mr. Sloan?"

"Don't tell me you're here to settle the score just because my answering your phone last night cost you a chance to whisper sweet nothings with your precious Noelle?"

Nathaniel looked at her.

Estelle pressed her lips together. Like a hedgehog activating its defense mechanism, she bristled with thorns. "What exactly do you—"

"Even if I had my phone on me last night, I wouldn't have answered it," Nathaniel said slowly.

Estelle's words got caught in her throat. She clearly hadn't expected him to say that.

The room fell quiet, the atmosphere growing increasingly heavy. Meeting Nathaniel's deep gaze, Estelle suddenly found herself at a loss for words. She took a step back, forcing the conversation to an end. "That has nothing to do with me. Move out of the way. I need to go to the company."

Nathaniel watched her retreating figure with a dark expression.

Chapman stepped forward. "Sir, Miss Noelle wants to know if you'd like to pick out a gift for Young Mr. Christian together."

Nathaniel withdrew his gaze and said evenly, "Tell her not to bother."

That evening after work, Estelle headed straight to the largest mall in Crestfall instead of returning to Imperial Crest, eager to pick out birthday presents for Zachery and Mia.

As soon as she parked her car, she saw Henry Kendrick standing in front of her. "What are you doing here?" she asked.

Henry fell into step beside her, acting as if it were the most natural thing in the world. "What do you mean? How could I not come when it's time to buy birthday gifts for Zachery and Mia?

"I'm their uncle, after all. Mom, Dad, and my oldest brother all told me to make sure I get them something they'll love. Let's go, let's head upstairs first."

After buying gifts suited to Zachery and Mia's tastes, Estelle suddenly stopped in front of a high-end luxury fountain pen boutique. Christian's birthday was on the same day. She was his family doctor, and the child relied on her so much...

Noticing she had stopped, Henry asked, "What are you doing?"

Estelle stepped into the store. "Picking out another gift."

Henry wasn't stupid. He figured it out immediately, his expression turning complicated. "You're buying a gift for Noelle Lockwood's son?"

This particular fountain pen brand was a German chain established a century ago. To this day, they insisted on handcrafting every single pen, making them exceptionally exquisite—and outrageously expensive. Even a small fountain pen could fetch an astronomical price of over a million.

Estelle picked out a solid silver pen shaped like a bamboo stalk. The clip featured a small piece of jade carved into the shape of a bamboo leaf. It suited Christian perfectly. Once she made her choice, she called the shop assistant over. "I'll take this one. Please wrap it up for me."

"Certainly, miss. The price for this pen is nine hundred and eighty thousand. How would you like to pay..."

Before the assistant could finish, a shrill, grating female voice cut in. "Noelle, I'm not seeing things, am I? Is that the Dr. Lockwood you were talking about? Haha, she can only afford a pen that costs less than a million. How pathetic!"

Estelle immediately narrowed her eyes.

Noelle Lockwood was standing a short distance away. The one who had spoken was the woman beside her—Noelle's cousin, Vivian Lowell. Vivian had lived with the Lockwood family for a period of time in the past and completely fancied herself a wealthy young lady of the Lockwood household, disregarding Estelle, the true heiress.

Estelle's eyes shifted. After throwing her weight around alongside Noelle all these years, had Vivian gotten so arrogant that she forgot her own place?

Noelle didn't say anything, but a flash of malice crossed her eyes. That phone call last night... and Nathaniel rejecting her yet again this morning—it all had to be because of this bitch, Yara!

Noelle deliberately turned to Vivian and said, "Yes, Vivian. This is the Dr. Lockwood I mentioned to you. She looks a lot like Estelle, doesn't she?"

The moment Vivian heard Estelle's name, anger boiled up inside her, and her dislike for this Dr. Lockwood instantly multiplied. Anyone who dared to snatch Noelle's man was a cheap slut, just like Estelle!

Rolling her eyes, Vivian suddenly pointed at the most expensive fountain pen on display. "How much is that one?"

The store manager, who had just come out, said excitedly, "Miss Lowell has an excellent eye. This pen is crafted from pure gold and embellished with Obsidian. It's luxurious yet

understated, perfect for a successful gentleman. The price is slightly higher—it's three million."

"Not bad. It's perfect for your fiancé!"

Vivian emphasized the word 'fiancé' and said smugly, "Noelle, why don't you buy this one for Nathaniel? He'll definitely love it."

Noelle smiled coyly. "Vivian, don't talk nonsense."

Vivian snorted. "I'm not talking nonsense. You're Nathaniel's official fiancée, so it's only natural for you to buy him a gift. Besides, it's only three million. That's just pocket change for you, right?"

"Unlike some people who have to hem and haw over something that costs a mere million. What a broke loser. How can she even compare to a Lockwood heiress?"

Chapter 38: Mr. Sloan, Please Take Care of My Yara

Henry Kendrick's face darkened, but Estelle Lockwood simply smiled.

It had always been like this. Noelle constantly claimed she didn't care about her status as the Lockwood family's heiress, yet she never missed a chance to show it off. She always flaunted that she was the wealthy Lockwood heiress, that everything in the Lockwood family belonged to her, and no one else had a share. Even Estelle, the true daughter of the Lockwood family, supposedly needed Noelle's "pity" just to put food on the table.

Five years had passed, yet she was still flaunting her status as the Lockwood heiress. Did she truly have nothing else to brag about?

Then there was Vivian Lowell. In the past, Vivian loved weaponizing luxury brands to humiliate Estelle, treating her like an ignorant country bumpkin. A large reason why Estelle used to feel so alienated from the Lockwood family was Vivian's relentless mockery. Every other day, Vivian would sneer at her inability to afford expensive things, declaring that she was only fit to wear Noelle's cast-offs—that this was simply her lot in life.

Estelle was ready to return every bit of that humiliation tenfold.

She looked Vivian up and down. "Miss Lowell, you are wearing an out-of-season dress from DL. Your bag is a three-year-old Tissenvi design, and your necklace and earrings are from a collection Evernight International discontinued last year. Furthermore, your clothes don't even fit properly, and the color of your bag clashes terribly. Let's not even talk about the jewelry—one of the diamonds is completely chipped off. It's quite obvious that you're dressed head-to-toe in Noelle's unwanted hand-me-downs."

Vivian's expression instantly froze.

Estelle gave a half-smile. "While I don't see the point in comparing wealth, Miss Lowell... at least I can afford to pay a million on my own. Can you?"

"Shut up!" Vivian shrieked, looking as though she had been stabbed in a sore spot. "You bitch, you're asking for it!"

"I'm only stating the facts. There's no need to get angry, Miss Lowell," Estelle said coolly. "Next time you try to mock me, please use your brain first."

Estelle tilted her chin up slightly, her gaze turning icy. "Noelle, reel your dog in. Don't just let her off the leash to bite people!"

As Noelle bit her lower lip, Vivian let out an enraged scream. Her face flushed a furious, beet red. "How dare you call me a dog! I'll kill you!"

Vivian lunged forward, ready to strike. However, Estelle didn't even need to lift a finger. Henry clamped a firm grip around Vivian's wrist, causing her to let out an agonizing squeal like a slaughtered pig.

Only then did Noelle step in, her voice weak and pitiable. "Dr. Lockwood, Vivian is merely outspoken. Aren't you taking this a bit too far?"

Estelle did not mince words. "Miss Lockwood, please don't confuse being outspoken with being obnoxious. Furthermore, I find it much worse when someone instigates others to fight their battles while they safely watch from the sidelines. Don't you agree?"

Hearing a mockery that practically called her out by name, Noelle's eyes welled up with tears. She stumbled back slightly. "I didn't..."

"Yara, what the hell is that supposed to mean?!" Vivian fumed, her blood boiling.

Here in Crestfall, Vivian was used to throwing her weight around. She relied heavily on her status as a relative of the Lockwood family and the fact that Noelle was the future Mrs. Sloan. This was the first time she had ever been subjected to such severe humiliation!

Exasperated, she whirled around and screamed at the store clerks. "Do you even know who she is? She's a homewrecking mistress! If you dare sell that pen to her, you're finished!

"Listen up, everyone! This bitch moved into someone else's house and hijacked another woman's husband and child! My cousin had a tiny misunderstanding with her son, and this homewrecker swooped in, sowed discord between them, and even got my cousin kicked out of her own home!

"Noelle wants to buy Nathaniel a fountain pen, and now this woman is trying to buy one too! Her intentions are completely despicable!"

As her voice echoed through the store, a few onlookers finally recognized Noelle and began to whisper among themselves.

"Wait, isn't that Noelle Lockwood?"

"I read online that she allegedly abused Young Mr. Sloan... Could it really just be a misunderstanding caused by that other woman's manipulation?"

Hearing the murmurs, Noelle felt a wave of satisfaction and subtly curled her lips into a smirk.

Vivian felt thoroughly vindicated. Striking a high-and-mighty pose, she asked the clerks disdainfully, "Well? Are you still going to sell your products to a mistress?"

The store clerks stammered, too intimidated to speak up.

Noelle feigned helplessness. "Dr. Lockwood, since things have escalated to this point, why don't we just drop it? Please don't make things difficult for the staff..."

"So, Miss Lockwood, you're suggesting I just accept the title of 'mistress'?" Estelle asked abruptly.

Noelle shook her head, her eyes glistening with unshed tears as she let out a deliberate sigh. "Actually, that's not what I meant. But it's true that you and Nathaniel have been getting far too close..."

"Miss Lockwood, just because you're a mistress yourself doesn't mean you should view every other woman in the world as one," Estelle said, casually brushing a strand of hair back. "But I understand you. Those of you who play the mistress are always terrified of having your man snatched away. After all, if a man can cheat once, he can cheat again. Since you haven't even successfully secured your position as his wife yet, it's only natural that you're paranoid.

"However, you're overthinking things. I am here to buy a gift for my child. I don't have the slightest bit of interest in your precious Nathaniel, so stop barking at every woman you see. Do you understand?"

A tear slipped down Noelle's cheek, adding a layer of sorrow to her gentle expression. "Dr. Lockwood, why must you mock me..."

Before she could finish, a small greeting card fluttered to the floor. A bystander picked it up and read the words written on it: "Happy Birthday, Zachery and Mia! And a very Happy Birthday to Christian too!"

Estelle scoffed. "Miss Noelle, you spend all day declaring to the world that you are Young Mr. Christian's biological mother, yet you don't even know that his birthday is coming up? You're completely indifferent to your own flesh and blood, but you're more than happy to corner me and hurl false accusations because you're so terrified I'll steal your man. It seems that your 'precious biological son' means absolutely nothing to you."

The store fell into a dead silence.

It took a long moment before someone finally murmured, "So it really is a gift for a child... Then why on earth was Noelle attacking her like a mad dog?"

"Exactly. Young Mr. Sloan's birthday is coming up, and Noelle—his supposed birth mother—didn't even bring it up. She probably forgot her own kid's birthday!"

"She only cares about keeping her man. Barking at everyone she meets over a guy... How pathetic."

Estelle withdrew her gaze and handed a sleek black card to the store clerk. "Swipe this, and please wrap the pen for me."

"Y-Yes, ma'am. Please wait a moment."

Estelle smiled as she looked over at Noelle. "Miss Lockwood, why aren't you paying? Weren't you about to buy that three-million-dollar fountain pen for Nathaniel? I'm sure he would be deeply moved to receive such a gift from you."

Noelle's face alternated between flushed red and a sickly pale.

Unable to swallow her anger, Vivian opened her mouth to shout another insult, but Noelle violently grabbed her arm. Taking a deep breath, Noelle forced her gentle facade back into place.

"Dr. Lockwood, we are at fault today. Vivian is still young; please don't take her harsh words to heart. Vivian, let's leave for now. We can come back to shop another day."

With that, Noelle dragged Vivian out of the store without looking back. As the onlookers continued to point and whisper, Noelle's eyes turned red with sheer fury. She would remember this humiliation!

After purchasing the gifts, Henry accompanied Estelle to the kindergarten. They picked up the three kids and drove them all back to Imperial Crest.

The moment they arrived, Henry noticed a tall, slender man standing right outside the gates of Imperial Crest.

Zachery leaned in and whispered, "Mia, look. Doesn't our scumbag daddy look like a lovesick maiden waiting for her husband?"

"...Watch your phrasing," Mia retorted softly. "Let's be accurate here: he's a lovesick husband waiting for his wife."

Nathaniel stepped forward, just about to speak, but Henry's eyes darted slyly. He immediately rushed up and enthusiastically grabbed Nathaniel's hand. "Mr. Sloan! Thank you so much for taking such good care of our Yara."

Henry silently vowed to annoy this ex-husband to death for letting that vicious woman bully Estelle.

Nathaniel immediately frowned. He wondered why Henry was here as well. First he had to deal with Jasper Kingston, and now Henry Kendrick had shown up too?

Mommy, Daddy Has Already Regretted It

Nathaniel Sloan wasn't waiting here on purpose. He had just arrived home and hadn't even gone inside when he heard the sound of brakes. He turned around and saw Estelle Lockwood and the three children getting out of the car. For a moment, he had the fleeting illusion that they were a real family.

But Henry Kendrick quickly shattered that illusion.

Henry walked up with a smile and offered his hand. "Oh my, Mr. Sloan, it feels like forever since we last met! You don't mind me showing up uninvited, do you? I was just dropping Yara and the kids off, and since it's getting late, I figured I'd crash here for dinner."

Without waiting for Nathaniel to speak, he immediately lowered his head, looking like a pitiful puppy. "Why aren't you saying anything, Mr. Sloan? Was I being too presumptuous? I'm sorry, I just wanted to get to know Yara's friends. I didn't realize you'd mind my presence so much. It's all my fault."

Estelle was speechless.

Nathaniel frowned, feeling like Henry was making pointed insinuations. "Vice President Kendrick..."

Henry immediately cut him off. "What's wrong? Why are you frowning, Mr. Sloan? Do you not like the way I talk? That shouldn't be the case. You love those 'green tea' types who play the innocent victim the most, and I'm a professional at it. Isn't that right, Yara? Oh my, what are we doing standing at the door? Let's go in."

With that, Henry walked inside without waiting for an invitation.

He looked completely at ease, as if treating Imperial Crest as his own home. "Yara, this place is really nice. I'll come visit you often. Surely Mr. Sloan wouldn't mind Yara's male friend moving in to keep her company?"

Henry heavily emphasized the words "male friend."

Nathaniel's temples throbbed. He didn't understand why Henry harbored such immense hostility toward him.

Luke White watched from the sidelines with mixed feelings. He thought, "Wow... Vice President Kendrick is also a 'green tea' hypocrite! He's even more dramatic than Noelle Lockwood!"

It was just about time for dinner. Since Henry was the Vice President of Star Group, it wouldn't be appropriate for Nathaniel to kick him out.

As they sat around the dining table, Estelle kicked Henry's leg under the table, signaling him with a look that said, "Stop messing around."

Henry acted as if he hadn't noticed.

During the five years Estelle spent with the Kendrick Family, he had seen with his own eyes how deeply she loved this man. Even though she had been bruised and battered, almost losing her life, it still took her a long time to let go of that relationship. When she first arrived, she didn't dare sleep in the dark. She was terrified of thunder and anything related to fire. Old Mr. Kendrick, Mr. Kendrick, and Mrs. Kendrick had stayed by her side, helping her through it, and it took nearly three years for her to fully recover.

The Kendrick Family loved Estelle as if she were their own daughter. The eldest son of the Kendrick Family treated her like a biological sister. Henry, who had accompanied her back to the country to seek revenge, also considered her family.

Facing the man who had hurt her so deeply, Henry had no intention of letting him off the hook!

Henry critically examined the dishes on the table. "This food isn't that great. Yara, is this what the Sloan Family usually feeds you?"

Mia and Zachery exchanged a glance. Looking at the lavish spread on the table, they remained speechless. They wondered why Uncle Henry couldn't find a better excuse to pick a fight. How could he possibly find fault with dishes that were practically fit for a state banquet?

But Henry was playing a deeper game. "Mr. Sloan, didn't you promise to be Yara's servant for a year? Since you're a servant, why aren't you cooking personally when Yara's friend comes over?"

Dead silence fell over the dining table. Chapman and the rest of the servants didn't dare lift their heads. They wondered, "Who is this guy? How is he so brave? He actually dares to provoke Mr. Sloan!"

Nathaniel put down his chopsticks and calmly raised his eyes. "Young Mr. Kendrick wants to eat the food I cook?"

With a heavy sigh, Henry replied, "Of course! I really want to taste Mr. Sloan's cooking. Are you unwilling?"

"Alas, Yara, your servant isn't very obedient. Forget it, forget it. I'm not trying to make things difficult for him. But since he's so boring on a daily basis and doesn't know how to do anything, how is he supposed to serve you?"

Estelle was speechless. She thought, "That's enough! You're laying the innocent victim act on way too thick!"

But the entire dining room had become Henry's stage.

Displaying exceptional theatrical skills, he said, "Mr. Sloan, don't misunderstand. I'm not intentionally making things difficult for you. I just don't understand why Noelle Lockwood was so desperate to snatch you away. Because, honestly, I don't think you're all that great. Sure, you're not bad-looking, but your personality is terrible, and you have a foul temper.

"Noelle had to have you, even if it meant being the mistress and getting cursed at by everyone. I was just really curious, which is why I wanted to dig a little deeper to see if there were any hidden merits I hadn't noticed about you, like your cooking skills.

"Now it seems there aren't any. But then again, it makes sense. How could I possibly use the logic of a normal person to understand the brain of a fake heiress and a true mistress?"

Nathaniel seemed to understand where Henry's hostility came from now. Noelle... Henry despised Noelle, and he also despised the man who had "taken care of" her all these years. But why would Henry despise her? And why did he have so much animosity toward Nathaniel and Noelle?

Nathaniel's gaze darkened. Perhaps it was because... the beloved daughter of the Kendrick Family was Estelle. Henry was standing up for her.

Everything in his mind seemed to connect. Nathaniel calmly explained, "There is nothing going on between Noelle and me."

"Don't bother explaining. Explaining is just covering up, and covering up means it's the truth." Henry didn't even hesitate to throw himself under the bus. "Mr. Sloan, I understand you perfectly because I'm a scumbag too. This is how we scumbags operate. We want to have our cake and eat it too. And when we get caught, we say, 'I didn't know, we have no relationship, we're innocent.'"

Estelle fell silent. Zachery and Mia also fell silent.

Christian rested his chin on his hands, looking at Henry and nodding thoughtfully.

Zachery was speechless. He thought, "Ahhh, young master, you can't learn this kind of 'green tea' manipulative behavior! Learn something good for a change!"

After Henry finished speaking, he felt a bit thirsty, so he chugged a large glass of water and then shot Nathaniel a provocative look. He thought, "You're sweating now, aren't you, Mr. Ex-Husband?"

To his surprise, Nathaniel suddenly put down his chopsticks and calmly stood up. "It's getting late, and Young Mr. Kendrick is almost done eating. You probably can't stomach any more heavy, rich foods, so I'll just stir-fry some simple vegetables for you."

With that, he actually went to the kitchen.

Twenty minutes later, a plate of bright green vegetables was placed in front of Henry, accompanied by a freshly brewed cup of premium pre-Qingming Longjing green tea.

Henry couldn't help but feel that something was off. He thought, "Damn it, the ex-husband is mocking me for my 'green tea' act, isn't he? He definitely is!"

He sneered inwardly, "He strikes hard against a male 'green tea' like me, but he couldn't see through a female one like Noelle Lockwood at all. The ex-husband really is unreliable!"

Once dinner was over, Estelle prepared to go upstairs, but Nathaniel suddenly spoke up. "The collaborative project with Star Group has been finalized. Miss Lockwood, please remember to go to Evernight International tomorrow to sign the contract."

Star had ultimately chosen Evernight International as their fragrance supplier, while opening up a different avenue of collaboration with Kingston Group. Tomorrow was the signing ceremony with Evernight International. As the person in charge of this collaboration, Estelle naturally had to be present.

She never brought personal emotions into her work. "Understood."

After Estelle went upstairs, Henry concluded his performance and was just about to take his leave when Nathaniel suddenly called out to him.

"Young Mr. Kendrick, I have a few questions. Could I ask you to answer them?"

Chapter 40: Mr. Sloan, You're Going to Cause a Misunderstanding

Henry Kendrick was impatient. "If it's about the partnership, let's leave it for tomorrow. This is my personal time."

"What I want to ask is not business-related," Nathaniel Sloan replied calmly. His gaze was steady as he cut straight to the chase, taking control of the conversation. "Young Mr. Kendrick, is Yara Lockwood the adopted daughter of the Kendrick family?"

Publicly, Yara had co-founded Star Group with the Kendricks, but outsiders were unaware of the true nature of their relationship. In reality, Estelle Lockwood had spent the past five years recuperating at the Kendricks' home. The family had taken her to several banquets abroad, always introducing her to others as their own child.

Obviously, Nathaniel had investigated Yara's identity to prompt such a question.

Henry furrowed his brows. "Why are you asking this?"

A glint flashed in Nathaniel's eyes behind his gold-rimmed glasses, but his tone remained as flat as before. "Since Yara is my son's private doctor, it's only natural that I want to get to the bottom of this."

Henry scoffed. "That's right. Yara grew up with the Kendricks, and my parents treat her like their own flesh and blood. Oh, by the way, I hope Mr. Sloan can pass this message along to Noelle Lockwood and her brainless cousin.

"Yara has the entire Kendrick family backing her up. She's not someone just any Tom, Dick, or Harry can bully."

Hearing Noelle's name, a trace of annoyance flashed in Nathaniel's eyes before he steered the topic back.

"Since Yara grew up with the Kendricks and is considered a daughter of the Kendrick family, why—" He lowered his voice. "Is her last name Lockwood?"

Henry narrowed his eyes as alarm bells rang in his head. He suddenly realized this ex-husband was suspecting Estelle's true identity.

"What's wrong with the last name Lockwood? It's her original last name, and she just didn't want to change it. Is that a crime?"

That statement wasn't exactly a lie. Coincidentally, although Estelle had been displaced for eighteen years, the grandfather who originally adopted her also had the last name Lockwood. Her name, Estelle, was given to her by him. Therefore, after faking her death and leaving the Lockwood family, she never changed her last name.

Nathaniel lowered his gaze. "Is that so? Then how does Young Mr. Kendrick explain the fact that all of Yara's records stop exactly five years ago?"

It was as if Yara had appeared out of thin air five years ago. Any records prior to that were completely blank. Estelle died, and Yara appeared out of nowhere... Nathaniel's throat tightened with a sudden bitterness, not daring to dwell too deeply on it.

Henry narrowed his eyes and mocked without hesitation, "Do you think you can just investigate anyone from the Kendrick family as you please? I heard Yara looks a lot like Mr. Sloan's deceased ex-wife. Don't tell me you suspect Yara is your ex-wife? Mr. Sloan is overthinking this. Yara is nothing like Estelle," Henry said.

Thinking of the grievances Estelle had once suffered, his tone laced with hatred as he spoke in complete irony. "Estelle wasn't favored by her elders. She was a country bumpkin despised by her biological parents, and everyone looked down on her. Yara, on the other hand, is part of the Kendrick family and owns Star Group. My parents, older brother, and grandparents all adore her. They are two completely different people—"

"Estelle was wonderful. Young Mr. Kendrick, I suggest you watch your mouth," Nathaniel interrupted coldly.

Henry gave him a half-smile. "Fine, I've said all I need to say. Just don't use Yara as an excuse to mourn your 'late wife' anymore. It's disgusting."

With that, Henry got straight into his car and left.

He couldn't understand why Mr. and Mrs. Lockwood could be so biased. Estelle was their biological daughter, yet they allowed that adopted daughter to suppress and torment her. And in the end, they even had the nerve to hypocritically say, "It's because Estelle is naturally insecure and refuses to get close to us; that's why we don't like her."

Yet, being the exact same person, Estelle had won the affection of everyone in the Kendrick family. Mr. and Mrs. Kendrick treated her like their own daughter, while Old Mr. and Mrs. Kendrick wanted to transfer their shares to her. The Lockwood family claimed Estelle was impolite and disrespectful to her elders... It was simply ridiculous!

It had been five years, and that family was still squeezing every drop of value out of Estelle to pave the way for Noelle. And Nathaniel, that accomplice, actually had the audacity to say, "Estelle was wonderful." If she was so wonderful, why didn't Nathaniel help when she was bullied by Mr. and Mrs. Lockwood? Why didn't he speak up for her when she was mocked and despised by Noelle? Who was he putting on this hypocritical act for now?

The more Henry thought about it, the angrier he got. He pulled out his phone and fiercely texted Estelle: [That ex-husband of yours makes me sick!]

Outside Imperial Crest, Nathaniel watched Henry's retreating figure, lost in deep thought.

Henry seemed a little too agitated. Why was he so worked up? Because he was feeling indignant on Estelle's behalf. If Yara and Estelle weren't the same person, and Henry didn't know Estelle, why would he be so agitated?

Therefore...

Nathaniel suddenly closed his eyes. So, she had returned, but she refused to acknowledge him? Was she really Estelle?

The next morning, Estelle got up, washed up, and picked out a formal outfit, preparing to head to Evernight International for her negotiations.

Since Evernight was both a fragrance supplier and a perfume partner, Estelle had to drive down the costs as much as possible. This was going to be a tough battle. Nathaniel's team was no pushover either; when it came to concrete profit margins, they absolutely wouldn't yield. Estelle could already imagine how fiercely they would be trading blows at today's negotiation and contract signing.

However, the moment she went downstairs, she saw the head of the opposing company standing in front of the sofa, casually adjusting his tie. He cast a sideways glance at her. "It's about time. Let's head to the office together."

Estelle choked on her words. "..."

This felt... so weird.

"Mr. Sloan, today I am negotiating prices with you in my capacity as the head of Star," she reminded him.

So, they were about to be at each other's throats shortly, yet here they were eating breakfast and leaving the house together. Wasn't there something very wrong with this picture?

But Nathaniel simply lifted his gaze slightly. "Mhm. We'll deal with that later. Get in the car."

Estelle wanted to decline, but then she heard Nathaniel state flatly, "Chapman and the driver had an emergency and had to step out. There are no available cars for you in the garage, either. The meeting starts at nine, and leaving now puts us exactly on schedule. If you delay any longer..." He seemed to chuckle. "...just wait for the headline 'Head of Star and CEO of Evernight Arrive Late Together' to hit the front pages of the financial channels."

Estelle was speechless. Why was Nathaniel acting so weird today?

However, she didn't overthink it and, without being coy, decisively got into the car.

Nathaniel gripped the steering wheel with both hands, restraining himself as he looked away. He did have many questions, but there was no rush. If she truly was Estelle, then... at least she had returned to his side.

Watching the two of them leave, Zachery ate his breakfast while dramatically spinning a tale for Mia, based on a sudden burst of inspiration.

"By day, they are the heads of two different companies, fighting tooth and nail over profits, known to everyone as sworn enemies. By night, however, they share the same car, return to the same home, and even have three children together..."

"Stop!" Mia said, her expression complicated. "Zachery, you little dummy, what kind of novel have you been reading again? Have you already moved on from the 'groveling for the wife' trope to 'sworn enemies to lovers' literature?"

Half an hour later.

At an intersection just before reaching Evernight International, Estelle suddenly said, "I want to get out."

Nathaniel glanced at her, his tone completely unruffled. "We're almost there."

Estelle furrowed her brows. "No, I need to get out here. If we show up together, people will misunderstand."

Nathaniel stepped on the brakes. His gaze deepened, and his voice turned husky.

"What kind of misunderstanding?"

Chapter 41: Have Nathaniel Apologize to Me with the Cancellation Fee

"What kind of misunderstanding?"

Estelle Lockwood's tone was unreadable. "A misunderstanding that you, Mr. Sloan, used your body to climb the ranks and win the partnership with Star, of course. After all, we are the number one perfume company. Countless people are begging to work with me."

Nathaniel Sloan was not annoyed. His face remained calm. "That's fine. To safely deliver my business partner to the company, I don't mind being misunderstood."

Estelle was momentarily speechless.

Seeing that he was about to start the car again, she instinctively pressed her hand against his. "That won't do."

She spoke faintly, "President Sloan probably doesn't know that the people I brought today are all industry elites. If these elites misunderstand you, President Sloan, your scandals

will spread throughout the entire perfumery industry. Since President Sloan is so considerate of me, I have to repay the favor, don't I?"

With that, Estelle unceremoniously opened the car door and swiftly hopped out.

Nathaniel gazed at her. Only after she had walked quite a distance did he chuckle. "Then I will wait for Miss Lockwood at the company."

Estelle breathed a sigh of relief, wondering if Nathaniel had lost his mind today.

A few minutes later, she arrived at the Evernight International building on foot. The receptionist asked her to take a seat in the lobby for a moment, saying that Assistant Luke White would be right down to receive her. Estelle had no objections. She sat on the sofa and read a book.

"Mrs. Sloan, President Sloan has a partnership meeting today. He really doesn't have time..."

"A partnership? What partnership is so important that he doesn't even have time to have a meal with his own mother?!"

A furious female voice rang out. Estelle furrowed her brows. Sure enough, it was Laura Jennings.

The assistant accompanying Laura had so many complaints they didn't even know where to begin, but since this woman was Nathaniel's biological mother, they could only try to placate her.

"Mrs. Sloan, why don't you rest in the company for a while? Once the meeting is over, I'll accompany you to see President Sloan."

"It'll be hours before the meeting ends! How is that acceptable? Are you expecting Noelle and me to just wait for him?!"

Laura's voice was shrill. Suddenly catching sight of something, she became instantly enraged and marched toward Estelle. "What are you doing here?!"

Ever since Estelle had exposed Laura for wearing knock-offs at Imperial Crest, Laura had harbored a deep grudge against her. On top of that, Noelle had accidentally let it slip multiple times that the reason Christian disliked her was all because of this woman's meddling. With new and old grudges fueling her rage, Laura exploded. She lunged forward, reaching out to grab Estelle's clothes. "Since when can any random nobody enter our Evernight International building?!"

Estelle took a sip of her coffee, not even batting an eyelid.

Afraid that Laura would cause another scene, the assistant hurriedly explained, "Mrs. Sloan, this is President Lockwood from Star. She is the person in charge of this partnership."

They thought that with this explanation, Laura would prioritize the big picture and put aside her personal grievances. Unexpectedly, she grew even more infuriated. "You're the business partner? Nathaniel refused to eat with Noelle because of you?"

"Yara Lockwood, I'm warning you. If you have any sense of shame left, stop pestering Nathaniel! He's not someone the likes of you can ever reach!"

Estelle finally reacted, casting a lukewarm sideways glance. "If you're delusional, go get treated. Is your son some rare prize that every woman in the world is dying to have?"

Trembling with anger, Laura thought of the things Noelle had said and let out a direct roar. "And you still claim you aren't intentionally approaching Nathaniel! You insisted on treating Christian, and now you're doing everything you can to partner with Evernight. What are you trying to do? You keep throwing yourself at Nathaniel time and time again! If Noelle can't deal with you, do you think I can't? Someone, throw her out!"

As her words fell, the entire lobby plunged into a dead silence. For a full minute, no one spoke, and no one moved.

Laura's face paled bit by bit, as if her authority had been openly mocked. She gritted her teeth. "I told you to throw her out! Did you not hear me?!"

A few assistants looked troubled, but they still made no move.

"Ms. Jennings," Estelle smiled faintly. "I seem to recall that Evernight International was founded single-handedly by Nathaniel. The Sloan family didn't provide him with any resources. So, throwing your weight around here under the guise of being Nathaniel's mother is useless."

Laura nearly choked on her own breath.

Estelle sneered, "Also, Ms. Jennings said that I'm seducing Nathaniel...

"First of all, Nathaniel personally welcomed me at the airport and begged me with a high salary to become Christian's private doctor. Second, my original intended partner was the Kingston Group. It was only after Nathaniel lowered his posture and negotiated with me multiple times that I chose Evernight.

"According to your logic, Ms. Jennings, could it be that Nathaniel is the one intentionally seducing me?"

Unsuppressed laughter rang out across the company lobby.

Laura was half-dead from anger. Pointing a trembling finger at Estelle, she stammered, "Y-you actually..."

She seethed, wondering if this Yara Lockwood had no shame. How did she have the nerve to say that Nathaniel was seducing her? What kind of nobody was she, and why would Nathaniel ever be interested in her? Only an innocent and kindhearted girl like Noelle deserved to stand by Nathaniel's side!

Thinking of Noelle Lockwood, Laura was instantly filled with a bursting sense of righteous indignation. She raised her voice, "I don't care about your partnership! In short, stay away from my son! If you hadn't deliberately seduced him, would Nathaniel even work with you?

"Miss Lockwood, you're new here, so you probably don't understand. In Crestfall, crushing you is as easy as crushing an ant for the Sloan family!"

Sometimes, Estelle found it strange. Neither Old Mr. Sloan nor Chairman Sloan were stupid, so why would they accept such an idiotic woman into the Sloan family? Moreover, with a brain like Laura's, could she really have given birth to a son with Nathaniel's freakishly high IQ?

Besides, back in the day, Laura was actually the mistress who climbed her way up, and Nathaniel was an 'illegitimate child'. It was just that now Laura was firmly seated as Mrs. Sloan, and Nathaniel wielded immense power in Crestfall, so no one dared to mention it.

She smiled cryptically. "Do you mean that the partnership is canceled, Ms. Jennings? That's not impossible, but canceling the partnership means Evernight International will have to pay a penalty for breach of contract. Will you be paying that sum on Nathaniel's behalf?"

Ignorant and arrogant as ever, Laura scoffed, "As long as you get lost, that little bit of money means nothing to Nathaniel!"

Estelle nodded and casually dropped a line to the assistant standing nearby. "Since Mrs. Sloan isn't willing to partner with us, let's cancel it. Tell Nathaniel to bring the penalty fee and apologize to me."

With that, she actually turned to leave.

The assistant froze for two seconds, then hastily stepped forward to stop her, but in the next second, a husky male voice rang out—

"President Lockwood, wait."

Estelle raised an eyebrow and looked back.

Nathaniel stepped out of the elevator, flanked by a group of directors. His tone was perfectly calm. "The meeting is about to begin. Where is President Lockwood going?"

Estelle shrugged her shoulders. "Your mother said the partnership is canceled, so I'm rushing over to the Kingston Group."

The directors' faces all changed. Nathaniel's gaze darkened. "It's not canceled. Head upstairs and prepare for the meeting."

Laura never expected this. She had successfully driven this woman away, yet Nathaniel personally made her stay! Her heart was filled with indignation. With a face full of hostility, she shrieked, "No, I don't agree to this partnership! Nathaniel, I will not allow this woman to stay by your side!"

Nathaniel's eyes darkened slightly.

Mommy, Daddy Has Already Regretted It

Seeing Estelle Lockwood still walking out, several directors panicked. "Miss Lockwood, President Lockwood, let's talk this out!"

"Yes, President Lockwood, please come back first. The contract has already been drafted. Please don't be angry, don't be angry."

Estelle turned back with a puzzled expression. "Come back? Why don't you ask Mrs. Sloan first if I'm allowed to come back? It'd be so awkward if I came back only to be told to get lost again."

The directors hastily shot glances at Nathaniel Sloan.

Nathaniel's tone left no room for doubt. "I am the one cooperating with you. President Lockwood doesn't need to listen to anyone else."

Estelle chuckled and finally sauntered back.

Laura Jennings was almost furious enough to drop dead. Didn't those words imply that she was "anyone else"?!

She gritted her teeth and rushed forward. "No, no! Nathaniel, she already agreed to cancel the partnership. Why do you still insist on it? This woman harbors ulterior motives!"

An imperceptible hint of disgust flashed through Nathaniel's eyes as he spoke indifferently. "Evernight and Star have signed a contract. Breaching it requires paying a penalty."

Laura maintained her condescending attitude. "It's just a small penalty. Can't you afford it? Or are you telling me you'd rather defy your own mother than cut ties with this woman? Do you have any idea that Noelle cried because you've been getting too close to her?!"

Everyone in the company looked over, somewhat bewildered. How could President Sloan's mother, the dignified Mrs. Sloan, act like a shrew screaming curses in the street?

Nathaniel didn't even bat an eyelid. "The initial investment for this partnership is one billion, and the subsequent profits are estimated to be around three billion. The breach of contract penalty is also five hundred million. Does Mother mean that I should throw away four point five billion for nothing, just because of Noelle Lockwood's tears?"

He mocked coldly, "Whose tears are worth that much?"

The entirety of Evernight Tower plunged into a deathly silence. The assistants didn't dare to utter a word, but the disdain in the directors' eyes deepened.

Laura's expression instantly stiffened. Probably shocked by the mention of 'four point five billion', her voice lowered considerably as she stammered, "N-No, that's impossible. What kind of partnership is worth that much? Nathaniel, to think you'd lie to me for a woman. Do you know how hard it was for me to give birth to you, and how I suffered to raise you..."

"Mrs. Sloan!" A director, unable to tolerate it any longer, suddenly spoke up sharply. "Have you made enough of a scene?! Do you really think you're that important, that Nathaniel would bother lying to you? Take a look at yourself—what about you is even worth deceiving?"

"Do you know how many people are eyeing this partnership? The Kingston Group is one of them! Four point five billion is merely a conservative estimate; the actual benefits this collaboration brings will be much greater!"

The other directors also couldn't watch this any longer. "Where do you think the money you casually spend comes from? It's all earned by Nathaniel! All you do all day is throw

your weight around because you're his mother. Having someone like you really ruins the Sloan Family's reputation!

"Noelle Lockwood's tears? Don't think we don't know that you've always been biased toward her. Did she save your life in a past life or something?"

Having said that, the directors, terrified that Estelle would storm off in anger, lowered their stances. "President Lockwood, there's no need to pay her any mind. Let's head upstairs first."

"Yes, President Lockwood, it is an honor to partner with Star..."

The stark contrast in how the directors treated Laura versus Estelle infuriated the former to no end. "Nathaniel, what is the meaning of this? You're doing this for her..."

"Luke White, have someone escort Mother home," Nathaniel interrupted indifferently.

Luke nodded respectfully. He then firmly grabbed Laura's arm, flashing a fake smile. "Mrs. Sloan, please."

Laura was practically thrown out of Evernight Tower. She trembled with such fury that she could barely catch her breath.

Noelle, who had been watching from the sidelines for quite some time, finally hurried forward, pretending she had just arrived. "Mrs. Sloan, are you alright?"

"I'm so sorry, Mrs. Sloan, this is all my fault. Knowing how important Miss Lockwood is in Nathaniel's heart, I shouldn't have said those things to you. Now that you stood up for me, it backfired, and..."

Laura's anger flared even hotter.

Yara Lockwood... Fine. Since Nathaniel was protecting Yara, she couldn't teach that bitch a lesson directly, but she had other methods! Didn't Yara bring along those two little bastards...?

When the elevator reached the twenty-fifth floor, Nathaniel and Estelle walked side-by-side at the front.

Nathaniel spoke coolly, "You insisted on coming to the company alone, and now someone gave you trouble?"

Estelle furrowed her brows. He actually had the nerve to say that?

"Well, I didn't expect that in a conglomerate as massive as Evernight International, someone would cause a scene targeting a business partner." Estelle mocked, "President Sloan, if you have free time, keep your mother in check. Don't let her run around throwing tantrums."

Nathaniel didn't say much else until right before they entered the conference room. He stated mildly, "Next time you encounter a situation like this, you can call me. Miss Lockwood, you are my business partner. Within the scope of my ability, I will protect you. There's no need to just stand there and be scolded for nothing."

Estelle sneered inwardly. Be scolded for nothing?

Did she suffer few insults and slaps for nothing from Laura five years ago? Why didn't she see Nathaniel protecting her back then?

"No need. Rather, I should give Mr. Sloan a heads-up. If there's a next time, your mother will be eating at least two slaps from me. Don't accuse me of going too far when it happens."

Nathaniel looked at her quietly for a moment, then nodded. "Let's start the meeting."

The meeting lasted for five hours before finally concluding. In the end, the profit-sharing ratio and raw material supply prices were set within a range that satisfied both parties.

Evernight's directors beamed with joy. "President Lockwood, it's still early, and everyone is tired from the meeting. How about I find a place for us to gather and have a meal together?"

Estelle was also a bit exhausted. "That works, but I won't be joining you. I need to head back and organize some materials."

The first batch of perfumes would be hitting the market soon, and she was worried about running out of time.

The directors were understanding. "Alright then, President Lockwood, please do as you must."

Afterwards, the executives of both companies went to a hotel for dinner. As Estelle prepared to return to her studio, she noticed that Nathaniel hadn't gone to the dinner either.

Oh, right. He never liked crowded places, especially these kinds of social engagements.

Estelle was heading to her studio today to blend perfumes. Whenever she did so, she would become completely engrossed and lose track of her surroundings. Afraid of losing track of time, she had called Henry Kendrick, who agreed to pick up Zachery and Mia later.

When Nathaniel walked out, he overheard her on the phone.

"Time is really tight, yeah... I'll leave Zachery and Mia in your hands then."

"Young Mr. Sloan? Today isn't Christian's scheduled check-up day. Plus, his body is recovering quite well. Not visiting Imperial Crest for two days shouldn't be an issue."

Whatever the person on the other end said, Nathaniel watched Estelle frown as she spoke with disdain.

"Why the hell should I care about how Nathaniel Sloan is doing? I'm his son's doctor, not his. He should be thrilled that I'm not being an eyesore around Imperial Crest. Anyway, I just spent five hours in a meeting with Nathaniel and I'm already annoyed enough. Stop bringing up his name; it makes me sick."

Nathaniel's footsteps jerked to a halt, his brows twitching violently.

Chapter 43: Nathaniel Was Ice-Cold, "I'd Like to See Who Dares!"

Estelle Lockwood hung up the phone and was about to hail a cab when she suddenly heard Nathaniel Sloan call out to her. "Miss Lockwood."

She turned around. "Is something the matter?"

"Don't forget we're going to Rosalind Garden together in two days to select the raw materials, Miss Lockwood."

Estelle furrowed her brows. They had just finalized this itinerary during a meeting half an hour ago. Did he really think she would forget it so soon? Was Nathaniel mocking her for being brainless?

She gave a nonchalant response and headed straight back to Star Studio.

Shortly past two in the afternoon, inside the CEO's office at Evernight International.

Luke White knocked and entered. "Sir, the partnership details have been arranged, and the personnel going to Rosalind Garden the day after tomorrow have been finalized."

Nathaniel gave a faint hum of acknowledgment. Sensing that Luke had more to say, he asked without even lifting his eyelids, "Anything else?"

Luke swallowed hard, feeling utterly helpless. "Also, Mrs. Sloan called again. She wants you to add Miss Noelle to the entourage..."

"Out of the question," Nathaniel rejected it outright.

Luke nodded and had a secretary relay the response to Mrs. Sloan. He really didn't understand what Mrs. Sloan saw in Noelle Lockwood. Back when the madam was still around, Mrs. Sloan had always disliked her and constantly tried to push Noelle into his boss's presence.

BEEP BEEP.

Just then, Nathaniel's phone suddenly rang. It was an unknown number, yet it was calling his private cell.

"Hello, is this Mia Lockwood's father?" An anxious young woman's voice came through the line. "This is Greenbriar Kindergarten. We haven't been able to reach the child's mother. Since your number is listed under her father's contact info, we had no choice but to call you. Mia has gotten into a bit of trouble. Could we trouble you to come over?"

Nathaniel's expression darkened instantly. "Luke, get the car ready."

Half an hour later, inside the office at Greenbriar Kindergarten.

A heavily made-up woman, clad in luxurious designer clothes and dripping with jewelry, pointed at Mia and hurled abuse. The rolls of fat on her face jiggled with every word.

"If my son wants to touch you, it's your honor, do you understand?! How dare you have someone hit him! Do you have a death wish?!"

Beside the woman stood a chubby little boy. Looking incredibly smug, he shouted, "Mia Lockwood, you're just a fatherless little bastard! So what if I touched you! You think you're so precious?"

Zachery looked furious, and Christian had completely lost his usual sunny smile. The two boys shielded Mia behind them. Zachery gritted his teeth. "Shut up!"

Christian added coldly, "Just because you're loud doesn't mean you're right. I've already called the police."

Mrs. King flew into a rage. "Miss Lockwood, look at this! Just look at this! I can't even say a few words to them! Calling the police? Do you know what kind of status the King family holds in Crestfall?! Miss Lockwood, if this isn't resolved, we are not done here!"

Noelle acted hypocritically. "Mrs. King, please calm down. My child is in the wrong here..."

The two young kindergarten teachers were beside themselves with anxiety. The principal was away today. During the activity class, the chubby boy, Walter King, had followed Mia around, repeatedly trying to grope her waist and legs, though Mia had managed to dodge him every time. Later, the chubby boy grew bolder. He gathered a few accomplices and dragged Mia into the restroom, attempting to strip off her clothes.

Fortunately, Mia's two brothers arrived just in time. They each delivered a punch to Walter King. That set off a complete disaster. Walter sat on the floor, wailing at the top of his lungs and demanding they call his parents.

The Kings were powerful and influential in Crestfall, and the vice-principal was a spineless coward who only knew how to pander to the rich. The moment he saw Mrs. King arrive, he demanded that Mia and the boys apologize without even asking what had happened.

The young teacher had originally wanted to advocate for Mia. It clearly wasn't the little girl's fault. She had almost been bullied, yet she was the one being forced to apologize? It was completely unreasonable, so the teacher decided to call Mia's father.

But who could have guessed that right after she made the call, a woman claiming to be Christian's mother would show up. The teacher reasoned that since Christian and Mia were siblings, Christian's mother must also be Mia's mother. Yet, the moment this "mother" walked in, she showed zero concern for her daughter. Instead, she immediately apologized to Mrs. King, dumping all the blame onto her own children!

Noelle was still apologizing earnestly. "I am so sorry, Mrs. King. My Christian doesn't know any better. I will definitely discipline him properly when we get home. It's absolutely wrong for a child to hit others.

"Christian, I know you and Mia are good friends, but you can't just indiscriminately beat up Young Mr. King like this. Mia claims that Young Mr. King tried to assault her, but is that necessarily the truth? Everyone knows she..."

At this point, Noelle deliberately paused, then sighed as if she couldn't bear to say any more. "Christian, hurry up and apologize to Young Mr. King."

Mrs. King's expression softened considerably. "Miss Lockwood, you are the reasonable one. Fine, I won't hold this against Christian Sloan, but these two little bastards must apologize! And be expelled!"

The Kings were nouveau riche. Mrs. King only knew how to eat, drink, and make merry; she was entirely clueless about the intricacies of high society. When Noelle revealed her identity as the heiress of the Lockwood Group, Mrs. King didn't make the connection between Christian Sloan and Nathaniel Sloan. She merely assumed Christian was some unfavored illegitimate child. As for the other two, she heard they were the children of the Lockwood family's servants, so they were even less worth her concern.

Noelle smiled gently. "I am only responsible for taking Christian home. The other two children have nothing to do with me. Do as you please, Mrs. King." With that, she acted like a mother wholeheartedly devoted to her son. "Christian, let's go home first. From now on, you should spend less time with..."

"Get lost!" Christian shoved her coldly.

Noelle's smile froze. "Christian, what are you doing? Are you upset because Mommy didn't stand up for Mia? But we have to be reasonable people..."

"Your idea of being reasonable is ignoring the truth, twisting black into white, and shifting the blame onto Mia?! Besides, you're not my mommy, so stop flattering yourself!"

Noticing the strange looks from the people around her, Noelle feigned helplessness. "Christian, you're really breaking Mommy's heart... I know you resent me because I said Mia wasn't a good child and forbade you from playing with her, so you...

"I am your mommy, so I can indulge your tantrums, but others will only think you lack manners. Do you understand?"

The surrounding onlookers' gazes gradually returned to normal. So Christian was only saying those things on purpose for Mia's sake. Sigh. To disown his own mommy over some shady friend—this Mia Lockwood really wasn't a good kid!

Christian gritted his teeth. For the millionth time, he hated the fact that he was just a child. "I'm not leaving! I didn't do anything wrong! I want to watch Walter apologize to Mia!"

Noelle looked exasperated, as if Christian were being terribly rebellious.

Hearing this, Mrs. King laughed out of pure fury. She looked down at them from her high horse, utterly contemptuous.

"Apologize? Don't think I don't know that Mia's background is highly questionable! She's raised by a single mother with no power or influence in Crestfall. She's just a fatherless little bastard! My son asking her to take off her clothes is doing her a favor! If my son likes her, what's wrong with a little touching? Why act so high and mighty?!"

She rolled her eyes and said menacingly, "So you want to do things the hard way, huh? Someone, strip her clean!"

Upon hearing this, Zachery and Christian's faces instantly darkened. The two boys positioned themselves front and back, shielding Mia in the middle. But Mrs. King had brought four bodyguards. As mere children, there was no way the two of them could fight off four grown men.

Walter clapped his hands, his chubby face twisting with a sinister malice that did not belong on a five-year-old. "Hurry up! Strip her clothes off!"

Zachery grew frantic. "Mia, when they come, you run first—"

"I'd like to see who dares!"

BANG!

The office door was kicked open. Over a dozen bodyguards in black suits instantly swarmed in, pinning the Kings firmly to the ground.

Everyone was stunned.

Nathaniel's expression was freezing cold. His sharp gaze swept over the room as he enunciated every single word. "I'd. Like. To. See. Who. Dares!"

Chapter 44: Nathaniel Took a Knife for Her

Nathaniel Sloan couldn't describe how he felt at this moment.

The very first thing he heard upon rushing into the kindergarten was that the Kings were going to strip off Mia's clothes.

Luke White quickly investigated the entire incident, and Nathaniel's expression grew increasingly icy.

Christian's eyes lit up. He rushed over and hugged Nathaniel. "Daddy, they bullied Mia, and they bullied me too!"

Nathaniel quickly walked over to Mia and picked her up. Seeing that she was completely unharmed, the heavy weight in his heart finally lifted.

"Mia, are you alright? It's Daddy's fault for being late. Don't be afraid."

Mia Lockwood blinked, subtly pinching her fingers together for a quick fortune reading. She was fine. It was the King family that was about to be in trouble.

Indeed, Nathaniel had no intention of letting the Kings off the hook.

Mrs. King shrieked, "What kind of thing are you? Do you even know who I am?!"

Walter King wailed at the top of his lungs. "Mommy, help! I'm Young Mr. King! Do you know the King family? Go to hell! All of you, go to hell!"

Nathaniel scoffed. He cast a sidelong glance at Mrs. King, who was sprawled on the floor, and said coldly, "The King family?"

Luke bowed slightly and said, "It's the King family from the south of the city."

Nathaniel's eyes were indifferent. Luke understood immediately. With a single phone call, the King Group's shares underwent a seismic shift in an instant.

Completely oblivious, Mrs. King was still throwing her weight around. "Scared now, aren't you?" she screeched. "Let me go right now, and I might just spare your miserable life later!"

Walter clamored as well. "Who are you?! Stop being so nosy! I wanted to strip Mia Lockwood's clothes, not yours!"

Nathaniel ordered lightly, "Beat them."

Everyone was stunned. They never expected this man to resort to violence the moment he walked in.

However, before Luke could make a move, a figure burst into the room and swiftly slapped both Mrs. King and Walter across the face.

Mrs. King was flabbergasted. "Honey, why are you here? And why did you hit me?!"

"How do you have the nerve to ask me that after the monumental mess you two caused?!"

President King, who had rushed over upon hearing the news, was on the verge of fainting. Gathering whatever strength he had left, he practically dropped to his knees before Nathaniel.

"Mr. Sloan! Mr. Sloan, please spare me! These two were foolish and blind. Don't worry, I... I'll divorce her the moment I get back! I don't want this son anymore either! I disown him!"

Mr... Mr. Sloan? Still kneeling on the floor, Mrs. King froze as pure terror instantly flooded her brain. How many people in Crestfall had the last name Sloan and were addressed so respectfully as 'Mr. Sloan'?

President King never imagined that sending his son to kindergarten would lead to his utter bankruptcy. Of all the people to mess with, his son had targeted Nathaniel Sloan's daughter and bullied her! The boy was only five years old, yet he had already turned out like this!

Fury surged in President King's chest. He viciously slapped his wife twice more. "I told you to discipline him, but you refused to listen! You just had to spoil him! Now we can all wait to die together!"

Nathaniel Sloan... Mia Lockwood was actually Nathaniel Sloan's daughter?! Then... then what about Noelle Lockwood...

As if suddenly remembering something, Mrs. King's eyes lit up. She crawled over to Noelle on her knees, grabbed onto her, and wailed. "Mrs. Sloan, please help us! Please save the King family! We... we didn't absolutely need Young Mr. Christian and Miss Mia to apologize. It was you who said these two children didn't know any better, so I... I..."

Noelle was so furious she could have died! Unfortunately for her, Nathaniel had already turned his head. His expression was icy, radiating an unspoken, intimidating authority. "Mia and Christian were being bullied, and you wanted them to apologize?"

Cold sweat seeped from Noelle's forehead. Her previous gentle and elegant image vanished completely.

"Nathaniel, I just wanted Christian to get along well with his classmates. I... I thought it was merely children playing around. Young Mr. King is still so little. It might just be Mia's one-sided story..."

Nathaniel's gaze grew colder by the second. "A one-sided story?" The chilling look made Noelle break out in a cold sweat, but she had to force herself to continue.

"Because... because no one else saw Mia getting bullied. But everyone saw Christian and Zachery Lockwood hitting people. It was clear for all to see. I thought there might have been some kind of misunderstanding..."

"How generous of you, Miss Lockwood!" Suddenly, a woman's voice rang out, interrupting Noelle. Estelle Lockwood walked into the office alongside Director Miller.

Estelle's face was frostbitten as she ordered the bodyguards behind her, "Go, strip off Noelle Lockwood's clothes."

Noelle screamed, "Dr. Lockwood, what are you doing?!"

Estelle replied icily, "Since Miss Lockwood believes that stripping someone's clothes is just playing around, I decided to play with you too."

"Nathaniel, save me..." Noelle sobbed uncontrollably. "I truly didn't know. I just gullibly believed Mrs. King's words. I meant well! How could Dr. Lockwood treat me like this..."

The crying echoed for two full minutes before Nathaniel issued a nonchalant order. "Take her away and send her back to the Lockwood family. Without my permission, she is not allowed to appear before me."

Estelle sneered and looked away. Taking the opportunity, Mia ran into her embrace. "Mommy!"

Two kindergarten teachers also stepped forward to help explain. "Mia's mother, you're finally here. Please don't misunderstand Mia's father. Thank goodness he arrived in time, otherwise the consequences would have been unimaginable."

Estelle paused, instinctively looking toward Nathaniel. He hadn't come to defend Noelle, but to help Mia?

Nathaniel could tell exactly what the woman was thinking with a single glance, and he couldn't help but frown. Was his image really that terrible in her mind?

"It's good that she's fine. It's good that she's fine. Mr. Sloan, Mrs. Sloan, please rest assured, we will definitely expel Walter King and give Mia justice!" a teacher promised.

Estelle snapped back to reality, a sudden wave of delayed fear washing over her. Half an hour ago, her phone had died, and it was Henry Kendrick who barged into her studio to deliver the news. Then she had rushed over without a moment's delay. Thank goodness...

"Mommy, don't worry. I definitely wouldn't be in danger." Mia pursed her lips. "When Walter locked me in the washroom, I saw the aura of ruin around him. I didn't even need to read his fortune to know that his family was doomed."

With Nathaniel's declaration, the King family wouldn't just be driven out of Crestfall—they would likely never be able to make a comeback anywhere in Croatia. No matter how indignant President King felt, he had no choice but to swallow his resentment.

Just as Estelle was preparing to take Mia home to rest, suddenly—

"Ahhh! Go to hell! All of you go to hell!"

Walter suddenly snatched a nearby fruit knife and charged straight at Mia!

Estelle's eyes turned cold. Unable to dodge in time, she instinctively shielded Mia in her arms, intending to block the blade herself—

However, the anticipated pain never came. Instead, she and Mia both fell into a warm embrace. A warm liquid slowly dripped onto her hand...

"Mr. Sloan!"

"Quick, quick, call an ambulance! Mrs. Sloan, please help stop Mr. Sloan's bleeding first!"

Estelle slowly widened her eyes. The fruit knife had pierced his wrist, and blood was pouring out profusely. THUMP. THUMP. THUMP. Her heart beat faster and faster, as if it were about to leap out of her chest. Nathaniel Sloan... had taken a knife for her. Why? Her mind was in total chaos. Her thoughts were completely occupied by his name, and she couldn't hear any of the voices around her.

"Dr. Lockwood."

After she had frozen for an unknown amount of time, a cool, clear male voice suddenly rang out. Nathaniel lightly raised his hand, gesturing toward the bandages nearby with his eyes. "Can you help me out?"

Chapter 45: You Deserve a Lifetime in the Wife-Chasing Crematorium

Nathaniel... was asking for her help?

Yes, Nathaniel was injured trying to save her, so she ought to help. But amidst the chaos, her thoughts couldn't help but drift back to the past—

Five years ago, during a banquet, Nathaniel had cut his hand on a broken wine glass. She had wanted to help then too, but Noelle had blocked her way. Noelle had scolded her, asking her if she could just stand aside and not cause trouble since she didn't understand anything and didn't know how to do anything.

At the time, Estelle had wanted to say that she only wanted to bandage Nathaniel's wound, not cause trouble. But Noelle had pushed her away in disgust, bustling about to attend to Nathaniel. She had been left alone in a corner, unnoticed, with no one caring about how she felt. It was as if an invisible barrier separated her from Nathaniel and everyone around him, making her completely out of place. From then on, whether Nathaniel was injured or sick, she never showed concern again. After all, even if she did, it would only be considered "causing trouble."

The scene before her overlapped with the one from five years ago. Estelle took an abrupt step back, her tone dripping with sarcasm. "Mr. Sloan is perfectly capable of bandaging this himself. I won't cause trouble."

With that, she took Mia's hand and walked out. "We're going home."

Zachery hurriedly followed. Christian glanced at Nathaniel, a hint of sympathy spilling from his eyes. Although he didn't know why his mommy's mood had suddenly plummeted, it was definitely his daddy's fault. Forced to choose between his mommy and daddy, Christian decisively chose his mommy.

Director Miller was speechless. His wife and children had all left within a minute. How did the injured Mr. Sloan feel about this? Director Miller gave a dry laugh to smooth things over. "Haha, Mrs. Sloan might... might just be too busy, haha."

Nathaniel narrowed his long, sharp eyes slightly. His forearm was still dripping blood, but he didn't care in the slightest. He cast a nonchalant glance at President King, who was sprawled on the ground, and spat out a single word. "Investigate."

President King trembled like a leaf. It was over. Everything was over...

That night.

After the three kids fell asleep, Estelle suddenly heard the sound of the front door opening.

Nathaniel's sturdy forearm was wrapped in thick gauze. He opened the door with one hand and took off his suit jacket with the same hand. Having done all this, he shot her a sidelong glance with a faint, mocking smile. "They say doctors have benevolent hearts. Is Dr. Lockwood truly this heartless?"

Estelle, who had been about to go to her room to sleep, furrowed her brows. Why did it feel like Nathaniel was mocking her for having no conscience? Well, he was right. She really was someone with no conscience!

Estelle said coldly, "During working hours, I'm a doctor, so naturally, I have a benevolent heart. Now that I'm off the clock, if Mr. Sloan wants to play the victim, you can go do it somewhere else. I'm sure plenty of women will fall for it."

A faint gleam flashed through Nathaniel's eyes. "Is Dr. Lockwood not planning to take care of me?"

Estelle was shocked. "What gave you the impression that I want to take care of you?"

He couldn't use the excuse that he got injured for her sake. His injury was Walter King's fault. As for why Walter King hadn't been at Greenbriar Kindergarten a few days ago but had suddenly transferred here today, and immediately started bullying Mia upon arrival... If someone were to investigate further, they might very well uncover his mother's involvement. She absolutely refused to believe that Laura Jennings had nothing to do with this. Therefore, the true culprit behind Nathaniel's injury was his own mother. Why should she be the one to take care of him?

Nathaniel leaned casually against the sofa, his thin lips curling up slightly. Seeing her avoiding him like the plague, the man suddenly felt the urge to tease her.

"Miss Lockwood hasn't forgotten that we're going to Rosalind Garden in two days, has she? My hand is injured, making it inconvenient to move around. If I don't receive the best care, I'm afraid I won't be able to go." He continued carelessly, "If I don't go, the collaboration won't proceed smoothly. What do you say, Miss Lockwood?"

Estelle's eyes widened in shock. How could this man be so despicable?!

"Nathaniel, is this collaboration only making money for me alone?"

The partnership was clearly a win-win situation, yet he was actually using it to threaten her!

Nathaniel raised an eyebrow. "To be honest, I really don't care about the small change from this collaboration."

The investments and profits across the early, middle, and late stages totaled 4.5 billion. Small change?!

But this hit Estelle right in her weak spot. Every day delayed meant another day of burning money. Nathaniel might not care, but she cared a lot! However, if she really had to take care of him, she would inevitably be reminded of those unpleasant memories from five years ago.

"Miss Lockwood, won't you reconsider?" Nathaniel said coolly. "When you wanted me to be your servant back then, I didn't refuse in the slightest."

Estelle scoffed. "You still remember you're my servant? Since you're the servant, what gives you the right to demand that I take care of you?"

Nathaniel naturally heard the mockery in her tone but remained noncommittal. "In special times, things are naturally different."

Seeing that she stayed silent for a long time, Nathaniel slowly picked up his phone with his left hand. "If Dr. Lockwood isn't willing, then I'll just have to postpone our trip to Rosalind Garden." As he spoke, he prepared to call Luke White.

Estelle gritted her teeth. In the past, she had wanted to take care of him but never had the chance. After all, whenever Nathaniel got hurt, he was immediately surrounded by all sorts of women. Noelle, his secretaries... they would crowd around him, forming an impenetrable wall. Even as the official Mrs. Sloan, she hadn't even had the right to visit him in the hospital. Now that he had merely injured his arm, he actually wanted her "care"?

How shameless!

But the trip to Rosalind Garden couldn't be delayed. The studio was still waiting for the fresh flowers to make perfumes. The daily costs for equipment, labor, and maintenance were astronomical; they couldn't afford any delays.

Estelle's expression shifted repeatedly. Forced to choose between "losing money" and "taking care of him," she decided that money was a bit more important. Enduring a couple of days of disgust would pass, but once the money was gone, it was gone for good.

Estelle gnashed her teeth. "Fine. You want me to take care of you? Sure, no problem."

Seeing the vivid expressions on her face, Nathaniel curled his lips. He once again superimposed Yara's face over Estelle's, and his mood improved significantly.

However, before he could speak, he saw Estelle suddenly stand up and walk toward the kitchen. Two minutes later, she returned carrying a watermelon and holding a knife in her hand.

"Mr. Sloan, there happens to be some chilled watermelon in the kitchen. The weather's getting hot, so this will cool you down. Since it's inconvenient for you to move, I'll cut it for you."

Nathaniel was slightly taken aback. When he asked Estelle to take care of him, he had actually just been joking. He hadn't expected her to really be willing to cut fruit for him.

"You don't..." He instinctively wanted to say that she didn't need to do these things.

But before he could finish, Estelle gripped the knife with one hand and stabbed it straight into the front of the fruit. The blade went in clean and came out red. Her movements made it look as though she wasn't stabbing a watermelon, but Nathaniel's head.

CRACK! The watermelon split into two halves.

A menacing smile surfaced on Estelle's lips. "Rest assured, Mr. Sloan. For the next two days, I will take very good care of you."

Nathaniel was utterly speechless.

Estelle gave a cold harrumph, tossed the watermelon knife aside, and went upstairs to sleep.

Nathaniel sat alone in the living room for a long time, gazing thoughtfully at her retreating figure. Whether it was her subtle habits or her expressions when she was angry, they were just too similar...

PLOP.

Suddenly, a tube of ointment was tossed onto the sofa next to him. He looked up and met Zachery's slightly tense little face, which was full of reluctance. "Mia asked me to bring you some medicine."

Nathaniel toyed with the ointment with interest. "At least Mia has a conscience."

Zachery instantly flared up. "What's that supposed to mean? Are you insinuating that my mommy has no conscience?"

Nathaniel was amused, his long, narrow eyes sparkling with banter. "You were the one who said that. I didn't."

Zachery was left speechless. Damn it, it felt like he had been outmaneuvered by his scumbag daddy! He muttered under his breath, "You deserve a lifetime of groveling to get your wife back!"

Chapter 46: Noelle Is Scorned by Mr. Sloan and Almost Dies of Anger

Nathaniel didn't catch his mumbling. "Zachery, there's something I've always been curious about."

Zachery figured this man was up to no good. If he hadn't shown up to save Mia today, Zachery wouldn't even bother giving him the time of day. "What is it?"

Nathaniel looked at the boy who was a carbon copy of Yara Lockwood. The emotions in his heart were churning, but his tone was exceptionally calm, as if he were just asking a casual question.

"What is your relationship with Estelle Lockwood?"

His tone was so utterly ordinary and indifferent that Zachery's tense nerves relaxed for a split second. "Oh, Es—"

Wait! Zachery suddenly snapped back to his senses, alarm bells blaring wildly in his head.

"What's going on?" he thought frantically. "Why did the scumbag dad suddenly mention Mommy's real name? Did he figure it out? No, no, no, that's not right. If he had, as the 'accomplice who killed Mommy,' he definitely wouldn't be this calm. He's testing me!"

With that in mind, Zachery sharply pivoted. "Oh? Who's Estelle Lockwood? I remember your fiancée is named Noelle Lockwood, Uncle Sloan. Could they be sisters? Wow, Uncle Sloan, you're quite the player!"

Nathaniel narrowed his eyes.

After a long while, he finally said hoarsely, "Estelle Lockwood is my wife."

Zachery's intellect peaked at this moment. He deliberately scoffed with disdain, "Why are you asking this? Don't tell me you suspect Mommy is Estelle Lockwood? Or that you suspect I'm your son?"

"Uncle Sloan, that's just lame. No one scrambles to be someone else's dad. Even if you're handsome and rich, you don't just get a great son like me out of nowhere.

"Also, I know Mommy is amazing, and a lot of people like her. If you want to date her, you should just pursue her directly. Claiming she looks like your ex-wife is no way to hit on someone... oh wait, no, to run a scam."

Zachery cleverly swapped his choice of words at the very end.

"Hmph, who told the scumbag dad to treat Mommy like a scammer the first time they met?" he thought.

Pressing his advantage, Zachery added, "Besides, even if Mommy really is your ex-wife, you should take a good, hard look in the mirror and ask yourself why she refuses to acknowledge you. Is it because you treated her too terribly?"

Having dropped that bomb, Zachery quickly ran upstairs, not giving the scumbag dad a chance to respond.

"That was close! He definitely suspects something," Zachery thought to himself. "But... when I said that last sentence, why did his expression look so sad? Does he actually have feelings for Mommy? If he does, why did he kill her?"

On second thought, Zachery figured it was for the best if Nathaniel had feelings. "If he had absolutely no feelings and no guilt, he might just think it saved him a lot of trouble when he found out Mommy returned but refused to acknowledge him. But if he has feelings and feels guilty toward her... then Mommy's coldness and deliberate concealment of her identity will be a poisoned blade to him."

The next morning at eight o'clock.

Estelle dragged herself out of bed, fighting off a heavy wave of exhaustion.

Thinking about how she still had to "take care" of Nathaniel today, she gritted her teeth. "It's just two days. I can endure it!"

After washing up, she was about to head downstairs when she suddenly heard a highly affected, pretentious female voice.

"Chapman, Nathaniel being injured is such a huge deal. Why didn't you tell me?

"I'm sorry, I really didn't know things would turn out like this. It's all my fault... Chapman, I'll stay at Imperial Crest for the next few days to take care of him. I'll just sleep in my old room, so please make the arrangements."

Estelle raised an eyebrow. This woman had been kicked out countless times, yet she still kept clinging to them like a leech. Her shamelessness was truly astounding.

Chapman hesitated. "Miss Noelle..."

Just then, Nathaniel walked out of the study and into the living room. His brows instantly furrowed. "Why are you here?"

Noelle's eyes brimmed with tears. She looked as though she wanted to speak but held back, her red, teary eyes gazing at Nathaniel with deep, lingering affection.

"Nathaniel, I never expected you to get hurt at the kindergarten that day. It's all my fault...

"I just couldn't put my mind at ease, so I wanted to come over and take care of you. You don't have anyone attentive and considerate by your side, and Chapman is getting old. It wouldn't be right to trouble him with certain tasks."

"I don't need your care," Nathaniel said coldly.

"It's okay. I'm more than willing to take care of you." Noelle bit her lower lip. "Nathaniel, have you changed your dressing yet? Let me help you."

As she spoke, she stepped forward to grab his wrist.

Estelle let out a light chuckle, practically flying down the stairs. She smoothly hooked her arm through Nathaniel's and feigned intimacy. "Nathaniel, so this is where you were. How's your arm doing?"

Nathaniel stiffened.

Noelle's eyes widened drastically. Her lips trembled as if she had just witnessed something utterly unbelievable. "You..."

"Oh, so Miss Lockwood is here too. Does Miss Lockwood want to take care of Nathaniel? There's no need; I can take care of him myself. You're a wealthy young lady who's never had to lift a finger in her life. How could you possibly know how to take care of someone? Please don't add to the chaos."

Estelle rested her head on Nathaniel's shoulder, playing up the affection. "Isn't that right, Nathaniel?"

The living room descended into a sudden silence.

Estelle still remembered an incident shortly after they got married. Nathaniel had been injured at a banquet, and a massive crowd had swarmed around him, squeezing her—his actual wife—to the very outside.

Noelle had hovered around him, bustling about anxiously, and the group had respectfully made way for her.

Estelle had tried to step in to help, but Noelle had loudly reprimanded her. "Sister, you came from the countryside! Do you even know how to bandage someone? You don't know anything! At a time like this, can you please stop causing trouble!"

The guests had also pointed fingers at her, criticizing her for lacking grace. They wondered why, during such an emergency, she still wanted to compete for favor with Miss Noelle—and if she even thought she could win.

But back then, Estelle had merely wanted to help...

Pulling her thoughts back to the present, Estelle swept a glance over Noelle's pale face, feeling a profound sense of satisfaction.

Noelle trembled all over, looking as if she were on the verge of tears. "Miss Yara, Nathaniel's injury is no small matter. It can't be treated like a joke. Over the years, I've been the one taking care of all his illnesses, both major and minor. I know exactly how to look after him, and you won't be able to do it properly..."

"Is that so?" Estelle blinked innocently. "But Mr. Sloan only wants me to take care of him."

Noelle desperately forced a gentle smile, though it strained at the edges. "Miss Yara, please stop joking. Nathaniel... say something..."

Estelle also turned to look at Nathaniel. She lowered her gaze, the threat in her eyes glaringly obvious.

Nathaniel's lips suddenly curled up. He leaned in slightly and spoke in a low voice that only the two of them could hear. "What does Miss Lockwood want me to do?"

Estelle raised an eyebrow. "You can't tell what I want you to do? Are you playing dumb with me?"

Nathaniel's eyes shifted thoughtfully. The scene that just played out and the words she used—he had an impression of them. At a banquet six years ago, he had been injured, and Estelle had wanted to help bandage him, only to be shoved aside by Noelle.

Since Yara still refused to admit that she was Estelle, his only option was to...

A playful smile tugged at the corners of Nathaniel's lips as he decided to push the test to its absolute limit. "I can help you. But Dr. Lockwood, give me a kiss. How about that?"

Mommy, Daddy Has Already Regretted It

Estelle thought she had misheard. Her eyes widened. "...What did you say?"

Nathaniel Sloan's gaze carried a physical weight. He swept his eyes over her face inch by inch before speaking in a hoarse, deliberate voice.

"I said, Dr. Lockwood, if you give me a kiss, I'll help you deal with Noelle."

Estelle stood stunned for two seconds before taking a sharp step back. "Nathaniel Sloan, have you no shame?"

She wondered if he was completely devoid of shame. She was merely his family doctor right now, yet he had the audacity to ask her for a kiss out of the blue! Was he even human?!

Nathaniel narrowed his eyes, then broke into a smile. "I can tell you really dislike Noelle, Dr. Lockwood. If she steps in to take care of me, she'll have to move back into Imperial Crest.

"When that happens, you and Noelle will be bumping into each other day in and day out. What a difficult situation that would be."

Estelle was no fool. "Are you threatening me?"

She wondered if this bastard was sick in the head! It was one thing that he insisted on having her take care of him. But now that Noelle had shown up, he actually wanted her to kiss him, or else he wouldn't give her the right to care for him... Who did he think he was? Was taking care of him such a great honor?

But if Noelle moved into Imperial Crest, wouldn't all of her own schemes be wasted? Estelle's expression gradually twisted in conflict.

Nathaniel gave a soft chuckle. He already had a rough guess as to what she would do, and was just about to tell Noelle to get lost when a shadow fell over him.

Estelle quickly pecked him on the lips!

It was a fleeting peck, brushing past as lightly as a feather, but that soft, warm sensation sent a jolt straight through Nathaniel's body.

A deeply familiar feeling surged up within him, and his gaze darkened profoundly.

After the kiss, Estelle immediately backed away two steps. She wiped her lips in clear disdain and shot him a look, silently urging him to speak up.

Noelle froze completely. Her eyes went wide, the blood rushing to her head until her vision tinted red.

She internally screamed, wondering what Yara was doing. Yara had just kissed Nathaniel! She had stayed by this man's side for so many years without ever getting the chance to lay a finger on him. Why was Yara allowed to kiss him?!

Tears welled up in Noelle's eyes, making her look incredibly pitiful. "Dr. Lockwood, how could you do this? Nathaniel, he..."

"I don't need you to take care of me here. I've told you before—you are not allowed at Imperial Crest without my permission," Nathaniel interrupted coldly. "Will you leave on your own, or do I need to have someone escort you out?"

Noelle acted as if she had suffered a monumental blow. Tears streamed down her beautiful face as she stumbled back a couple of steps, crying uncontrollably. "Nathaniel, I know you still blame me. I'll just go.

"But even if you blame me, there's no need to put on an act with Miss Yara just for my sake. I know..."

"Who said I'm acting?" Estelle didn't mind provoking her a bit more.

She gently pressed herself against Nathaniel's chest, looking at Noelle with utter leisure.

"Nathaniel and I are sincere. Miss Lockwood, it's getting late. Could you stop bothering us now?"

She would return every single word Noelle had once said to her, right back at her!

Seeing that Noelle still hadn't left, Estelle smiled brightly. "Or perhaps you want to stay and watch us continue kissing?"

"You... you..." Noelle whimpered. Under Nathaniel's icy glare, she covered her mouth and ran away.

Her retreating figure made it seem as though Estelle was some heinous Sinner.

Nathaniel's gaze was quiet and profound, carrying an indescribable depth as it fell upon Estelle.

Once Noelle was gone, Estelle immediately shoved him away, leaving his embrace. She frowned in annoyance. "What are you doing? Let go of me. Are you addicted to hugging me or something?"

Nathaniel let out a soft scoff. She really knew how to use him and toss him aside, burning the bridge the moment she had crossed the river.

Estelle headed straight upstairs. Nathaniel watched her back, suddenly closing his eyes.

"Mr. Chapman, I'll need you to do me a favor tonight."

He still had one more way to force her to admit her true identity.

Later that evening.

Estelle had just finished her work. Upon exiting the study, she bumped into a hurrying Mr. Chapman.

"Dr. Lockwood, the wound on Mr. Sloan's arm has split open again. It's too late to call for another doctor, so I must trouble you to take a look."

Estelle halted her steps toward her room. "Split open again?"

Thinking of Mr. Sloan's instructions, Mr. Chapman felt a bit guilty, but he still continued, "Yes, it seems quite serious. It's his right hand, and he can't even hold a pen right now."

As he spoke, he observed Estelle.

He noted how remarkably she resembled Mrs. Sloan. Rumors claimed she had undergone plastic surgery, so why was Mr. Sloan so certain of her true identity?

However, Mr. Sloan had mentioned he had a way to test her, and this wasn't something a butler like him needed to concern himself with.

Estelle furrowed her brows deeply, silently cursing Nathaniel in her head.

Was he crazy? Staying up in the middle of the night, tossing around until his wound bled again, to the point where he couldn't even hold a pen.

Didn't he know he had a ton of documents to sign tomorrow?

Fueled by pure, unadulterated fury, Estelle stormed into Nathaniel's room. "Nathaniel Sloan, you—"

Before she could finish her sentence, she abruptly froze, her eyes widening.

The man had discarded his black silk shirt, standing completely bare-chested. His broad shoulders, narrow waist, and perfectly sculpted eight-pack abs were put on full, unguarded display right before Estelle's eyes.

A thick rush of masculine pheromones seemed to saturate the air. With only a single bath towel wrapped loosely around his waist, he was a sight that easily sent the imagination running wild.

She was intimately familiar with this body. Over countless nights, he had used this very body to pin her down...

Stop. She couldn't let her thoughts go any further down that path!

Estelle immediately looked away, a faint shade of pink uncontrollably rising to her cheeks. "Can't you wear your clothes properly? Does the dignified head of the Sloan Family have exhibitionist tendencies?"

Nathaniel, however, simply raised his eyes indifferently, his Adam's apple bobbing. "Dr. Lockwood, this is my room. You didn't knock."

The implication was clear: she had barged in without knocking, so whatever she shouldn't have seen was her own fault.

Estelle choked on her words a bit, keeping her eyes averted. "Fine. Then do as you please, Mr. Sloan."

Saying this, she turned to walk out.

"Heh." Nathaniel gave a low chuckle. He raised an eyebrow with profound meaning and total composure. "Why keep your eyes closed, Dr. Lockwood... Are you afraid to look?"

Estelle's feet felt glued to the floor. She sensed a faint presence drawing closer and closer, followed by the man's unique body heat enveloping her entire figure.

"Didn't you say that in the eyes of a doctor, there is no distinction between genders? Why is Dr. Lockwood too afraid to even open her eyes?" Nathaniel's tone was slow and light.

Estelle silently cursed him for being sick in the head and angrily opened her eyes. "I am off the clock!"

The moment she opened them, her eyes landed squarely on the man's full, well-defined pectoral muscles. She instantly squeezed her eyes shut again, her cheeks flushing even redder. "Mr. Chapman was worried about you and asked me to come check on you. Since you're fine, I'm leaving."

A hint of scrutiny appeared in Nathaniel's eyes.

He still remembered that Estelle would blush no matter how many times she saw his physique. And as for Yara... since she had clearly returned, why was she hiding her identity?

"Of course there's an issue." Nathaniel leaned in slightly. His scorching breath brushed against Estelle's ear, sending a shiver of goosebumps down her skin and making her body go slightly weak.

The man's voice was hoarse as he spoke slowly, "Dr. Lockwood, help me bathe."

Chapter 48: Pinning Her in the Bathroom to Kiss Her

Estelle's eyes widened in shock.

Help him... take a shower?

But before she could refuse, Nathaniel Sloan slowly approached her. With nowhere left to retreat, Estelle was backed into the corner of the bathroom.

CLICK.

The door locked.

"Nathaniel..."

The familiar, masculine scent of his hormones washed over her. Her body went inexplicably limp, and she nearly stumbled into his arms. Estelle closed her eyes, silently cursing herself. Even though five years had passed, her body was still accustomed to surrendering to Nathaniel.

As his pale, thin lips leaned in, inches from claiming hers, her voice trembled. "Get away from me!"

"Mia, I don't know where Mommy went. Let's look upstairs first."

Zachery's voice drifted in from outside the door, growing steadily closer. Estelle stiffened, her body breaking into an involuntary, faint tremble.

Nathaniel pinned her against the glass door of the shower, his tone nonchalant. "If Dr. Lockwood goes out looking like this, people will inevitably get the wrong idea. You wouldn't want Zachery and Mia to misunderstand, would you?"

"What a bastard! What a scumbag!" she cursed internally.

Seeing no way of escaping, Estelle gritted her teeth and sneered. "Taking a shower when you're injured? Are you afraid of healing too quickly?"

Nathaniel's expression didn't change. "I naturally cherish my body. It's precisely to avoid getting water on my wound that I need Dr. Lockwood's help."

The tension in the room grew thicker. Estelle turned her head away, trying her best to keep her voice steady. "Go find Chapman. He can help you."

Nathaniel wrapped one arm around her waist and drawled, "Chapman is getting on in years. Are you really going to make him work this late at night?"

Estelle didn't back down. "Then ask Luke White."

He chuckled. "Dr. Lockwood, Luke is already off the clock. I'm not the kind of boss who exploits his employees."

Her eyes widened in disbelief. "When Mr. Sloan exploits me, why don't you claim to be a good boss then?"

The bathroom in Imperial Crest was incredibly spacious, but enveloped in such an intimate atmosphere, the walls felt like they were closing in on her, making it hard to breathe.

Nathaniel wasn't the least bit annoyed by her retort. His gaze traced her face, slowly trailing down to her lips, her collarbone, and finally, her water-soaked clothes.

"Regardless, I am a patient," Nathaniel said, his tone heavy with implication. "It is perfectly normal for a doctor to help sponge-bathe a patient."

"You're so resistant, Dr. Lockwood. What exactly are you afraid of? Or rather... are you afraid you might expose something while washing me?"

Estelle's breath hitched. She knew he was deliberately provoking her. As a doctor, she shouldn't refuse a patient's request. If she kept pushing him away, it would only arouse his suspicions even more.

"Fine! It's just a shower! I'll help you!"

A faint smirk played on Nathaniel's lips.

The shower area wasn't particularly large. Although Estelle consciously tried to keep her distance, their bodies still brushed against each other inadvertently, letting the intimate tension bloom. She wiped him down haphazardly, desperate to finish the task and get out of there.

Unbeknownst to her, she had also been soaked by the spray. Her thin clothing clung tightly to her shoulders and collarbone, painting a highly evocative picture.

Nathaniel's eyes gradually darkened with desire. He remembered Estelle's figure—it was exactly the same as Yara Lockwood's. Their height, their voices, their figures, and their strikingly similar faces. Who else in the world could resemble Estelle Lockwood so perfectly, other than Estelle herself?

He grasped her wrist, his hot breath brushing against her ear, sending a tingling sensation down her spine.

"There is something I am quite curious about. I hope Dr. Lockwood can answer it for me."

Not giving Estelle a chance to speak, Nathaniel pressed on. "You've never met Noelle Lockwood before, yet you despise her so much. And every time the events of five years ago are brought up, you get incredibly agitated... Who exactly are you getting so worked up for?"

He finished speaking, his unblinking gaze locked onto her.

Estelle shuddered but forced herself to remain calm. "Do I need a reason to hate Noelle Lockwood? As for what happened five years ago, I just can't stand by when I see an injustice. Is that a crime?"

Nathaniel lowered his voice. "The subject of the injustice you keep standing up for always seems to be my wife."

Estelle mocked him. "Isn't it just because your ex-wife's fate was too tragic, and I couldn't bear to see it? Mr. Sloan might not know this, but my ex-husband was also a bastard. I simply empathize with her, that's all."

He narrowed his eyes and suddenly tilted her chin up. Looking straight into her eyes, he asked slowly, "Are you empathizing, or..."

"Are you my wife?"

The surroundings instantly fell dead silent, the air itself seeming to freeze in place. Estelle's pupils dilated for a fraction of a second before she vehemently denied it.

"Mr. Sloan, please conduct yourself with dignity! My ex-husband is six feet under! He's a dead man. Are you one too?"

The bathroom remained silent for a couple of seconds, but the sensual tension between them didn't stop growing.

Nathaniel let out a low, husky chuckle. He suddenly leaned in close, his scent completely enveloping her. "To tell you the truth, I suspect that you are my ex-wife."

Completely oblivious to the fact that she had just walked right into his trap, Estelle retorted, "Just because you suspect it, it means I am? Well, I suspect there's something wrong with your head!"

He wasn't angered in the slightest. Instead, his fingertips lightly brushed against her waistline. Seeing her whole body shiver, a playful smirk tugged at the man's lips.

"I am very familiar with her body, and she is naturally very familiar with mine... Dr. Lockwood, do you dare?"

Estelle knew exactly what he was asking with that 'do you dare.' And precisely because she knew, she stared at him in disbelief. "What do you think you're— Mmph!"

A numbing, electric sensation spread from her waist. She was far too familiar with this feeling!

Whenever Nathaniel did this sort of thing, he always took his time. He was never impatient in bed; his movements were slow and methodical, yet he could always leave her weak in the knees and completely breathless. She was only wearing a thin silk nightgown. Soaked by the water, it clung to her seamlessly, tracing every perfect curve of her body.

The man's body was scorching hot and powerful, effortlessly pulling her petite frame into his embrace. As his fingertips ignited fires all over her skin, a dazed look slowly clouded Estelle's eyes.

Nathaniel looked at her face—a face that was aligning more and more with the one in his memory. His eyes darkened instantly. With a sudden spin, he pinned her against the glass door!

"Nathaniel, what are you doing... Mmph..."

All her protests were swallowed by his lips. The sound of splashing water was drowned out by the other sounds in the bathroom. A violent shudder ripped through Estelle's body. Under his familiar assault, her body's secrets were being exposed piece by piece.

The kiss didn't last long. It seemed Nathaniel was truly just testing her. His expression remained unchanged, his handsome features as cool and detached as ever. Estelle, on the other hand, was left in a daze. Her legs had turned to jelly, and her swollen lips were slightly parted as she panted heavily.

When the kiss finally broke, she slumped limply against his chest. Her voice lacked its previous bite, coming out raspy and deeply evocative. "Get lost..."

Nathaniel knew that in moments like this, Estelle would always be left completely disoriented and would answer any question he asked. So, he slowly leaned down, cradling the drenched woman in his arms, and whispered softly.

"Dr. Lockwood, you are Estelle Lockwood, aren't you?"

Chapter 49: Bitten by a Dog on the Lip

Estelle's head spun from the kiss. Hearing his voice, it felt as if she had been transported back to five years ago.

Back then, she loved this man so deeply she would have sacrificed everything for him. Just two words from him could keep her happy all day.

She always knew she had a fiancé, but everyone said he rightfully belonged to Noelle.

When she first returned to the Lockwood family, her parents had no affection for her. The entire family revolved around Noelle. As the true daughter of the family, her status was even lower than that of the servants.

But one day, while she was doing servant's chores in the yard, a man blocked her path.

He wore a black silk shirt, sunlight spilling from behind him. That was the first time someone in the Lockwood family had ever called her by her real name.

He had asked, "Are you Estelle Lockwood?"

Later, Estelle learned that this was her fiancé in name.

While the rest of the Lockwood family called her a "country bumpkin" or a "waste of money," only Nathaniel Sloan would pronounce her full name, syllable by syllable: Estelle Lockwood.

He was like a beam of light cutting through the darkness. From then on, Estelle threw herself at that light, heedless of the cost—until later...

Estelle suddenly snapped back to the present.

It wasn't five years ago anymore, and she refused to be fooled by this hypocritical man again!

"I'm not! I'm Yara!"

Having fully regained her senses, Estelle took a deep breath and forced herself to stand tall. "Mr. Sloan, you act as though you're so deeply in love, yet you can't even recognize your own wife!

"Since you're so suspicious, I'll say it one more time. Listen closely—my name is Yara Lockwood, not Estelle Lockwood!

"If you still have your doubts, I highly recommend you get your head checked at a hospital. It's best to seek early treatment if you're already suffering from delusions at your age!"

With that, she yanked the bathroom door open and strode out.

Nathaniel watched her retreating figure, his eyes swirling with an unfathomable depth.

Furious and flustered, Estelle stormed out of Nathaniel's bedroom and crashed right into someone.

The person was a man in his late twenties, wearing a white lab coat. He stumbled back a step from the collision and stared in utter shock. "Y-You..."

He wondered if he was seeing things. Had this soaking wet woman, wrapped only in a bath towel, just come out of Nathaniel's room...?

And her lips were bruised and swollen. It didn't take a genius to figure out what she had just been doing!

Wait, no... what was Nathaniel doing?

Completely oblivious to the man's wild misunderstandings, Estelle glanced at him and suddenly asked, "Are you a doctor?"

The doctor replied instinctively, "Ah, yeah. I'm President Sloan's family doctor. I just got back to the country. How did you..."

Before he could finish, Estelle nodded and said dryly, "Perfect timing. Go check Nathaniel's brain."

Her tone was completely deadpan. "I suspect he got water on the brain while taking his shower."

The doctor was speechless.

He was confused, yet profoundly shaken.

Carrying this sense of shock, he entered Nathaniel's bedroom just as the man himself emerged from the bathroom.

The doctor swallowed hard. A whirlwind of complex emotions—surprise, excitement, and sheer admiration—flashed through his eyes before he summarized them all into a single sentence. "Nathaniel, you certainly know how to play wild."

He didn't know who that woman was, but to think they had actually done the deed in the bathroom... He had never heard of Nathaniel, the notorious ice block, having a fetish for bathroom escapades with women...

Nathaniel cast him a sideways glance, interrupting the doctor's inappropriate train of thought. Slipping into a bathrobe, he asked coolly, "Why are you here?"

The doctor immediately snapped back to attention, not daring to let his eyes wander. "Chapman said you were playing the sympathy card. He was worried you'd take the stunt too far, so he told me to come keep an eye on you."

The doctor's name was Zane Grant. He was a longtime friend of Nathaniel's who had gone abroad to study medicine and had only recently returned.

Zane tried to hold back but failed. He leaned in with burning curiosity, a sly tone in his voice.

"Who was that woman just now? I caught a glimpse—she's gorgeous! Even with all the beauties in Crestfall, she's easily the prettiest. Where did you find—"

Nathaniel's icy gaze shot toward him. "You looked at her?"

Zane choked on his words and hastily backed away, waving his hands defensively. "No, no, I didn't see anything! She was wearing a towel! What's with that look? I know she's your woman; it's not like I'm going to steal her!

"But to think you've actually changed women? Would Noelle agree to this? Tsk, tsk."

Nathaniel looked at him quietly before suddenly asking, "Don't you think the woman just now looks a lot like someone?"

Zane froze. Like someone? Like who?

He quickly realized there was only one woman Nathaniel would ever keep so close to his heart.

"Are you talking about... Estelle?"

Nathaniel's eyes darkened.

"No way." Zane was bewildered. "Estelle has been dead for five years. Her body was... uh, anyway, that's impossible, right?"

He had wanted to say that Estelle's body had been charred beyond recognition in that fire.

When Nathaniel got married, Zane had been abroad. He only rushed back in a panic because he heard Mrs. Sloan had committed suicide and was worried about his friend.

By the time he returned, Estelle's body had already been sent for cremation by the Lockwood family. Once someone was cremated, how could they possibly come back to life?

Zane had only ever seen photos of Estelle. Thinking about it now, the woman from earlier really did look a lot like her. "There's something I'm not sure if I should say."

"If you don't think you should say it, then shut up."

Zane wrestled with himself for a moment before deciding to spill it anyway. "She has a very small scar on her temple, hidden by her hair. Most people wouldn't notice, but it's obvious to me. That's a post-operative scar from plastic surgery."

If that woman had undergone plastic surgery, then no matter how much she resembled Estelle... it didn't count, did it?

After Zane finished, he noticed Nathaniel remaining silent. He couldn't help but add, "Besides, you always said Estelle was well-behaved and gentle. That woman from earlier couldn't be further from 'well-behaved.'"

The moment they met, she told him Nathaniel had water on the brain. She even wiped her lips as she walked, acting as if Nathaniel was some sort of repulsive plague.

Why would Nathaniel think she was Estelle?

Suddenly realizing something, Zane asked cautiously, his voice laced with concern, "Hey, you don't actually have water on the brain, do you?"

Nathaniel was speechless.

Estelle hurried back to her own room. The moment she was inside, she rushed to the bathroom and scrubbed herself squeaky clean from head to toe.

Her lips were already split and swollen red. They would never heal by tomorrow!

But she had to go to Rosalind Garden tomorrow... How was she going to explain this to anyone?

Whatever! She would just say she had been bitten by a dog!

Estelle forced herself to sleep. Early the next morning, she finished washing up and opened her door, just in time to see Zachery and Mia coming to find her.

"Mommy, where did you go last night? Mia couldn't find you anywhere..."

Halfway through her sentence, Mia suddenly widened her eyes. "Mommy, why are your lips so swollen?"

Estelle was at a loss for words.

It was just her luck!

She took a deep breath. Sticking to her plan from the night before, she gritted out through clenched teeth, "It's nothing. Mommy was bitten by a dog."

Nathaniel, who had just opened his bedroom door, heard every word.

Chapter 50: Do We Have a New Dad? Who Is It?

Estelle and the two little ones didn't see Nathaniel Sloan.

After she finished speaking, Mia and Zachery fell silent for a moment before speaking up like little adults.

"Mommy, we aren't little kids anymore! A dog couldn't leave a mark like that. That was obviously made by a person!"

Estelle blushed, slowly closing her eyes.

She wondered what on earth her two darlings had been watching lately.

Zachery's eyes darted around mischievously. "Mommy, could it be that you have a man now? Is it our new daddy? Is the new daddy handsome?"

Estelle almost fainted on the spot.

Forcing herself to calm down, she said, "Darlings, there's no new daddy. My lips were really bitten by a dog... You know, the one Chapman keeps in the backyard, Whitey. Do you remember? Yesterday, when Mommy was playing with Whitey, I got bitten."

Chapman did, in fact, have a little white dog.

Zachery didn't buy it at all. "Mia, do a reading. Figure out where the person who bit Mommy's lips is."

Estelle stiffened. Nathaniel raised an eyebrow slightly, wanting to see how this woman would try to explain herself next.

He wondered if she had just called him a dog.

Mia nodded immediately, pulling out three copper coins to cast a hexagram.

Five minutes later, Mia said dejectedly, "Zachery, there's a problem. The hexagram says the person who bit Mommy... ah, no, the dog is right here in Imperial Crest! It seems it really was Whitey!"

"In Imperial Crest?" Zachery was greatly disappointed as well. Who in Imperial Crest could have bitten Mommy? It couldn't be Chapman, it couldn't be Ms. Riddle, and it couldn't be the young master. So, it could only be...

"WAAAH! Our new daddy is actually a dog!"

Nathaniel closed his eyes, the veins on his forehead throbbing twice.

After much coaxing, Estelle finally managed to soothe her two darlings and prepared to set off for Rosalind Garden.

As soon as she came downstairs, she saw the doctor from last night eating breakfast in the dining room, but Nathaniel was nowhere to be seen.

Estelle furrowed her brows. She wondered if that dog of a man's injuries had worsened and if he was bailing on today's plans.

That wouldn't do at all. The document signing, the contract, and every single matter concerning Rosalind Garden had to go through Nathaniel. She couldn't afford any delays.

"Where's Nathaniel?" Estelle asked Chapman.

Chapman glanced at Zane Grant and lied through his teeth. "Sir is... sick."

Estelle didn't notice Chapman's unnatural demeanor. "Sick? Even if he's sick, he needs to get up. Is he reliable at all? Dropping the ball at such a critical moment."

Zane almost choked to death on a mouthful of steamed bun.

He had deliberately wanted to test this woman. If she were truly Mrs. Sloan, wouldn't she show some signs of distress upon hearing that Nathaniel was sick?

Moreover, although Zane hadn't been in the country five years ago, he had still heard a few rumors about Mrs. Sloan—that she was cowardly, docile, and obedient.

How was she even remotely similar to this woman named Yara Lockwood?

"Ahem, Miss Lockwood," Zane couldn't help but interrupt. "Nathaniel is fine. It's just that Evernight International has a last-minute multinational conference that requires his decision, so he's having a meeting upstairs. He'll be done in ten minutes."

Estelle was relieved.

Zane looked at her with interest. "Miss Lockwood, why aren't you asking who I am?"

Estelle glanced at him, seemingly puzzled. "Why should I need to know who you are?"

Zane coughed. "Nathaniel and I have been close friends for many years. I know a lot about him. Aren't you curious at all?"

In the past, whenever Noelle Lockwood wanted to get close to Nathaniel, she would try to curry favor with Zane, attempting to use him as a stepping stone to grow closer to Nathaniel. Zane was already used to it.

Who would have thought that after a long silence, Estelle would suddenly let out a cold sneer. "Curious about Nathaniel Sloan? Heh."

Zane was dumbfounded, wondering what that "heh" meant and whether she was mocking him or mocking Nathaniel.

However, Zane didn't dwell on it. Nathaniel had mentioned that Yara was Christian's personal doctor, and Christian's health had indeed improved significantly recently.

But since they were heading to Rosalind Garden, it would be up to him to take care of Christian for the next few days.

Half an hour later, Estelle and Nathaniel set off for Rosalind Garden on time.

In the car, Nathaniel's gaze swept over her.

Estelle kept her lips tightly pursed and her eyes closed, resting. Perhaps due to a lack of sleep last night, she was feeling a bit carsick.

Rosalind Garden was located in the suburbs of Crestfall, meaning the drive would take over two hours. Estelle clutched her stomach, her face turning pale.

Nathaniel furrowed his brows. "Are you feeling unwell?"

After what happened last night, Estelle didn't want to talk to him at all, nor did she want to show any vulnerability in front of him. "Mind your own business."

Despite her dismissive words, her face grew paler by the minute.

"Miss Lockwood, we have a packed schedule today. If you act tough now and your body gives out later, as your business partner, I will have to question your sense of responsibility towards our cooperation."

Estelle's lips pressed into a tight line.

"Pull over," Nathaniel ordered the driver.

The car came to a stop by the side of the road. Estelle rolled down the window, clutching her chest in silence.

She didn't speak—firstly, because she didn't want to engage with Nathaniel, and secondly, because the motion sickness was truly unbearable, leaving her with no energy to talk.

Estelle looked listless. Suddenly, she heard the car door open. She instinctively turned her head and saw that Nathaniel had stepped out.

She wondered why he was getting out of the car when they hadn't yet reached Rosalind Garden.

Watching Nathaniel walk further away, Estelle's mind was a muddled mess, and she couldn't be bothered to overthink it.

Suddenly, something ice-cold was pressed against her cheek.

Estelle looked up blankly.

The man's distinct, well-defined fingers were holding a cup of iced lemonade and a blister pack of pills.

"Motion sickness medicine. Take some and rest for a bit before we hit the road."

Estelle tried hard to focus her vision, attempting to process what he was saying about the motion sickness medicine and lemonade.

Her brain hadn't fully caught up, but she subconsciously accepted the items and took a sip.

She had always suffered from motion sickness, a condition that hadn't improved over the years. In the past, she always liked to take a few sips of iced lemonade whenever she felt carsick.

She wondered how Nathaniel could possibly know.

Estelle shook her head vigorously, convincing herself that it had to be a coincidence!

"I'm fine now. Let's go."

Nathaniel's gaze was profound. He stared at her for a long time before looking away and calmly instructing the driver, "Drive."

He knew that Estelle suffered from motion sickness and that she liked to drink lemonade whenever it hit.

His gaze landed on her red, swollen lips. By tacit mutual agreement, neither of them brought up what happened last night.

He scoffed inwardly at her refusal to admit it.

An hour later, they finally arrived at Rosalind Garden.

Having taken the motion sickness medicine, Estelle wasn't feeling as miserable anymore, but her mood remained low.

Nathaniel got out of the car first, then walked around to the other side to open the door for her.

Waiting at the entrance of Rosalind Garden, Noelle Lockwood took in this scene at a glance. Her expression turned ferocious as she gritted her teeth.

She knew that many business elites would be visiting Rosalind Garden today. She had purposefully shown up as Nathaniel's fiancée so that no one would dare say a word against her, even allowing her to stand front and center to welcome him.

Yet, to her dismay, she was now watching Estelle and Nathaniel step out of the exact same car!

Putting on a smile, Noelle stepped forward, preparing to link her arm through Nathaniel's. "Nathaniel, you're here. You must be tired, hurry and come inside."

Nathaniel narrowed his eyes. "Why are you here?"

Before Noelle could answer, a pot-bellied executive stepped up from behind her. "President Sloan, Mrs. Sloan came specifically to deliver some documents."

Estelle slightly raised her head and arched an eyebrow, silently questioning the title of "Mrs. Sloan."

Noelle's expression was gentle and refined as she gave a coy smile, as if asserting her dominance.