

Mommy, Daddy Has Already Regretted It

Chapter 61: Nathaniel to Noelle: Get Lost

Hearing the piano teacher's words, Chapman was already furious. However, since this was the instructor the master had hired for the young master, it wasn't his place as a butler to say anything.

Just then, a soft, sweet voice rang out from the staircase. "Grandpa Chapman, is the piano teacher here? Please let him in."

Chapman recognized Young Mr. Sloan's voice. No matter how indignant he felt, he could only turn to the piano teacher and say, "Please come in."

The piano teacher gave a cold harrumph. Walking into the piano room, he saw 'Christian' already sitting obediently at the piano with his head bowed. At first glance, the boy looked incredibly easy to manipulate.

The piano teacher couldn't help but feel that Noelle Lockwood had made a mountain out of a molehill. Still, seeing the young master of the Sloan family acting so respectfully toward him put the teacher in an excellent mood. After all, being the private tutor for Nathaniel Sloan's only son was a huge bragging right.

The piano teacher puffed out his chest arrogantly. "Play the piece I taught you last month."

Zachery feigned obedience. "Okay, Mr. Miller."

The piano teacher immediately furrowed his brows, looking thoroughly displeased. "My last name is Young! How could you even get your teacher's name wrong?!"

Zachery feigned astonishment. "Oh, did I remember it wrong? I'm so sorry, Mr. Young. But you can't really blame me. After all, I was just born so~ stu~pid~"

A dead, awkward silence fell over the piano room. The piano teacher choked on his words. "You... you..."

"Don't be mad, sir. I'll play for you right now." Zachery closed his eyes and began mashing the keys at random. The resulting noise was completely tuneless and jarring to the ears. Let alone someone who had studied piano, even a complete beginner couldn't have played something so atrocious.

The piano teacher once again struggled to catch his breath. "Christian Sloan! I told you to play properly! Are you trying to piss me off on purpose?!"

The only reason he had been allowed to stay at Imperial Crest and teach the young master was because Christian's piano skills had previously shown improvement. Yet now, the boy was refusing to cooperate. What if Nathaniel Sloan thought he wasn't teaching properly?

The more he thought about it, the angrier he got. Terrified of losing this lucrative job, the piano teacher's face contorted fiercely. "So young, yet so poorly behaved!"

Zachery blinked his eyes and threw his hands up in a helpless gesture. With an incredibly infuriating, sarcastic tone, he began to mock him:

"Sir, it's really not that I'm not trying. I just can't learn it. After all, you know I'm naturally stupid~

"Mr. Young, it must be so hard on you to teach such a dumb child. We really can't afford a hotshot like you here. Why don't you go find Chapman and settle your final paycheck?"

"You... have no respect for your teachers..." The piano teacher was practically dying of anger, his chest heaving violently.

Just then, a woman's voice rang out from outside the piano room. Noelle Lockwood rushed in anxiously. "Mr. Young, please don't be angry. Christian is just a bit mischievous. He has a rather eccentric temper, so please bear with him."

Feeling like he now had someone backing him up, the piano teacher's tone grew tough. "Miss Noelle, I never wanted to take on this student in the first place. I only agreed to teach him a little because you begged me. But I never expected Young Mr. Sloan to be so hopelessly stubborn!"

Noelle bit her lip and said frantically, "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry. It's all my child's fault. It's not your fault that he can't be taught."

After saying that, she turned her head, putting on a face that made it look like she was only acting in Christian's best interest. "Christian, hurry over and apologize. You can't keep being so willful. If you anger this teacher until he leaves, who else will be willing to teach you in the future?"

Only then did the piano teacher feel his mood lift. "Miss Noelle, you are the only reasonable one here."

Zachery narrowed his eyes.

"Is she the grandmaster of gaslighting?" he wondered. "She opens her mouth and immediately demands an apology. She hasn't even figured out what happened, yet she wants the young master to apologize. How much injustice has the young master suffered in the past?"

Laura Jennings was following behind Noelle. So that was why she had a backer now. However, while the young master might have been bullied before, he, Zachery Lockwood, certainly wouldn't be.

Zachery let out a cold chuckle. "Aunt Noelle, I don't quite understand what you mean. Mr. Young can leave if he wants to. What do you mean by saying that no one else but him

would be willing to come to Imperial Crest to teach me? How about I have Daddy go out and ask around?"

Noelle choked on her words. She thought to herself, "This little brat actually knows how to talk back now!"

"Christian, even if you can find another teacher, they won't be as dedicated and devoted to you as Mr. Young..."

Zachery cut her off unceremoniously. "Dedicated and devoted to me? Does 'dedicated and devoted' mean Mr. Young taking a six-figure salary from Daddy just to come to the house and teach me once a month? That's way too easy of a buck to make!"

He had asked Chapman earlier and seen the payroll, which had instantly made him explode with anger. He wondered if his scumbag dad had a hole in his brain. Even if a hundred grand was just pocket change to him, giving it to a piano teacher with zero professional ethics who only worked two hours a month was simply not how money should be spent. And then there was this piano teacher. Taking the money without doing the work was bad enough, but he even had the nerve to constantly gaslight the young master!

Hearing this, the piano teacher was enraged beyond belief. "Miss Noelle, you heard him! Christian has had this attitude the whole time—how am I supposed to teach him?! As his teacher, it's not asking too much for me to demand an apology, is it?!"

Noelle hurriedly placated him, her every word implicitly and explicitly blaming Christian. "Of course it's not too much. Christian is in the wrong here, and I'll definitely make him apologize to you. Auntie, wouldn't you agree?"

Laura Jennings had arrived late and only heard Noelle apologizing profusely. Following normal logic, she assumed Christian had done something wrong—otherwise, why would Noelle act so submissive and humble? Thus, Laura also chimed in, "Christian, apologize. How can you be so disrespectful to your teacher?"

Zachery felt like his lungs were going to explode from rage.

He didn't understand. Christian Sloan was clearly a young master born with a silver spoon in his mouth. So why did Noelle, as his biological mother, treat him this way? His status was noble and prestigious, yet in places no one could see, he suffered such grievances.

Zachery sneered, "No."

A flash of irritation crossed Noelle's heart. Why was this little beast being so disobedient?! If he didn't apologize, how was she supposed to spread the word about this incident and show off her 'hard work and great contributions'?

Noelle took a step forward and viciously pinched Zachery's wrist. "Apologize this instant..."

Before she could finish her sentence, the sound of hurried footsteps echoed from outside the door.

Noelle could tell that these were Nathaniel's footsteps. She immediately put on a wronged expression, but Zachery wasn't about to give her the chance to perform!

Zachery immediately threw himself onto the floor and began to wail at the top of his lungs, though without shedding a single genuine tear.

This sudden outburst of crying completely dumbfounded Noelle and Laura. For a long while, neither of them could process what was happening.

Nathaniel rushed into the piano room and scooped Zachery up into his arms, his heart trembling. "Christian!"

"WAAAH! Daddy! They're all bullying me! Noelle even pinched me—it hurts so much!"

Zachery had used all his might to pinch his own wrist until it was red. Then, with teary eyes, he held it up to Nathaniel, not feeling the slightest bit guilty about framing her.

"Look, Daddy! Aunt Noelle pinched me here! She's so mean!"

Nathaniel's eyes were icy. "Didn't I tell you to get the hell out?"

Noelle bit her lower lip and wept in grievance. "Nathaniel, I didn't. Why would I pinch Christian? I just wanted him to stop being so mischievous and apologize to his teacher. And then... then he..."

"Were you just asking me to apologize? You were forcing me to admit that I'm naturally inferior!" Zachery said in disgust. "You're the one who brought this piano teacher here. Don't think I don't know what you're plotting!"

Chapter 62: I Thought You Were a Different Person

As Zachery spoke, he pinched himself again, but still couldn't squeeze out a single tear.

Giving up, he simply covered his face with his hands and continued to wail drily.

Nathaniel Sloan's heart ached. "Christian, it's okay. Daddy's here. I'll make her leave right now."

"Nathaniel," Noelle Lockwood shed silent tears. "I know Christian isn't close to me. If I just wanted to win his affection, I could simply do nothing and let him have his way with everything."

"But I truly want what's best for him, which is why I can't indulge his every whim. That's why I found a teacher for him, so he could study properly. However... you saw what just happened, Mrs. Jennings."

Laura immediately nodded. "Exactly. Noelle is Christian's biological mother, and she does everything with his best interests at heart. Think about it—if she weren't his real mother, why would she go through the trouble of finding him a piano teacher?"

Noelle lowered her head submissively. "Nathaniel, I know I've upset Christian. If you blame me for that, I have nothing to say. But Mr. Young is a teacher, after all. How can Christian disrespect his elders? If word gets out, people will turn him into a laughingstock."

Laura's heart immediately went out to her. "Nathaniel, Noelle is already being so humble. Do you still not believe her? Christian is my grandson, and I dote on him too, but you can't spoil him rotten!"

"I really don't get it, Grandma. Am I actually your biological grandson?"

Zachery didn't back down. "You claim I disrespected the teacher and are forcing me to apologize. But Mr. Young called me stupid! Why aren't you making him apologize to me?"

The piano teacher and Noelle both froze.

Zachery continued, "Mr. Young said that if it wasn't for Noelle, he wouldn't have even come to teach me. He said I was lucky to have him as my teacher and told me to obediently listen to him. What era are we in, acting like it's a 'blessing' for me? What, did Daddy not pay him?

"Daddy, Noelle says I don't like her, but does she actually like me? If she really cared about me, she wouldn't have gone out of her way to introduce a teacher like this. She's just trying to ruin my future!

"But Aunt Noelle has always treated me this way over the years, and I'm used to it. But what about you, Grandma?"

Zachery sharply changed the subject, continuing, "I used to think you were just being deceived by Noelle. But today, you're doing the same thing. You demanded that I apologize without even listening to reason. Daddy said a couple of words to Noelle, and you immediately felt sorry for her. Why don't you feel sorry for your own biological grandson?

"Or could it be that I'm not your biological grandson at all? Should we go get a DNA test? But I look so much like Daddy, so I must be his real son. That leaves only one possibility—you aren't Daddy's biological mother!

"And because you aren't Daddy's biological mother, you aren't my real grandmother! That's why you agree with Noelle's methods and want to intentionally ruin me!"

The more Zachery spoke, the more sense he felt he was making. In his mind, it formed a flawless loop of logic.

Laura's face turned pale, then flushed red. By the end, she was both angry and exasperated. "Nonsense! How could I not be Nathaniel's biological mother?! And... and you didn't mention earlier that this piano teacher insulted you! If you had told me, Grandma definitely would have taken your side!"

Zachery didn't want to hear her excuses. With red eyes, he looked up. "Daddy, that's exactly what happened. I'm not apologizing."

Nathaniel's expression was icy. His sharp gaze swept over Noelle, though his words were directed at the piano teacher.

"Since you're so reluctant to teach my child, you're fired. Chapman, make sure the reason for his dismissal is made public."

The piano teacher instantly panicked. If he left the Sloan Family, where else would he find such a lucrative job?

"Miss Noelle, please help me. I... I only did this because of you..."

"I'm so sorry, Christian! I had no idea Mr. Young would be so out of line!" Noelle suddenly burst into uncontrollable sobs, cutting off the piano teacher's words.

Clutching her chest, her tears fell in a continuous stream, like pearls from a broken string. "It's all my fault. Go ahead and scold me, Christian. It's all my fault..."

Laura was at a loss. "Nathaniel, look, Noelle knows she made a mistake. It was this teacher who deceived us all. You really can't blame Noelle for this... She came here today specifically to make pear soup for Christian. You know how much Christian loves the pear soup she makes..."

Zachery pursed his lips.

He thought, "I really want to crack open the young master's grandmother's skull to see what's inside.

"But Noelle is truly something else. Even after I 'cried' so pitifully, Laura is still defending her.

"They must have bullied Mommy exactly like this in the past!

"Once this starts, it'll never end. If I don't completely drive this woman out today, Noelle will just find more excuses to come over in the future. What should I do..."

Wait, pear soup?

Zachery's eyes darted around as a plan sprang to mind. He tugged at Nathaniel's sleeve.

"Daddy, I want some pear soup."

Noelle's eyes lit up. She knew this little brat wouldn't dare kick her out for real!

Nathaniel frowned slightly. Noelle really wasn't suited to remain by Christian's side.

But Christian wanted pear soup...

He shot her a cold glance. "Then stay and make him the soup."

Noelle forced a smile, carefully hiding the venom in her eyes. "Alright, Christian. I'll go right now."

Noelle headed to the kitchen, and after a moment of hesitation, Laura followed her.

Zachery looked on in disgust. "Daddy, seriously, find some time to do a paternity test with Grandma."

He thought, "With her IQ, she doesn't seem like she belongs in the same family as scumbag Daddy.

"Even though I don't want to admit it, scumbag Daddy is undeniably smart and capable. How could he have a mother like that? Could someone like Laura really give birth to a son like scumbag Daddy?"

"Alright, Daddy. I'm done talking. I'm going back to my room."

Zachery scurried off the moment he finished speaking. He needed to hurry and exchange signals with the young master, so he could absolutely dominate the dinner table later!

He ran back upstairs, only to find that Christian was not in his room.

He wondered, "That's weird. Where did the young master go? Could he be with Mommy?"

Meanwhile, in Estelle Lockwood's study.

She sat with the two little ones, video-calling Old Mr. Kendrick and Old Mrs. Kendrick. As the call came to an end, the two children obediently said their goodbyes.

Old Mr. Kendrick exclaimed, "Zachery, this is incredible! Since returning to the country, you're like a completely different person. To think you've become so polite and even know to say goodbye to your great-grandfather."

Old Mrs. Kendrick chuckled happily. "What nonsense are you spouting? Our precious Zachery has always been polite. Isn't that right, sweetie?"

Old Mr. Kendrick teased, "If you weren't standing right next to Yara, I would have thought you had been swapped out for someone else."

Mia's scalp tingled with anxiety. Zachery's Disguise Technique had been taught to him by Old Mr. Kendrick himself. What if their great-grandfather noticed something?!

She gave Christian's sleeve a quick tug, signaling for him to speak less.

But to her surprise, Christian didn't panic in the slightest. He even smoothly took the opportunity to compliment himself. "Great-Grandpa, that's because I met a new friend after coming back to the country. He's incredibly polite, and hanging out with him made me polite, too. Oh, by the way, his name is Christian."

Mia remained expressionless. She thought, "Heh."

After ending the video call, Estelle brought out a writing brush, an inkstick, paper, and an inkstone, placing them in front of the two little dumplings.

The Kendrick Family had a long lineage of calligraphers, and Old Mr. Kendrick was a master of the craft. Although Zachery was normally highly energetic, he always managed to calm his mind when practicing calligraphy. Because of this, both he and Mia set aside time every week to practice.

However, today, "Zachery" hadn't moved an inch.

Estelle looked at him in confusion. "Zachery, sweetie, what's wrong?"

Chapter 63: Zachery Teaches the Bitch a Lesson

Christian's expression cracked a little, and he gently pressed his lips together. He had thought of every possible countermeasure, but he hadn't expected that Zachery would know calligraphy while he didn't.

Just then, Zachery pushed the door open and walked in. "Ms. Yara, Mr. Chapman is looking for you," he said politely.

Estelle saw 'Christian' arrive and, without suspecting anything, walked to the door.

Zachery took this opportunity to dart into the room. He picked up the calligraphy brush and began writing on the rice paper. SWISH, SWISH, SWISH. He finished writing in a flash and stuffed the brush back into Christian's hand.

"Young Master, don't give yourself away. I'm going to use your identity to pull off something huge later!"

As soon as he finished speaking, Estelle returned, looking a bit confused. "Mr. Chapman wasn't looking for me."

"Then I must have misheard," Zachery said immediately.

Estelle didn't suspect a five-year-old child. She walked back to the desk and was surprised to find that the rice paper, which had been completely blank moments ago, was now filled with characters.

"Zachery... did you just write this?"

Zachery immediately shot Christian a look. Christian, still holding the brush, mumbled, "Yeah..."

"Your handwriting has improved, but Mommy asked you to practice calligraphy to help you calm your mind. Don't do this next time."

Christian was quick to admit his mistake. "I'm sorry, Mommy."

Estelle figured that Zachery probably found practicing calligraphy boring, which was why he had scribbled randomly. She felt a bit helpless. "Since you're not in the mood to continue practicing, let's just forget it. Mommy is going back to her room to handle some work. Be good, you two."

Zachery nodded eagerly.

As soon as Estelle left, Zachery closed the door and flashed a mysterious grin. "Come here, Young Master. I have a plan to teach Noelle Lockwood a lesson. Do you want to do it?"

Christian nodded. "Yes."

Zachery coughed. "Alright, but this plan might ruin your image a tiny bit... actually, a whole lot!"

Christian thought about it. He wondered, "A tiny bit of my image? I'm not someone who cares about my image anyway." Then he said, "Alright, Zachery. You are me right now, so whatever you want to do, just decide for yourself."

Zachery's eyes darted around, feeling a bit guilty. He wondered, "Will the Young Master beat me up later... Oh, whatever! Regardless, the Young Master is only five years old. What is wrong with a five-year-old child being a little rowdy?"

Half an hour later, Estelle finished her work and went downstairs, only to hear Noelle's voice coming from the kitchen.

"I'll do it. This is the soup Christian wants to drink, so of course I have to make it myself. How could I trouble anyone else?"

"Yes, Christian wanted to drink it, so I came over to make it for him.

"Pear soup is common, and everyone knows how to make it, but Christian only loves the one I cook. As parents, we naturally have to fulfill our children's wishes."

Estelle's eyes darkened slightly. She wondered, "Didn't Nathaniel Sloan tell Noelle to get lost? Why is she here again?"

A servant in the kitchen praised her. "Miss Noelle, you are so good to the Young Master."

Noelle smiled gently, then feigned disappointment. "He is my son, after all. It's just that compared to before... we've grown distant. It's probably because I don't live at Imperial Crest. He's only five; since he can't see me, he's gradually forgetting me."

The servant was about to comfort her, but Noelle had already forced a strong smile.

"Alright, alright, there's no need to talk about this. The fact that Christian thought of me and asked me to make soup for him is enough to satisfy me."

Laura Jennings's heart ached even more when she heard this. She thought, "Why can't Noelle live at Imperial Crest? Isn't it all because of that vixen?!"

Right at that moment, they heard footsteps. Noelle put on a smile. "Ms. Yara, do you need something in the kitchen? I'm sorry, but I'm currently making soup for Christian."

Estelle narrowed her eyes. She wondered, "Noelle is making soup for Christian?"

She glanced at Laura before looking at Noelle, raising an eyebrow. "Are you trying to make another bowl of soup that will give Christian an allergic reaction?"

Noelle secretly seethed with hatred. She thought, "How dare Yara bring that up? It was precisely because I gave Christian a bowl of celery soup that Nathaniel kicked me out!"

However, on the surface, she pretended to be helpless. "Ms. Yara, I explained it to you last time. I was truly just being careless. I'm Christian's mother—how could I intentionally

cause him to have an allergic reaction? Christian was the one who asked me to stay this time, which is why I'm here. If you don't believe me, you can just go ask him."

"Ms. Yara, I was indeed the one who asked her to stay," a voice rang out.

Estelle turned around and saw 'Christian' standing at the kitchen door. She had no idea when he had arrived.

For some reason, hearing Christian say those words made a faint trace of sadness surface in her heart. She didn't even know where this sadness was coming from.

She wondered, "Is it because... Christian relies on Noelle? That makes sense; Noelle is Christian's biological mother after all. How strange, why am I feeling jealous over this?"

However, a mere second after this thought arose, she saw 'Christian' blinking desperately at her. His eyes practically screamed the words: 'Watch my performance.'

Estelle fell silent for a moment. She wondered, "Why does it feel like the Young Master is picking up bad habits from Zachery? Every time Zachery is about to do something mischievous, he has this exact same expression!"

Naturally, Noelle didn't notice this. Her words were filled with uncontrollable smugness. "Did you hear that, Ms. Yara? I know you hate me, but this is Christian's wish, after all."

Estelle shot her a glance.

Zachery spoke up, "Aunt Noelle, is the pear soup ready?"

Noelle couldn't wait to show off and deliberately made her voice sound very gentle. "Of course it is. Come have a taste, Christian."

A bowl of pear soup was brought over and placed in front of Zachery.

Zachery curled his lips. He had already asked the Young Master earlier, and the Young Master didn't like drinking pear soup at all. Noelle claiming that Christian loved pear soup was nothing more than an attempt to show off her 'hard work and dedication'.

At that moment, Nathaniel slowly walked down from the second floor.

Noelle knew this was a great opportunity. She thought, "As long as Christian says he loves it, and I add a few sweet words, Nathaniel will definitely let me stay!"

As for whether Christian actually liked pear soup? A flash of contempt crossed Noelle's eyes. She thought, "This little brat never dares to say much, nor does he dare to reject anyone's 'good intentions'."

Thinking of this, Noelle softened her voice. "Have a taste, Christian. I put a lot of effort into this soup. If it's not good, I'll make it again for you."

Zachery caught sight of Nathaniel at a glance. He thought, "So the scumbag dad is here; no wonder she's acting so gentle."

He lowered his head and took a sip of the soup.

Noelle's smile widened, and Laura said in a gratified tone, "Nathaniel, no matter what, Noelle is Christian's biological mother. Look, Christian also likes the soup she makes..."

"PFFT!" Before she could finish, Zachery suddenly bent over and spat out a mouthful of soup!

"What is this? It tastes awful! Aunt Noelle, did you come all the way here just to make this kind of stuff for me?"

The kitchen plunged into a dead silence.

Noelle was in disbelief, thinking she had misheard. "Christian, y-you..."

Zachery slammed the bowl down. "What about me? Aunt Noelle, Daddy kicked you out, but you said I liked pear soup and came over to make it for me. I was touched for a moment. But now it seems like you just wanted to find an excuse to get close to my Daddy. You don't care about me at all."

Chapter 64: Daddy, Kick Noelle Lockwood Out

"Christian, Noelle poured her heart into this. How could it taste bad?" Laura Jennings said instinctively.

"If you like it so much, Grandma, you drink it," Zachery pouted. "Grandma, I advise you to stop talking. If you say one more word, I might just ask Daddy to do a paternity test with you to see if you're his biological mother or Noelle Lockwood's."

"Earlier, you forced me to apologize, and now you're trying to force me to say this tastes good?"

Laura shut her mouth awkwardly. "I didn't mean it like that, Christian, but it's the thought that counts..."

Zachery couldn't be bothered to listen. He looked at Noelle. "What are you staring blankly for? How can you have the nerve to serve me something so disgusting? Go make it again."

Noelle gnashed her teeth in silent fury.

She wondered what had gotten into this little brat today. In the past, he would eat whatever she gave him. Now, he suddenly knew how to be picky!

Putting on a wronged expression, she looked at Nathaniel Sloan with tear-filled eyes. "Nathaniel..."

Nathaniel didn't even spare her a glance. "Since Christian doesn't like it, go make it again."

No matter how unwilling Noelle was, she had no choice but to return to the kitchen.

Standing off to the side, Estelle Lockwood watched the drama unfold with great amusement.

About ten minutes later, Noelle brought out a second bowl of soup. "Christian, try it again..."

"Yuck! It's terrible. Are you trying to give me a cavity with all this sugar?"

Then came the third bowl.

"It's too hot! And why didn't you add any sugar?"

The fourth bowl.

"I can't taste the snow pear at all! Disgusting!"

The fifth bowl.

"Aunt Noelle, why don't you try it yourself? Are you doing a half-hearted job on purpose just because I'm a kid?"

Noelle was practically losing her mind with anger.

To stay at Imperial Crest and leave a good impression on Nathaniel, she had gone out of her way to make five bowls of snow pear soup for this little bastard, yet he still wasn't satisfied!

Unable to watch any longer, Laura said, "Nathaniel..."

"It's alright, Mrs. Sloan. It's my fault. I'll just go make it again."

With tears in her eyes, Noelle shook her head helplessly, subtly conveying a message to everyone: it wasn't that her soup tasted bad, but rather Christian was deliberately making things difficult for her.

Seeing her like this made Laura's heart ache even more. "Nathaniel, you can't just let Christian act like this. Noelle is his mother! You were exactly like this when you were young, and you grew distant from me when you grew up. I can't let history repeat itself..."

A trace of impatience flashed across Nathaniel's forehead. "Mom!"

Zachery curled his lips. What on earth was she talking about? Was he really similar to his scumbag father when he was young?

No, no, no, he was just pretending. He didn't want to be like his scumbag father at all. If he were too much like him, he would grow up to be a scumbag himself!

At that moment, Noelle emerged from the kitchen once again. She sighed as she looked at Laura. "It's fine. As long as Christian is happy, I'm willing to remake it as many times as it takes."

Noelle had it all figured out. As long as Christian continued to be unreasonable, she would win everyone's sympathy. By then, staying at Imperial Crest wouldn't be difficult.

However, Zachery took a sip and beamed. "Wow, this one is delicious!"

He nodded, looking surprised. "So Aunt Noelle actually knows how to make soup! What were you doing the previous times, then?"

Noelle's plan was instantly thrown into disarray. She choked on her words for a moment but quickly replaced her shock with a gentle smile. "As long as you like it, Christian."

Laura wanted to claim credit on Noelle's behalf. "Nathaniel, look how happy Christian is. Listen to me, you need to let his biological mother stay by his side. Christian's fondness for Yara is only temporary. Given time, he'll realize that the only person in the world who truly has his best interests at heart is his own mother..."

"Ms. Yara, here, drink this! I've already tasted it. It's really good this time!"

A clear, bright voice interrupted Laura.

Laura and Noelle's eyes widened in shock as they turned their heads.

They saw "Christian" presenting the snow pear soup to Yara, eager to please. "Ms. Yara, I heard you love snow pear soup, right? Hurry up and drink it! This is Aunt Noelle's labor of love, so it can't go to waste!"

Estelle was speechless.

Nathaniel raised an eyebrow.

Laura stared in disbelief. "Wait, Christian, you're giving the snow pear soup to Yara?!"

Zachery nodded. "Yeah, is there a problem?"

There was a huge problem!

Laura's blood boiled instantly. A look of disdain spread across her face, and she fell just short of pointing a finger at Yara and cursing her out. "This is a soup Noelle prepared specifically for you! What is the meaning of giving it to someone else? I knew this Yara harbored ill intentions!"

Noelle shed a few tears. "Please don't be angry, Mrs. Sloan. It's okay. Dr. Yara has been taking care of Christian lately, so it's only natural that he likes her."

Indignant, Laura snapped, "No, I absolutely cannot stand for this! If Christian is already defending her like this right in front of us, disrespecting you, what will happen in the future? It seems a certain homewrecker is getting impatient to take your place!"

Zachery's gaze darkened. "Grandma, I don't understand what you're saying. Noelle Lockwood gave the soup to me. Why can't I give it to someone else?"

Laura put her hands on her hips. "That was Noelle's labor of love! Tell me, Nathaniel, isn't Christian crossing the line? I must get justice for Noelle today!"

"A labor of love?" Zachery let out a cold laugh. "But I don't even like snow pear soup. What kind of love is that?"

Laura was convinced he was talking nonsense. "How is that possible? To think you've even learned to lie just to protect Yara. You desperately need to be taught a lesson..."

"From the very beginning, Noelle Lockwood was the one who claimed I liked snow pear soup, so you just assumed I must like it. But Grandpa Chapman, Grandma Riddle, you've been taking care of me at Imperial Crest for so long. Did you know I liked snow pear soup?"

Chapman and Ms. Riddle exchanged a glance and shook their heads.

Chapman stepped forward. "The young master has never asked for snow pear soup. He usually prefers lotus seed dessert."

Ms. Riddle nodded in agreement. "That's right... The last time I made a pot of snow pear stew, the young master didn't touch a single bite. It seems he truly doesn't like it."

Noelle's expression had already changed.

Zachery looked back at Nathaniel. "Daddy, I'm the only young master in this house, right? Whatever I want to eat or drink, everyone will prepare it for me."

Nathaniel patted his head. "Yes."

Zachery reasoned, "So, if I actually liked snow pear soup, there's no way the butler, the chef, the maids, and the nannies wouldn't know about it."

He was absolutely right. Let alone Chapman, even Ms. Riddle and the other servants earned salaries of over a hundred thousand a month. Taking good care of their young master and figuring out his preferences was precisely what they were paid to do.

Yet, the young master had never once mentioned liking snow pear soup.

"Since no one here knows, why did Grandma believe Aunt Noelle so easily the moment she said it? Even I didn't know when I supposedly started loving snow pear soup."

Zachery spoke bluntly. "Aunt Noelle, you claim you do your utmost to take care of me, yet you don't even know my preferences. I don't like snow pear soup, but you still complain to Grandma and get her to scold me for lying."

"What 'doing your utmost'? You were just putting on a show for everyone else! Daddy, I don't like her. Tell her to get lost!"

Nathaniel looked at Noelle with a cold expression.

Chapter 65: Aunt Is Back and Wants to See Yara

Noelle Lockwood stumbled back a step. "Christian, I didn't expect you to think of me this way. I'm sorry..."

With that, she covered her mouth and ran off in tears.

Laura Jennings stood there awkwardly, at a loss for what to do. Seeing Noelle run out and no one paying her any attention, she had no choice but to follow.

The living room fell into a temporary silence. Zachery immediately stopped his dry wailing. Shedding his earlier heartbroken expression for a lazy one, he took Estelle Lockwood's hand and led her upstairs. "Ms. Yara, we're going back to our rooms."

Nathaniel Sloan stood in the living room. After a long silence, he asked, "Chapman, do you feel that Christian has been a bit different lately?"

Chapman chuckled. "The young master is indeed much more lively. It's probably because Zachery and Mia, who are his age, are staying here. Having companions has made him more outgoing."

Nathaniel nodded. At that moment, his phone rang. Surprise flashed in the man's eyes. "Iris is back? And she... wants to see Yara?"

After eating dinner with the three kids, Estelle went upstairs to continue working.

Suddenly, a knock sounded on the study door. She asked in surprise, "Is something the matter?"

Nathaniel got straight to the point. "Report to Evernight International's headquarters starting tomorrow."

Estelle frowned. "Are you doubting my professional competence?"

Having already agreed to the collaboration and promised to work at Evernight International, how could she possibly forget?

Nathaniel's lips curved slightly. "Of course not. I just wanted to inform my business partner in advance that Iris wants to see you."

Estelle froze in surprise.

Nathaniel's aunt...

Old Mr. Sloan only had two children: his eldest son, Ethan Sloan, and his youngest daughter, Iris Sloan. Ethan was Nathaniel's father. As for Iris, she was in her early forties, had remained unmarried, and was currently managing the Sloan Group's business in the North.

Five years ago, before Iris left Crestfall, she had been the person in the Sloan family who treated Estelle the best and protected her the most.

Aunt Iris had returned...

Excitement and joy welled up in Estelle's heart, but she ultimately suppressed her emotions. "Alright."

Observing her expression, Nathaniel asked in a hoarse voice, "You seem very eager to meet her."

Estelle gave a foolproof answer. "Of course. Ms. Sloan's reputation resonates overseas. It is my honor to meet such a legendary woman in person."

Nathaniel's gaze deepened. Iris had always doted on Estelle. So, would Yara tell Iris the truth?

His intense stare gave Estelle the creeps. "Is there anything else, Mr. Sloan?"

He calmly withdrew his gaze. "Iris just returned to the country. I've booked the restaurant at Dewdrop Garden to host a welcome dinner for her tomorrow night. Care to join us?"

Estelle wanted to decline, but she swallowed the words before they could leave her mouth. With her current identity, she had no reason to invite Iris out privately. It would be good to use Nathaniel's name to share a meal with her.

Meanwhile, upon returning to Sloan Manor, Laura saw Iris standing in the living room with a displeased expression.

Iris managed all of the Sloan Group's affairs in the northern region of Innerland and rarely returned to Crestfall. Seeing her now, Laura instantly stiffened.

Iris couldn't even be bothered to exchange pleasantries. She stated flatly, "It seems you have a lot of free time lately. I've cut off your allowance. For the next few days, it's best if you don't go anywhere. Stay home and reflect on your actions."

Laura gnashed her teeth in anger, but because she feared Iris, she didn't dare raise her voice. "What do I need to reflect on? Iris, you want to dock my allowance the moment you return? Have you asked Ethan about this..."

Hearing that name, Iris felt a flash of disgust. Although her older brother managed the Sloan Group, he hadn't achieved anything noteworthy. After all his careful selection, he had inexplicably chosen to promote a mistress like Laura to marry into the family.

"If you have a problem with it, tell Ethan to come find me himself. Also, Christian doesn't like you, so stop throwing yourself in his face. Do you have any idea what the rumors outside are saying?"

"Everyone is saying that you wouldn't hesitate to abuse your own grandson for the sake of the Lockwood Family's fake daughter. Do you think that makes you look good?"

Laura's imposing manner deflated. Blushing red, she argued, "Noelle is Christian's biological mother and Nathaniel's future wife! I... I'm just protecting Noelle..."

"Enough. You think I don't know what's going on in your head? You just feel a bit lonely being the only mistress in the family, so you're tirelessly encouraging Noelle to claw her way up as well." Iris waved her hand, too lazy to continue. "In a few days, I'm inviting Yara over as a guest. Stop acting like everyone owes you a fortune. If you can't manage a smile, then get out of my sight and stay upstairs."

Laura was furious. Did Iris even realize she was Ethan's wife? What kind of way was that to speak? No one in this family respected her; even Ethan's sister treated her with such insolence!

Iris used to favor Estelle, and now she was inviting that vixen Yara over as a guest. What was her problem?! Noelle was so gentle; was Iris blind to that?!

However, no matter how angry she was, Laura didn't dare lash out in front of Iris. She could only run off crying to tattle to Ethan.

The next afternoon.

Estelle first processed some data at the Star Group and sent Nathaniel a message before setting off for Evernight International.

According to the contract, she would need to commute between Evernight International and Star Company for the next month. Luke White had already arranged an office for her, so all she needed to do was go straight there and report in.

Unexpectedly, as soon as she arrived downstairs at Evernight Tower, she spotted Noelle's figure.

Estelle frowned instantly. "She haunts me like a lingering ghost," she thought.

Meanwhile, in the lobby of Evernight Tower, Noelle was directing her assistant to distribute small gifts to the receptionists and other staff members.

A few receptionists thanked her. "Thank you, Miss Noelle. You took the time out of your busy schedule to come over, and you even brought us gifts."

Noelle smiled gently. "I am a manager at Evernight, after all. Now that Evernight International is establishing a Perfumery Department, and considering I was born into a perfuming family, it's only natural for me to come help."

After returning home last night, Noelle had been unwilling to just sit and wait for her doom, so she came up with this idea. If Nathaniel wouldn't let her go to Imperial Crest, couldn't she come to the company? She already held a nominal position at Evernight International and had experience in making perfumes, so it was perfectly reasonable for her to come over now.

Estelle didn't want to waste words on Noelle and prepared to press the elevator button.

However, Noelle called out to her in a soft voice, "Miss Yara, are you going to look for Nathaniel? That's the regular employee elevator, which is quite slow. I can take you up in the CEO's exclusive elevator."

With that, Noelle walked over to another elevator and smiled tenderly. "I happen to be going to look for Nathaniel as well. Let's go together; it's no trouble at all."

Estelle's eyes turned cold as her mind uncontrollably recalled a scene from years ago. She had come to deliver lunch to Nathaniel and ran into Noelle in the lobby.

When she was stopped by the receptionists from going upstairs, Noelle had smiled and said, "This is a servant from the house here to deliver Nathaniel's lunch. Don't block her."

Then, the receptionists and security guards let her go, making her take the employee elevator. Noelle, on the other hand, had casually strolled into the CEO's exclusive elevator amidst everyone's flattery.

It had formed a stark contrast. The two of them were worlds apart, as different as night and day.

Chapter 66: Nathaniel Sloan Gives Noelle Lockwood No Face

Back then, Estelle had heard people gossiping.

"Only President Sloan, Luke, and Miss Noelle have their fingerprints registered for the CEO's private elevator, right?"

"Yeah. I heard President Sloan specifically added her fingerprint so Miss Noelle could come see him whenever she wants. After all, she's a daughter of the Lockwood family and a celebrity. It wouldn't be good for her to squeeze into a crowded elevator with everyone else."

"Then why wasn't that little maid who just delivered lunch allowed to use the private elevator?"

"Are you stupid? Noelle Lockwood is the future Mrs. Sloan. What is a little maid compared to her? How could she ride the same elevator as the future Mrs. Sloan?"

Estelle's memories came rushing back. Seeing Noelle still putting on this hypocritical act, she cast a faint glance at her. "No, thank you."

Noelle pursed her lips into a soft smile. In the eyes of the bystanders, the future Mrs. Sloan was being incredibly welcoming to the head of their partner company.

"It's alright, Miss Yara," she said. "Although this elevator isn't usually open to others, Nathaniel won't say much if you go up with me."

Over the years, Noelle had worked tirelessly to create the illusion of an intimate relationship between her and Nathaniel Sloan, so naturally, she wouldn't miss any opportunity to flaunt it.

Estelle gave her a sidelong glance. "You're overthinking things, Miss Lockwood. I'm heading to the HR department. Please go ahead without me."

Noelle choked on her words, feeling as though she had thrown a punch into a pile of cotton.

Suddenly, the CEO's private elevator stopped on the first floor with a DING. Everyone subconsciously looked over.

"Nathaniel, what are you doing here?" Noelle asked, pleasantly surprised.

When she arrived at Evernight Tower, the front desk had called the CEO's office. She hadn't expected Nathaniel to actually come down!

It must have been because Christian Sloan had teased her yesterday. Even though Nathaniel had sent her away, he must have still felt guilty and come specifically to pick her up.

Thinking this, Noelle stepped forward with a radiant smile, eager to show off her special status. "I was just about to go looking for you. Oh, by the way, Miss Yara is here too, but she's planning to go to the HR department."

Estelle furrowed her brows. Watching the two of them stand outside the exclusive elevator, the memories she had deliberately suppressed resurfaced once again.

Right at that moment, the regular elevator arrived. Estelle was just about to step inside when—

"Go to the conference hall on the thirtieth floor first. Luke White has already taken care of things at the HR department for you. Get ready for the meeting," Nathaniel said.

The crowd subconsciously snapped their heads toward their CEO.

Noelle's face turned deathly pale. In sheer disbelief, her hands began to tremble slightly as she realized Nathaniel hadn't come down to pick her up, but this woman.

Estelle was also stunned for a moment. She turned around. "Are you talking to me?"

Nathaniel's eyes were calm as he countered, "Who else?"

Estelle raised an eyebrow. Suddenly catching a glimpse of Noelle's twisted expression, her interest was piqued. "My apologies. I thought you had specifically dropped your work to come down and pick up Noelle."

Nathaniel shot her a sidelong glance. Without so much as looking at Noelle, he said to Estelle, "Come here and take this elevator."

He was pointing at the CEO's private elevator.

Estelle chuckled softly. Curving her red lips into a smile, she stepped into the elevator. Noelle tried to follow her in, but Luke stopped her. "I'm sorry, Miss Noelle. The boss is going to a meeting with President Lockwood. Please take the regular elevator."

Instantly, a pin-drop silence fell over the entire lobby.

Noelle felt like she was going to faint. Not only had Nathaniel not come down for her, but he wouldn't even let her on the elevator! In front of so many people, did he not care about her feelings at all? Nathaniel used to give her so many privileges just for her convenience. Why had things changed now?!

Estelle felt this scene was strikingly similar to five years ago. The only difference was that the people inside and outside the elevator had swapped places.

She curved her lips into a faint smile. At an angle unseen by the bystanders, she gently leaned against Nathaniel's shoulder. "Miss Lockwood, I'm so sorry, but we'll be heading up first."

Her warm breath brushed against his neck, sending a tremor through Nathaniel's body.

Noelle was practically going mad with anger! What was this bitch Yara showing off for?!

But no matter how furious she was, the elevator doors slid shut anyway.

Inside the elevator, as soon as Noelle's enraged face disappeared from view, Estelle immediately took two steps back, putting a full meter of distance between herself and Nathaniel. "Didn't Ms. Sloan want to see me? Where is she?"

Seeing her step away, Nathaniel's brows darkened. He quickly looked away. "There's no rush. Let's have the meeting first."

The theme of the meeting was to determine the flagship perfume for the first quarter. The executives of the perfume department had all gathered. Noelle walked in as well, deliberately taking a seat next to Nathaniel. Although she only held a nominal position at Evernight, she was still considered one of Evernight International's executives, so no one stopped her.

Estelle was somewhat surprised by this woman's thick skin. She had just suffered such a humiliating blow, yet barely fifteen minutes later, she was acting as if nothing had happened.

Nathaniel frowned slightly. However, since the meeting time had already arrived, kicking her out would only waste everyone's time, so he spoke in a deep voice.

"Let me introduce everyone. This is Miss Yara, the Chief Perfumer of Star Group."

All the top executives applauded.

Nathaniel raised his hand casually, and the applause stopped instantly. His tone brokered no argument. "For this collaboration, Evernight will be divided into three departments. Going forward, all departments must cooperate with Miss Yara. She has absolute authority in this project."

The crowd was shocked. President Sloan had actually given this Perfumer such immense power! Shock aside, however, no one dared to question Nathaniel's decision.

Nathaniel gave a faint nod. "Miss Lockwood has already reviewed everyone's files. She will now appoint the head of each department."

Estelle dove straight into work, her tone entirely professional. "The PR and Marketing Department will be headed by Raina Gable. The Packaging Design Department will be headed by Zoe Holt. As for the R&D Department, I will personally lead the team."

The appointed department heads stood up, ready to report on their work. Just then, a soft female voice rang out.

"Wouldn't this arrangement be a bit inappropriate?"

Estelle narrowed her eyes and looked over. "Miss Noelle Lockwood, do you have any brilliant insights to share?"

Noelle smiled gently. "They aren't brilliant insights, per se. I just feel that the position of R&D head warrants further consideration. The heads of the other two departments are Evernight International's own people.

"Yet when it comes to the R&D department, you, Miss Yara, are taking the helm. Isn't that a bit unfitting?"

"Although Miss Yara is in charge of the overall project, the perfume formulas and ingredients required by the R&D department are all provided by Evernight. Having an outsider manage them will inevitably lead to dissatisfaction among the staff. Nathaniel, I'm just worried about Miss Yara."

The conference room fell silent as everyone exchanged uncertain glances.

Nathaniel's face remained devoid of any extra emotion. "Are you questioning my decision?"

"I'm not, Nathaniel, I'm merely worried..."

"Noelle," Estelle interrupted. Resting her chin on one hand, she asked meaningfully, "You claim that my serving as the R&D head won't command respect. Then who do you think could in this position? You?"

Mommy, Daddy Has Already Regretted It

Noelle's expression froze. "Miss Yara, how could you think so poorly of me? That wasn't what I meant at all. I was just worried about you. If your subordinates aren't convinced of your leadership, it'll be very difficult for you to make any progress with your work.

"But you aren't entirely wrong either. I genuinely believe it would be better for me to take the position of department head. First, I've been at Evernight for a long time, so everyone knows me. Second, I have many independent perfumes to my name and am very familiar with the industry. I am perfectly qualified for this."

Noelle's words plunged the conference room into a brief silence. No one dared to speak.

This woman was the daughter-in-law chosen by Mrs. Sloan, and rumors about her were already flying everywhere. She could very well become the CEO's wife one day. They couldn't afford to offend her. However, Yara didn't look like someone who would let herself be pushed around either.

"It would be better for you to take the position?" Estelle chuckled, raising an eyebrow. "I don't understand what you mean, Miss Noelle. Why would the subordinates be unconvinced if I took charge, but happily listen to you if you did?"

Noelle opened her mouth to speak, but Estelle calmly cut her off.

"Out of all your perfumes, Miss Noelle, how many have won international awards?" Estelle asked. "How many have won domestic awards? Have you ever designed a viral hit? How many of your creations have sold out? And how many are still ranked on the global perfume charts to this day?"

"Oh, the answer couldn't possibly be zero, could it?"

Noelle's face flushed bright red. "You..."

"Then guess what achievements I have under my belt?" Estelle pivoted sharply.

She didn't even need to answer her own question. Her assistant stepped forward from behind her.

"As the Chief Perfumer of Star, Miss Yara has independently released twelve perfumes, each of which became a global sensation. She has also led her team to release twenty perfumes, generating tens of billions in revenue for Star."

When the assistant finished, Estelle propped her chin on her hand. "So, Miss Noelle... who do you think everyone will respect more? Me, or you?"

The crowd subtly began to look at Noelle with disdain. What gave her the right to compare herself to Star's Chief Perfumer?

Estelle turned to Nathaniel and slowly stood up. "Mr. Sloan, when we signed the contract, it was agreed that I would have ultimate authority. Yet today, a mere manager at Evernight International dares to question me and demand that I give up my position as department head.

"Your company's actions are in breach of our contract. If you cannot give me a satisfactory explanation, I will withdraw from this partnership, and Star will send another perfumer to take over."

That was absolutely out of the question! The executives groaned inwardly. Wasn't the entire point of this partnership to collaborate with this specific Chief Perfumer?

Nathaniel didn't give Noelle any face. "Since you have ultimate authority, not even I can veto your decisions. As for what anyone else says, you can simply ignore them."

Simply ignore them! Noelle's face drained of color, her body swaying as if she might collapse. Nathaniel's words made her look like an absolute clown!

Estelle's lips curled into a faint, mocking smile as she smoothed her hair. "Glad to hear it. Let's continue the meeting."

Noelle remained deathly pale until the meeting concluded. Once most of the people had dispersed, she stepped forward, her eyes red and tears streaming down her face.

"Nathaniel, why did you do that earlier? Do you really not care about my feelings at all?"

Nathaniel glanced at a message from Iris on his phone. His aunt had texted to say she arrived, and he was getting ready to go pick her up. Hearing Noelle's tearful complaint, he didn't even bat an eye.

"What else was I supposed to do? Hand the position of R&D Director over to you?"

A wave of sorrow swelled in Noelle's chest. "Why can't I?!" she wanted to scream in her mind. "If that woman Yara can do it, why can't I?!"

She refused to believe it was because Yara was more capable than her. It had to be because Nathaniel was bewitched by that woman!

"Nathaniel, I didn't actually want to be the R&D Director. I just felt that you were being too good to Yara. Giving her so much power right off the bat—what will other people think?"

"Meanwhile, ever since I joined the company, you've only given me a titular role. Everyone else is ranked higher than me. No one listens to me here. It's so suffocating. You can't treat me like this..."

Nathaniel narrowed his eyes and was about to speak when a resounding female voice echoed from behind him.

"Why were you only given a titular role? Because you're stupid. Got it?"

Iris strode over in her high heels. Time hadn't left a single mark on her face. Even in her forties, if someone claimed she was Nathaniel's older sister, people would easily believe it.

Nathaniel nodded in greeting. "Aunt Iris."

Iris shot her nephew a look of disgust before turning her contemptuous gaze back to Noelle.

"With your tiny brain, you actually want real power, Noelle? Give you real power so you can run wild and drive the company into the ground? Don't think that just because you have a pretty face, you can seduce a man into losing his mind. Pardon my bluntness, but in the face of corporate interests, what the hell are you?"

"Even though Nathaniel can be quite oblivious and can't spot a manipulative victim act to save his life, at least he isn't brain-damaged. Look at how petty and pathetic you are. Stop making a fool of yourself in public!"

Nathaniel fell silent. "There is no need to go that far, Aunt Iris," he thought to himself.

But his aunt wasn't wrong. He was very clear on Noelle's level of competence. Any position handed to her would inevitably turn into a complete mess. Moreover, the only reason Noelle had been hired at Evernight in the first place was because Laura Jennings had arranged it behind his back.

Noelle wept pitifully. "Aunt Iris..."

"Put away that manipulative sob story. I'm not a fool like Nathaniel. Turning on the waterworks won't work on me. I don't buy your act! Enough. Go back to wherever you came from." Iris lost her patience. "Nathaniel, come with me."

Nathaniel nodded and followed her, leaving Noelle standing there. Enraged, she smashed several cups onto the floor.

"Why did this bitch have to come back?! Why?!" she screamed in her mind.

Iris looked at the nephew she hadn't seen in years. She couldn't even be bothered to exchange pleasantries. "Zane Grant told me Christian is doing much better?"

Nathaniel nodded. "Yes. He made two good friends. They eat together, play together, and go to kindergarten together. He's definitely become a lot more cheerful."

"Now that his psychological issues are being resolved, we need to focus on his physical health. You know very well why Christian had such severe pneumonia. By the way, where is Yara?"

"Do you want to see her right now?"

A brief look of discomfort flashed across Iris's face, and she immediately lowered her head. "You paid a high price to hire her as his doctor. I need to see for myself if she's reliable."

Nathaniel nodded. "Alright. I'll have her come to my office."

Estelle had just sat down when she received the call on the internal line. "So demanding," she muttered under her breath.

Despite her grumbling, she still made her way over. The CEO's office was exceptionally large. Besides the main workspace, it featured a reception area, a lounge, a bedroom, and a bathroom. It was essentially a full suite.

As she walked in, she didn't see Nathaniel. Instead, she saw a woman.

"Aunt Iris..." Estelle thought, her breath catching.

Seeing Iris so unexpectedly brought a sudden wave of longing and grievance crashing over Estelle. Her eyes instantly turned red.

Back when she had first returned to the Lockwood family, everyone had called her a country bumpkin, claiming she wasn't good enough for the Lockwoods. Iris was the only one who had furiously defended her, demanding, "She's not good enough? You were the ones who lost your child and made her suffer immensely, and now you have the gall to say she's not good enough?!"

Iris was also the one who shielded her when Noelle came knocking to provoke her. "Noelle, you're a fake heiress and the real mistress. Drop the hypocritical act, will you? Looking at you makes me sick!"

No matter how strong Estelle tried to be, seeing an elder who had genuinely loved and cared for her still made her want to cry and pour out her grievances. Unfortunately, to Iris, the current her was nothing more than a stranger.

She did her best to suppress the tremble in her voice. "Hello, Ms. Sloan."

To her absolute shock, Iris simply asked, "Is that Estelle? Have you come back?"

Chapter 68: Nathaniel Said, What I Mean Is What He Means

Estelle froze, her hand subconsciously brushing against her cheek. "You might have mistaken me for someone else."

Iris walked over. "I sent Nathaniel out. It's just the two of us in this office."

The implication was clear. She could tell the truth.

But Estelle simply lowered her head gently. "Ms. Sloan, I'm sorry. My name is Yara. I might look a bit like the Estelle you're talking about, but I am not her."

Iris halted in her tracks, letting out a soft sigh. It took a long moment before she finally spoke in a resigned tone. "I saw you at the Kendrick family banquet three years ago."

Estelle's head snapped up.

"Because you were in a fire and suffered facial injuries, you had to undergo plastic surgery. The Kendrick family has kept your past completely under wraps. Even though they never explicitly said anything, I'm not a fool," Iris said.

Estelle pursed her lips.

She desperately wanted to admit her true identity. After all, Iris had treated her so well back then. How could she bear to keep this a secret from her? However, she had returned to seek revenge against the Lockwood family, Nathaniel, and even the Sloan family. If Iris found out, she would undoubtedly be put in a difficult position.

But she had to get her revenge. No one could change that. Besides, there was one more crucial reason...

The current Yara would do anything for revenge and personal gain. She didn't want Iris to know that the obedient, good girl from five years ago had turned into this.

Turning her head away, Estelle tried her hardest to suppress the choke in her voice. "I'm sorry, I'm really not her."

Iris studied her quietly for a moment before dropping the subject. "Alright."

She was already certain in her heart. But seeing that Estelle didn't want to talk about it, she decided not to press the issue. At the end of the day, she was back. Seeing Estelle safe and sound was enough to put Iris's mind at ease.

Thinking back to five years ago, Iris felt a pang of pity while simultaneously feeling an even deeper disdain for Nathaniel. He had lost such a wonderful wife, and now it served him right that he couldn't win her back!

She wasn't stupid; she could naturally tell that Nathaniel was also suspecting Yara's identity. The difference was that Iris had been to the Kendrick family's home and knew many of the inside details, whereas Nathaniel was relying entirely on guesswork. As long as Yara vehemently denied it, there was nothing Nathaniel could do.

At that thought, Iris's expression softened a bit. She broke into a smile. "Then how about I call you Yara? Mrs. Kendrick and I are friends, so I can be considered your elder. You can call me Aunt Iris."

Estelle nodded, but before she could even utter the word...

Iris excitedly asked, "Yara, are you single right now? I know plenty of outstanding young men I can introduce you to. Do you want to see their photos? I'll send them to you right now!"

Nathaniel originally hadn't intended to eavesdrop on their conversation. However, he had left an important document in the office, so he had come back for it. Just as he approached, he caught that exact sentence.

Estelle cleared her throat. "Aunt Iris, I'm focusing on my career right now. Plus, I have two children. I don't want to date, nor do I want to get married."

"Oh, I see," Iris replied, not looking disappointed at all. "It's good for a woman to focus on her career. Look at me—I never got married because I felt none of those men were worthy of me. In that case, I'll introduce a few business projects to you instead."

She paused, then seemingly directed her next words at the person outside the door, her tone pointedly sarcastic. "Having money to rely on is the most important thing. Once you have money and your horizons broaden, you'll realize men ain't shit!

"Take my nephew, for example. He might look decent on the outside, but even he isn't good enough for you!"

Nathaniel was speechless. Feeling the conversation was getting increasingly absurd, he simply pushed the door open and walked in. "Aunt Iris, I've arranged a welcome dinner at Dewdrop Garden. Would you do me the honor of attending?"

Iris scoffed coldly. "I have no interest in a welcome dinner. I don't want to see that irritating bunch from the Sloan family."

Nathaniel knew his aunt didn't get along with his parents. "My father doesn't know about it. It'll just be me... and Yara."

Upon hearing Estelle's current name, Iris agreed without a second thought. "Alright then."

Nathaniel narrowed his eyes, deep in thought.

When it was time to get off work, the employees began to leave in twos and threes.

Iris felt that walking alongside Nathaniel would attract too much attention, so she headed to Dewdrop Garden first.

After wrapping up her work for the day, Estelle took the elevator downstairs and was about to hail a cab when Nathaniel's voice rang out from behind her. "What are you doing?"

Estelle didn't even look up as she opened a ride-hailing app on her phone. "Are you blind? I'm getting a cab."

Nathaniel's eyelids lifted slightly, his gaze placid. "Miss Lockwood, we are having dinner together."

Estelle let out a soft murmur of confusion. "What about it?"

Nathaniel couldn't tell if this woman was truly dense or just deliberately trying to annoy him. "We are both leaving from the company and heading to Dewdrop Garden. Doesn't Miss Lockwood think it would be more convenient to just ride in the same car as me?"

Estelle's fingertips paused over her screen, her elegant brows knitting together at the prospect of going to Dewdrop Garden with Nathaniel. Forget it. Because of Iris's sudden appearance today, she was feeling a bit down and didn't want to face him right now.

Just as she was about to refuse, she caught sight of Noelle hurrying toward them out of the corner of her eye. Estelle raised an eyebrow as an idea suddenly flashed through her mind.

"Nathaniel, Mrs. Sloan said she'd be bored eating dinner alone and wanted us to keep her company at Sloan Manor—"

"Sure, let's take the same car."

The two women's voices rang out simultaneously. In an instant, a pin-drop silence fell over the lobby.

Estelle curled her lips into a smirk and quickly spoke up again before Noelle could. "Miss Lockwood wants to have dinner with Nathaniel? I'm sorry, but he already invited me first. The restaurant is already booked."

Noelle glared at Nathaniel and Yara. Knowing they had spent the entire afternoon together filled her with so much bitter jealousy that she felt like she was going to throw up! She had gone through so much trouble to find an excuse to see him, only for this Yara to act so shamelessly!

Forcing herself to stay calm, Noelle put on a sorrowful expression. "Nathaniel, Mrs. Sloan is your mother, after all. She wants you to go back and visit her..."

"But Nathaniel and I already made plans," Estelle said, feigning a coy, whiny tone. "I'm Nathaniel's business partner, so tonight isn't just a simple dinner. We definitely have work matters to discuss. I'm sure even if Mrs. Sloan knew, she would approve."

The onlookers were dumbfounded. What on earth was going on? How could Yara be so brazen?

Noelle was furious, her eyes turning red. "Nathaniel, then let me go with you..."

"That's a no-go, Miss Lockwood." Estelle tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. As she parted her red lips, she looked every bit the stereotypical vixen. "Nathaniel said he belongs solely to me tonight. How about you get in line? Besides, didn't you say Mrs. Sloan is bored eating alone? This is the perfect chance for you to go keep her company."

"Yara!" Noelle finally snapped. A whole day's worth of pent-up anger erupted, causing her usually gentle and refined facade to nearly shatter. "I am speaking to Nathaniel. It's not your place to interrupt."

"But Nathaniel said that my words represent his." Estelle looked at Nathaniel. Suddenly, in a blind spot where no one else could see, she reached out and gave his arm a vicious pinch. "Isn't that right?" she asked in a soft, eerie tone.

Chapter 69: Why Does It Feel Like President Sloan Is the One Being Disdained?

To the uninitiated, Estelle's gesture made it look as though she were intimately hooking her arm around Nathaniel's wrist.

Nathaniel's expression remained unchanged. He allowed her to pinch him and gave a faint nod. "Yes."

Estelle let out a soft hmph. "Did you hear that, Miss Lockwood?"

Tears welled up in Noelle's eyes. "Nathaniel..."

Nathaniel didn't even spare her a glance. Utterly ignored and turning pale with anger, Noelle swayed on her feet before running off in tears.

Once Noelle was gone, the crowd broke into hushed whispers.

"This... she's really letting his favor go to her head! Who does she think she is? The president's new fling?"

"What's Yara's background anyway? Isn't Noelle the Sloan family's acknowledged daughter-in-law? I can't believe Yara completely disregarded her!"

"Noelle has been talking about it for years, but we still haven't seen her marry into the Sloan family. She might just be riding on his coattails to fake her status. If you ask me, President Sloan has zero intention of marrying her..."

"I wonder if Yara will take advantage of her proximity to win him over? I feel like she's a much better match for President Sloan. I'm rooting for her!"

"Even if Yara is infatuated with the president, what's the point? A woman like her... I bet the president is thoroughly disgusted by her."

Before those words could even settle, the crowd watched as Estelle released Nathaniel's hand and stepped back three paces with a look of utter disgust. "Aren't we getting food? Let's go."

The crowd fell speechless.

Why did it feel like the president was the one she found disgusting?

Noelle's face twisted into a vicious scowl. She was furious. But with Laura Jennings currently hiding indoors after being scolded by Iris Sloan, who else could help her vent her anger?!

Why did that bitch Yara get to have dinner with Nathaniel?! No, she absolutely would not allow this!

Gritting her teeth, Noelle suddenly had a flash of inspiration. She came up with a plan and hurriedly summoned her driver. "To Dewdrop Garden."

Meanwhile, at Dewdrop Garden.

Seeing them arrive, Iris broke into a warm, enthusiastic smile. "Yara, come here. Sit next to me."

Estelle nodded. "Okay."

"I ordered a few dishes, but I'm not sure if they suit your taste. Take a look, Yara, and order whatever you like. Nathaniel is paying anyway, so there's no need to save him money."

Estelle obediently glanced over the menu. "These are all my favorites."

"That's wonderful! I was worried your tastes might have changed!"

"Thank you, Aunt Sloan. I didn't expect you to still remember my preferences."

Nathaniel's throat felt a little dry. This was the first time he had seen such an obedient, docile side to this woman.

Then, as if struck by a sudden thought, his dark eyes flickered. "Even I don't know what Yara likes to eat... How are you so well-acquainted with her tastes, Aunt Sloan?"

Everything about Yara kept telling Nathaniel that she was Estelle. Back in the day, Estelle and Iris had shared an excellent relationship. Iris remembered exactly what Estelle loved to eat and would frequently arrange special meals for her.

Iris arched an eyebrow. She naturally understood what Nathaniel was getting at. However, with that hypocritical white lotus still lingering around him unhandled, how could she let him discover the truth so easily?

It was precisely because Nathaniel lacked concrete evidence that the two of them were currently maintaining such a delicate balance. If he were to confirm that Yara was indeed Estelle...

Iris felt a pang of sorrow as she recalled the Estelle from five years ago—the woman who had seemingly died for this romance. Since Estelle didn't want to remarry him, how could Iris push her back into that fiery pit?

So, Iris turned the tables on him. "Yara has been staying at Imperial Crest for so long. She's Christian's private doctor and now your business partner, yet you actually don't know what she likes to eat?"

Nathaniel abruptly paused, suddenly feeling at a loss for words. "I didn't mean..."

"If you had put even a little bit of effort into it and asked a couple of simple questions, you would know her tastes. And you have the nerve to question me?"

Nathaniel subconsciously tried to explain himself. "I was only curious as to why you knew..."

"Yara and I hit it off right away. We chatted for so long this afternoon, so of course I know her preferences. What's so strange about that?" Iris cut him off, refusing to give him a chance to pry any further. "Alright, Yara. I'll have them serve the food."

The manager didn't dare dawdle, and the dishes were quickly brought out in full.

Among them was a steamed sea bass. Iris rotated the lazy Susan to place the fish directly in front of Estelle. "I remember you used to love this dish. Why aren't you eating it now?"

Estelle sighed helplessly. Every single one of Iris's actions proved that she had firmly identified her as Estelle. That was why she was asking why she no longer ate the food she had once loved. She had already lied to her aunt once and didn't want to do it a second time, so she answered truthfully, "They don't have this dish abroad. I haven't eaten it for a long time, so I've gotten used to going without it."

Nathaniel sharply caught the words "used to." His eyes darkened. "Since you and Yara only hit it off today, Aunt Sloan, how do you remember what she 'used to' love to eat?"

Iris's hand paused mid-reach for some food. She frowned inwardly. Did her nephew really have to be this perceptive?

She was just trying to come up with an excuse when she saw Estelle speak up without batting an eye. "I met Aunt Sloan at a Kendrick family banquet in the past. What's wrong with that? Do you have a problem with it, President Sloan?"

Nathaniel's voice was husky. "Is that so? Aunt Sloan has been in Europea all these years, while the Kendrick family expanded in the USA. Did Aunt Sloan really attend a Kendrick family banquet?"

Estelle shot him a sidelong glance, her red lips parting slightly. "It was a banquet three years ago. If you're suspicious, President Sloan, you can go investigate it yourself. Stop interrogating people while they're trying to eat."

Nathaniel narrowed his eyes meaningfully. "Coincidentally enough, the people around me seem to be quite fond of you, Miss Lockwood."

Take Christian, for example, or Iris. One was Estelle's son, and the other was one of the elders who doted on her the most. Both had expressed a strong affinity for Yara the moment they met her.

To his surprise, Estelle's eyes widened in astonishment. "The people around you are all fond of me? The way you say that, President Sloan... could it be that in your eyes, Ms. Laura Jennings isn't considered human?"

"PFFT—" Iris spat out a mouthful of tea.

It made sense. Laura was Nathaniel's biological mother and harbored a deep hatred for Estelle. Yet, when Nathaniel made that statement, he clearly hadn't factored her in.

Outsiders might not know the reason behind this, but as a member of the Sloan family, Iris was perfectly aware of the circumstances. She could only say that Laura had brought it upon herself. However, having finally gotten to see Nathaniel looking so deflated, there was no way she was going to explain things on his behalf.

It was just that...

Iris hesitated for a moment. Why did she feel like whenever these two spoke, an invisible barrier formed around them, making it utterly impossible for anyone else to get a word in edgewise? It was a difficult feeling to describe. If she had to explain it in a single sentence, it would be: Iris felt that they were a match made in heaven.

But Estelle had explicitly stated that she didn't want to remarry...

Just then, a KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK sounded at the door. Estelle stood up to answer it.

Unexpectedly, as she rose, her ankle caught on the leg of her chair, and she pitched forward uncontrollably.

Nathaniel sprang up instantly, catching her in his arms and saving her from a fall!

Iris stared blankly for a moment, sensing that something was glaringly off.

Was this really what "not wanting to remarry" and "never seeing each other again" looked like?

Chapter 70: Brother-in-law? You Knew Nathaniel Sloan Was Married, Too?

Estelle Lockwood had already closed her eyes, but the anticipated pain never came. Instead, she crashed into a man's firm chest. Her face instantly flushed red.

"Let me go!"

Nathaniel Sloan raised an eyebrow. "Miss Lockwood, I just saved you. Shouldn't you be a little more polite?"

Estelle's face grew even redder. "Who asked you to save me?" she retorted stubbornly.

Nathaniel's brow arched higher. "You didn't want me to save you? Then I suppose Miss Lockwood will just have to fall."

Estelle couldn't help but feel a strange shift in the atmosphere. She had the bizarre illusion that she was flirting with Nathaniel. "Then let me fall—ah!" she said unnaturally.

Nathaniel feigned letting go. Truly believing she was about to plummet, Estelle instinctively threw her arms around his neck. "What are you doing?!"

"Nothing. Just wanted to see if someone was still going to talk tough."

Feeling mocked, Estelle snapped her mouth shut in sheer irritation.

KNOCK, KNOCK, KNOCK. The knocking on the door continued.

Estelle snapped back to reality. Shoving him away, she jogged over to the door as if trying to cover up what had just happened. To ease the awkwardness, she swung the door open—and froze.

Noelle Lockwood?!

Noelle stood outside, wearing a gentle, meticulously practiced smile. "Nathaniel... Yara?!"

Estelle looked Noelle up and down, then turned her head back to shoot a sarcastic comment over her shoulder. "President Sloan, you certainly are quite the charmer."

Nathaniel's Adam's apple bobbed slightly. Strangely enough, despite her obvious mockery, he wasn't angry in the slightest.

Estelle walked back to her seat. Iris Sloan had also stopped eating, her face etched with such intense disdain that it couldn't have been more obvious.

Nathaniel looked at the woman at the door, his gaze turning icy. "What are you doing here?"

Noelle sensed his shift in demeanor. Sour jealousy bubbled in her chest, but she maintained her smile. "Nathaniel, I heard you were having dinner here, so I came over to see you."

Nathaniel frowned. "There is nothing to see." With that, he actually moved to shut the door in her face.

Noelle's heart practically shattered, and she hastily blocked the doorframe. "Nathaniel! Actually... it's because everyone at the company is saying that you and Yara came out to eat alone, which means you two must be having an illicit affair... I figured since Yara is new to the company, dealing with these kinds of rumors wouldn't be good for her. So, I thought I would join you both for dinner.

"With me here, it'd be impossible for anyone to misunderstand Miss Yara anymore. After all, a man and a woman alone in a private dining room... it's just not good for your reputations..."

"Not good for their reputations?" a middle-aged woman's voice rang out, cutting Noelle off.

Noelle jumped in fright. Iris was already casting a cool glance her way.

"What do you mean, 'a man and a woman alone'?" Iris asked. "What, am I not a person?"

Noelle's face turned ghastly pale. She thought frantically, "What is going on?! Why is Iris here too?"

"Iris, I didn't realize you..."

"Don't act so familiar with me. I have no junior like you," Iris interrupted sharply, before turning her attention away. "Nathaniel, since she's already here, it doesn't look good for her to just stand like a statue at the door. Let her in."

Joy flashed across Noelle's face.

But before she could even reach the dining table, Iris spoke again. "However, what you just said reminded me of something. It doesn't really matter what kind of gossip is spreading out there—as long as Yara marries Nathaniel, everything will be fine."

Iris waved a hand airily. "Once they're husband and wife, eating together won't be considered 'a man and a woman alone' anymore. People can stick their noses wherever they want, but they can't possibly meddle in a married couple's private affairs, can they?"

Estelle's chopsticks paused in mid-air, while Nathaniel's eyes instantly darkened with an unfathomable depth.

For Noelle, those words struck like a thunderbolt! She thought furiously, "What is this old bitch Iris saying?! Have Yara marry Nathaniel?! No way!"

Noelle nearly choked on her own fury. Gritting her teeth, she forced out, "Iris, how could Nathaniel possibly marry Miss Yara? It's completely inappropriate..."

Iris asked with a pleasant smile, "And what exactly makes it inappropriate?"

Noelle knew very well that Iris wasn't Laura Jennings. While Laura wanted to play matchmaker for her and Nathaniel, Iris was incredibly biased toward Estelle. Taking a deep breath, she let her tears fall as she spoke.

"Iris, Nathaniel is already married. How can he marry Miss Yara?"

At those words, Estelle let out a silent, mocking laugh.

Iris's face instantly darkened. "Is that so? Nathaniel is married. Why don't you enlighten us, then—who exactly is Nathaniel married to?"

Noelle mistakenly thought Iris was angry because she assumed Noelle was the one married to Nathaniel. Crying non-stop, she said, "Iris... have you forgotten about my sister? Nathaniel is my sister's husband! He already has her, so how can he marry someone else? Miss Yara, if you have any shame left, you won't get so close to a married man. Don't you know how to keep your distance?"

The entire private dining room instantly plunged into an eerie, dead silence.

Nathaniel subconsciously looked at Estelle. She remained silent, while Iris's expression grew increasingly grim.

"Noelle, so you **do** know Nathaniel is your 'sister's husband'." Iris heavily emphasized the words 'sister's husband'. "From what I recall, you didn't hold back from eating alone with Nathaniel five years ago. Since you knew perfectly well who he was to your sister, why didn't you keep your distance?"

Noelle's face instantly drained of all color!

"Iris, that's not true! Back then, when I ate with Nathaniel, my sister agreed to it. She..."

"Yara, are you thirsty?" Iris suddenly asked.

Hearing Noelle's words, Estelle's face had darkened slightly as memories from five years ago resurfaced. When Iris abruptly changed the subject, she was momentarily stunned. Caught off guard, she answered honestly, "A little."

"Then let Noelle brew you some tea. She's an absolute expert at brewing 'green tea'—playing the innocent victim until the stench of her hypocrisy fills the room."

Iris continued nonchalantly, "Maybe I've just been choking on too much of your 'green tea,' but I really can't seem to understand what you're saying, Noelle. So, you're telling me it was Estelle who forced you to move into her marital home? That she was the one who made you and Nathaniel practically inseparable, and orchestrated all those scandalous rumors about the two of you?"

Feigning surprise, Iris added, "I never realized Estelle was so incredibly generous!"

Noelle was absolutely fuming inside, but on the surface, she shook her head desperately, her small face bathed in tears. "No, Iris, you've really misunderstood me! I only lived at Imperial Crest to take care of Nathaniel and my sister..."

Nathaniel closely observed Estelle's expression. If what his aunt said was true, and Estelle didn't care about the Lockwood family or those so-called relatives, then she never would have asked him to take care of Noelle in the first place. Yet, there wasn't a single trace of sadness on her face. It was as if she truly was an outsider, completely oblivious to everything that had happened five years ago. She didn't interrogate Noelle. She was even smiling.

Estelle naturally noticed Nathaniel staring at her. She thought, "Heh... Nathaniel wants to see my reaction? What's there to see? Back then, he swallowed Noelle's lies hook, line, and sinker. No matter how much I explained, it was utterly useless. Could it be that after five years, Nathaniel has suddenly grown a conscience, regained his intellect, and learned how to spot a two-faced hypocrite? Forget it. I remember when I told him I wanted Noelle to move out. What did he say back then? He said, 'She is your sister, and her health is poor. If you kick her out, what will people think?'"

Snapping out of her daze, Estelle rested her chin in her hand, looking thoroughly amused. "Iris, you shouldn't place all the blame on Miss Lockwood. As the saying goes, it takes two to tango. Miss Lockwood and her sister's husband might have been practically inseparable, but it's not like Mr. Sloan ever rejected her advances, right?"

She looked at Nathaniel, the smile not quite reaching her eyes. "What do you say, Mr. Sloan?"

Chapter 71: A Man's Mouth, a Lying Ghost

Nathaniel's eyes darkened. "I never allowed her to live in our marital home."

Estelle's playful smile instantly cooled. He was still lying to her even now! Could it be that the facts she had seen before were all fake?

Before the wedding, everyone had told her that Nathaniel was originally Noelle's fiancé, and that she, a country bumpkin, had stolen Noelle's man. After they were married, Noelle openly moved into Imperial Crest. When Estelle resentfully confronted her, Noelle had feigned surprise and asked, "Of course Nathaniel told me to move in. Didn't he tell you?"

Now... Nathaniel was saying he had never allowed it?

Estelle scoffed and turned to Iris. "Iris, you see? Men are all liars. You can't trust a word they say."

Iris didn't want to give her nephew a good look either. To have the audacity to say such things... Anyone with half a brain would know that a woman wouldn't invite another

woman to live in her home after getting married. Not to mention that Noelle's affection for Nathaniel was known by the whole city! Estelle would have to be crazy to invite Noelle into her home just to watch her husband and sister act all lovey-dovey.

"The hypocrisy is suffocating. I've lost my appetite," Iris said. "Yara, let's go eat next door."

Iris stood up, grabbed her bag, and left. Estelle nodded and followed her out the door.

Nathaniel's jaw tightened. Only after their figures disappeared did he cast a cold glare at Noelle.

Seeing that the nuisances were gone, Noelle put on a shy expression. "Nathaniel..."

"Back then, Estelle said you were in poor health. Since President Lockwood and Mrs. Lockwood were away on a business trip at the time, she was worried about you, so she brought you to Imperial Crest. Is that right?"

Noelle's scalp tightened with anxiety, but she maintained her gentle demeanor. "Nathaniel, I'm not entirely sure about the details either. All I know is that Estelle suddenly called me and told me to move to Imperial Crest..." At this point, tears welled up in her eyes. "Nathaniel, did you hear some rumors? Do you think I threatened Estelle back then and intentionally moved into your marital home to cause trouble for you two?"

Nathaniel's gaze was heavy.

Noelle seemed to have suffered a massive misunderstanding, crying profusely. "How could I be that kind of person? Besides, what Estelle told you herself couldn't possibly be a lie, right?"

It was true that what Estelle had said back then wouldn't be a lie. But Yara...

"Nathaniel, since Iris and the others have left, do you want me to keep you company while you finish eating?" Noelle didn't want to let this opportunity slip by.

Nathaniel turned around coldly. "There's no need!"

He didn't give Noelle any face at all, leaving her completely alone in the private room.

Noelle's chest heaved with anger. Completely shedding her gentle and proper facade, she stepped forward with a vicious expression and swept all the dishes onto the floor!

Yara... just wait and see! She was going to kick that meddlesome woman out sooner or later!

Estelle and Iris booked a new private room next door and ordered a few dishes. By the time Estelle returned to Imperial Crest, it was already midnight.

"I'm telling you, can't you find a few more doctors to check on this headache condition of yours?"

As soon as she walked through the door, she heard Zane Grant's voice. He was wearing a white coat, holding some sort of medical instrument, and standing next to Nathaniel. Evidently, he had been called over to treat him.

Estelle glanced at her phone to confirm it was indeed midnight and clicked her tongue. Wage slaves truly had it rough, having to work overtime at this hour. But what did that have to do with her?

She turned around and prepared to go upstairs, but Zane called out to her. "Dr. Lockwood! Could I trouble you for a favor?"

Zane jogged over, looking as if he had just seen his savior. "Nathaniel's headache is acting up. It's quite severe today, and he needs to take his medication. However, whenever he has an episode, he doesn't allow anyone near him. We can't get him to take his medicine at all."

Estelle raised an eyebrow, finally getting a clear look at Nathaniel's condition. His eyes were tightly shut, and his forehead was covered in cold sweat. He leaned against the sofa motionless, but the moment anyone approached, he would open his icy eyes and reject everything.

Zane coughed. "We're really out of options. Dr. Lockwood, have mercy and help us out?"

Estelle retracted her gaze and frowned. "If none of you can do anything, what makes you think I can?"

"We've all tried," Zane said, "but no one can get close to Nathaniel. You're our last hope, Dr. Lockwood. Just give it a try."

Estelle lowered her eyes. Nathaniel's headache was a condition he had suffered from since birth. It was manageable at first, but it worsened as he grew older. When they first got married, she had gone to great lengths to formulate an aromatherapy blend to suppress his headaches and make him feel a bit better. But later on, Nathaniel gave the credit for that aromatherapy blend to Noelle, adding a new achievement to Noelle's resume.

Thinking of this, she shot a sidelong glance at the man on the sofa and turned back to Zane. "To Nathaniel, I'm practically a stranger. You're his childhood friend, Dr. Grant. If you can't do it, there's no way I can.

"However, I know someone who probably can. I'll give you a phone number; give her a call."

Focused entirely on getting Nathaniel's headache under control, Zane didn't think twice. "Alright, please give me the number, Dr. Lockwood."

Estelle tapped on her phone a few times and went upstairs to take a shower.

After her shower, she heard an affectedly sweet female voice from downstairs. "Dr. Grant, what happened to Nathaniel? I rushed over as soon as I got the call."

Zane was speechless. He clearly hadn't expected the woman Estelle mentioned to be Noelle! He instantly felt a massive headache coming on. "No, you..."

Noelle had already barged in and rushed over to the sofa. "Let me feed him the medicine... Ah, Nathaniel, it's me, Noelle. Look at me..."

Nathaniel's icy eyes flushed with a bloodshot red as he violently smashed the medicine bowl onto the floor.

Noelle's eyes turned red. "Nathaniel, please don't be like this. I'll go brew another bowl. Just drink a little bit..."

Following that came a hoarse "Get out" from the man.

Estelle curled her lips. Nathaniel really couldn't appreciate good intentions. In the past, she had always put him first, taking care of him day and night. Yet, he assumed Noelle was the one who cared for him and gave her all the credit. Now that she had directly brought Noelle over, shouldn't he be happy?

Estelle closed her bedroom door, put in her earplugs, and fell into a deep sleep.

The next day, since she didn't have to go to work, Estelle didn't wake up until past nine o'clock. As soon as she went downstairs, she saw the man who had stayed up all night in the living room.

Nathaniel's expression was cold. Hearing the sound of Estelle coming downstairs, he turned to look at her. "Were you the one who called Noelle over last night?"

Estelle paused her steps, raised her eyebrows, and nodded. "That was me. No need to thank me."

As her words fell, the man suddenly stood up. Perhaps due to being tormented by his headache all night, Nathaniel's face looked dreadful. He had lost his usual gentleness, replaced by a trace of coldness and paranoia.

Seeing Nathaniel like this, Estelle subconsciously took a step back. "What are you doing?"

Chapter 72: Pressed Hard on Her Lips

Nathaniel Sloan remained silent. His expression was cold as he backed Estelle Lockwood into a corner until she had nowhere left to retreat.

Estelle's breath caught. "Nathaniel, if you're sick, go get treated! Don't come here and act crazy with me!"

"Are you really this generous, bringing just any woman into the house?"

BAM! The man pinned her against the wall. His hot breath washed over her, making Estelle's legs feel weak.

Her entire body went soft, nearly causing her to lose her footing. "What do you mean 'generous'? Weren't you hoping Noelle Lockwood would move into Imperial Crest? I was merely doing you a favor."

Nathaniel's anger seemed to ignite at those words. He suddenly closed the distance, pressing his body against hers, leaving her not an inch of room to escape.

"Why let her move in? Do you have even the slightest awareness of being my wife?"

Estelle instinctively wanted to retort but suddenly froze.

Did he just say—his wife?

Nathaniel's wife was only "Estelle Lockwood," not "Yara Lockwood."

But she was clearly using Yara's identity right now! Why would Nathaniel say that? Had he recognized her?

Estelle's face paled slightly. "Who is your wife? Stop talking nonsense!"

"When my headaches act up, you get her to take care of me. When I'm drunk, you let her into my room. For every banquet, big or small, you have her accompany me as my partner..."

Nathaniel slowly leaned in, lowering his voice until his lips were mere inches from hers. He stared straight at her. "Do you even remember that you are my legally wedded wife?"

Estelle's breath hitched.

What was he saying? She didn't understand a word!

"Nathaniel, stop acting crazy and get off me!"

The man acted as if he hadn't heard her. He raised a hand and pressed heavily against her lips, his voice hoarse. "Estelle..."

Meeting his unfocused eyes, Estelle suddenly realized what was going on.

Nathaniel's headache was probably so severe that he had lost track of time, thinking it was still five years ago.

And what was that nonsense he just spouted? Letting Noelle move in and take care of him—was he saying she, his "wife," had allowed it?

He was faking it. He was still faking it!

The more Estelle thought about it, the angrier she got. With a forceful shove, she pushed him away!

THUD!

Nathaniel crashed violently onto the carpet!

Startled by the loud noise, Zane Grant hurriedly ran out to check the situation. Seeing the scene before him, he was absolutely dumbfounded.

"This... you... I... Dr. Lockwood, what happened?"

Why were Yara's clothes rumpled, her lip split, and her eyes red? She looked as if she had just endured something unspeakable.

And Nathaniel—shoved onto the carpet so violently—showed not the slightest hint of displeasure.

Zane felt that the situation was getting a little complicated.

Furious, Estelle snapped, "Who knows what's wrong with him? He just came up and mistook me for his ex-wife! Is Noelle not taking good care of him? How does Nathaniel even have the mind to think about other women?"

Zane was speechless. Should he tell her that before Noelle could even start taking care of him yesterday, Nathaniel had already scolded her and chased her away?

Although Nathaniel claimed that Yara was very likely Estelle, Zane remained skeptical. Setting aside the fact that the Lockwood family had already cremated and buried Estelle's body back then, even if she had survived, there was absolutely no reason for her to return under a new identity.

So, the current situation was...

Nathaniel had mistaken their family doctor for his wife and assaulted her!

Screaming internally, Zane hurriedly said, "Dr. Lockwood, I'm so, so sorry. I apologize on Nathaniel's behalf. Why don't you head upstairs and freshen up? I can handle him on my own!"

Nathaniel furrowed his brows, seemingly unable to comprehend why Estelle was angry.

Besides, Estelle was his wife. Why was Zane getting involved?

Nathaniel stood up and tried to approach Estelle again. Zane hastily stepped forward and pulled him back. "Nathaniel! Wake up! This is Dr. Yara Lockwood, not Estelle!"

He then turned his head and apologized once more. "Dr. Lockwood, when Nathaniel's headaches flare up, he loses his sense of time and sometimes doesn't even recognize people. Basically, anything can happen. But I promise, there won't be a next time!"

Estelle let out a cold chuckle. "That would be best."

With that, she headed straight upstairs without looking back.

Zane clicked his tongue and muttered, "Nathaniel, open your eyes and look. Seeing you in so much pain, Dr. Lockwood just walked away without a second glance. How could she possibly be your wife?"

Upstairs, Estelle changed her clothes and composed herself before knocking on Zachery and Mia's door.

"Sweethearts, Aunt Penelope invited Mommy out shopping today. Do you want to come with me?"

Penelope Sullivan had watched these two children grow up. Hearing this, Mia glanced at the "Zachery" beside her. "Mommy, wait a second. We need to discuss this."

Estelle couldn't help but laugh. What was going on? They needed to discuss going out for a walk? Still, she never interfered with her babies' decisions.

"Alright then. Mommy will wait for you in my room."

As soon as the door closed, the three little ones huddled together. Mia looked incredibly serious. "You both saw what happened yesterday. That bad woman Noelle is ready to move into the house.

"Even though our scumbag dad... I mean, Uncle Sloan, kicked her out yesterday, who knows if he'll soften up today? We can't just let Uncle Sloan do whatever he wants. We have to stay behind and nip this in the bud the moment we see any signs!"

Listening to their "strategist," Zachery and Christian nodded repeatedly.

If anyone saw these three kids working together and formulating a master plan to drive Noelle away, they would be absolutely stunned.

Mia continued, "But if we don't go with Aunt Penelope, it'll look too suspicious. So, I suggest we split into two groups!"

Zachery nodded. "Then let's do this: Mia, you and the young master will go out with Mommy. I'll stay at Imperial Crest. I absolutely won't give that bad woman a single chance!"

Mia thought for a moment. "Zachery, do you think you can pull off pretending to be the young master all by yourself at Imperial Crest without getting caught?"

Zachery patted his chest confidently. "I'm a natural genius! How could I possibly mess this up?"

Five minutes later, Mia and Christian knocked on Estelle's door.

Seeing Mia and "Zachery" already wearing their little backpacks, Estelle's heart melted, and her previous annoyance vanished instantly. "Alright, let's head out. By the way, where is Christian?"

Pretending to be his brother, Christian lied without skipping a beat. "Christian said he was worried about Uncle Sloan, so he's going to stay behind and keep him company."

Estelle scoffed inwardly. She couldn't understand how Nathaniel got so lucky to have such a good son!

Later, Penelope had chosen a family amusement park for their outing.

After playing with the two kids for a while, she brought them into the lounge.

"It's been so long, my little sweethearts! Did you miss Aunt Penelope? I got you guys some cupcakes! Oh, speaking of which, Zachery..."

Penelope looked as though she had just discovered something extraordinary. "Why are you so quiet today, Zachery? You aren't playing with anything. Are you feeling unwell?"

Normally, the cool little Zachery would be bouncing off the walls, never sitting still for a second.

The attractions at this park were usually his and Mia's favorites, yet today, Mia had been playing by herself the entire time. Zachery had spent most of his time watching from the sidelines.

That was why Penelope was worried he might be feeling sick.

Christian and Mia exchanged glances. Before they could say a word, Estelle chimed in with a smile.

"Zachery has been pretty quiet lately. He used to be like this when he was little, remember?"

Hearing this, Penelope remembered. "Yes, yes! When Zachery was three, he was very shy. I remember he took a tumble once and just buried his face in my chest, crying his eyes out, hahaha! Oh, right, that fall left a tiny scar. Come here, Zachery, let Aunt Penelope see if that scar has faded at all."

Estelle also looked over with a smile.

Mia's stomach dropped in panic.

Oh no! Zachery had a scar from a fall, but the young master didn't!

How could the current "Zachery" possibly have a scar on him?!

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

Mommy, Daddy Has Already Regretted It

Mia opened her mouth. "Mommy..."

The next moment, Christian calmly walked over and lifted the hem of his shirt. There was a fingernail-sized scar on his waist.

Mia's eyes immediately widened, and she shot several glances at "Zachery." She wondered, "This guy is the young master, right? That little dummy Zachery is still at Imperial Crest, right? Why does the young master have a scar exactly like Zachery's?!"

Penelope Sullivan's heart ached. "Oh my, this scar is still so deep. Does it hurt?"

Christian dropped the hem of his shirt. "It doesn't hurt anymore."

He walked back to Mia's side, met her dumbfounded expression, offered a slow smile, and poured her a glass of lemonade.

Christian didn't know how things could be this coincidental either. Zachery had a scar, and he had one in the exact same spot. Daddy had said this scar was left behind when he was three, after roughhousing and falling over with another little boy.

Penelope clicked her tongue and teased, "Our precious Zachery is so considerate now. I almost thought my baby had been swapped with someone else! But this scar can't be faked, right, Yara?"

"But you need to be more careful when walking from now on, sweetie. Taking a tumble hurts so much!"

Estelle Lockwood ordered their food. Seeing Zachery eating so obediently, she couldn't help but smile. In truth, Zachery hadn't fallen because he was unsteady on his feet; he had gotten into a fight.

Henry Kendrick had called her that day, saying Zachery had sneaked out and gotten into a fight with a little boy on the street. The two of them took a tumble together, and both ended up with a scar on their waist. By the time Estelle arrived, the other boy had already been picked up by his parents, leaving Zachery crying sullenly all by himself.

Afterward, Zachery firmly refused to admit that he had fallen because he lost the fight. Everyone else assumed he had just been careless and hadn't watched where he was going. Penelope had even gently scolded him several times out of concern.

For the sake of the little guy's pride, Estelle didn't expose the truth. "Now that Zachery is a big boy, he won't trip while walking anymore, right?"

Christian nodded obediently.

Mia was speechless. She wondered if she was crazy or if the world was crazy. How could this actually be covered up?

At Imperial Crest.

When it was time for dinner, Zachery sat at the dining table and waited for a while. "Grandpa Chapman, why isn't Daddy here yet?"

Mr. Chapman said gently, "Young Master, Mr. Sloan isn't feeling well today. Dr. Grant is upstairs taking care of him, so he won't be coming down. Could you eat by yourself?"

Zachery wondered if his deadbeat daddy was sick. His eyes darted around. He immediately hopped off his chair and dashed upstairs like a wisp of smoke. "Grandpa Chapman, I'm going to check on Daddy!"

"Ah, Young Master, please eat your dinner first..." Before Mr. Chapman could finish, Zachery was already out of sight.

Zachery lightened his footsteps, tiptoeing to Nathaniel Sloan's bedroom door. He pressed his ear against it and heard people talking inside.

Zane Grant was speaking earnestly. "Nathaniel, I know you miss Estelle, but Dr. Lockwood really isn't her! What's the point of taking your anger out on Dr. Lockwood? Look, you even drove her away!

"Besides, if Dr. Lockwood really were her and she had returned to your side, why wouldn't she acknowledge you? It means you definitely did something wrong, and you need to reflect on yourself!"

Nathaniel pressed his temples, a splitting headache tormenting him. Hearing this, he mockingly twitched the corner of his lips. His tone carried an indescribable pain. "I want to ask that too. What did I do wrong to make her leave me so heartlessly?"

Zane opened his mouth but couldn't find anything to say.

Outside the door, Zachery's eyes widened. He thought, "No, wait a minute, what did this deadbeat daddy just say?"

"He actually has the nerve to ask what he did wrong? He's blaming Mommy for being heartless?"

"What did he do wrong? He did everything wrong! My fiery temper can't take this anymore!"

He shoved the bedroom door open. "Daddy, right now you look exactly like a cheating scumbag who wants to shift the blame onto his wife! You're holding the mistress with one arm while asking your wife, 'Why are you so heartless? I just cheated, why do you have to leave me?' Daddy, look at yourself. Is this acceptable?!"

The room instantly plunged into dead silence. Zane's jaw dropped. "Christian?" Zane wondered if Christian was being a little too lively!

Nathaniel regained a bit of clarity and retorted, "I didn't cheat."

Zachery sneered. "You didn't? Then what exactly is Noelle Lockwood? And how did she become my mommy? Since she isn't the person you married, where did I come from?"

This was what infuriated Zachery the most! Back then, his deadbeat daddy had abandoned Mommy for the child in that scummy woman's belly! Fortunately, the young master was a good person. Otherwise, he would have risked his life to fight this deadbeat daddy a long time ago!

Zane realized Christian had a massive misunderstanding. He hurriedly said, "Christian, your daddy has no relationship with Noelle whatsoever! As for you..."

How should he explain this? If he brought this matter up, he would have to expose all the dirty laundry of the Sloan family. Christian was still just a child; knowing too much wouldn't do him any good. But... but Christian truly wasn't Noelle's son! He was the only child Estelle had left behind!

Zachery grew even more self-righteous. "Daddy, if you made a mistake, you have to be brave enough to admit it. If you didn't have an illicit affair with Noelle, why would your ex-wife have left you?

"Let's not even talk about you letting Noelle move into the marital home. Your ex-wife..."

Zachery felt a lump in his throat when he brought this up. He wanted nothing more than to tear this man into eight pieces. He steadied his emotions before continuing, "Your ex-wife died under such suspicious circumstances, yet you didn't investigate it at all. Why didn't you ever consider who wanted her dead back then, and who benefited from her death afterward?!

"You didn't look into anything and just closed the case as a suicide. Even if you suspect she isn't dead, you never bothered to look for her!"

Zane didn't know why Christian was getting so emotional. Perhaps this was just the telepathic connection between mother and son. He glanced at Nathaniel, who was still being tormented by his headache, and sighed. "Christian, you've wrongly blamed Nathaniel. Estelle was indeed the one who started that fire back then. Nathaniel suspected

Noelle and the Lockwoods, but they had no reason to kill their own biological daughter, right?

"Besides, your daddy has never stopped searching all these years. As long as there's a sliver of hope, he exhausts all his efforts to find her. Didn't you also go to the USA when you were three..."

Before Zane could finish, Zachery forcefully pushed him away.

Hearing Zane say they were certain it was a suicide and certain Estelle started the fire, Zachery's eyes instantly turned bloodshot, and he stumbled two steps back.

"Nonsense! You adults only know how to spout nonsense! Just to protect that venomous woman, you can disregard the truth. I hate you all!"

After saying that, he turned and ran.

"Hey, Christian!" Zane wanted to chase after him. He hadn't finished speaking yet!

When Christian was three, Nathaniel heard that a woman who looked a lot like Estelle had appeared in the USA, and he brought Christian along to find her. Even though they didn't find her in the end—and Christian even ended up with a scar on his waist from getting into a fight—no one could claim that Nathaniel didn't care about his wife.

"Nathaniel..." Zane turned back.

Nathaniel's gray eyes flickered as he pressed his temples. He said in a hoarse voice, "He really hates Noelle. Find a time to publicly announce Christian's true identity."

Mommy, Daddy Has Already Regretted It

Zane Grant hesitated for a moment before shaking his head. "But Mrs. Sloan, the Sloan family, and the Lockwood family probably won't just let this go.

"Besides... Nathaniel, making Christian's identity public means you'll face a massive backlash from public opinion. I know you don't care, but if Christian gets cursed at... do you think he can handle it?"

In the fire five years ago, although Estelle Lockwood was the only fatality, over twenty medical staff and patients were injured. The hospital also lost a lot of equipment, several wards were destroyed, and the medical treatment of hundreds of people was delayed, causing an extremely severe negative impact. Once the cause of the fire was determined to be Estelle committing arson to commit suicide, almost everyone cursed her. They cursed her to die a horrible death, said she deserved it, and cursed her for harming others even in death.

Because of the public sentiment at the time, Rose Lowell proposed claiming publicly that Christian was Noelle Lockwood's child. That way, even if people insulted Estelle, it wouldn't implicate Christian. Due to Noelle's status as a celebrity, this matter caused a

huge uproar online. Only five years had passed, so there were definitely still people who remembered.

If Christian's identity were made public now, he would undoubtedly face intense scrutiny and questioning. He might not even be able to go to kindergarten. Furthermore, there was one most important point.

"When Noelle found Christian back then, he had been thrown into the fire and was barely breathing. Can we tell Christian about this? Tell him that his mother wanted to commit suicide and didn't want him to survive either? So many people saw it; we can't hide it...

"If Christian knew, how heartbroken would he be?"

As Zane was sighing, Nathaniel suddenly spoke up. "But Christian has grown up."

"What?" Zane clearly didn't understand, but Nathaniel didn't elaborate.

Perhaps sometimes, he really should listen to his child's opinion. Back then, "for Christian's own good," he had hidden the fact that his biological mother was Estelle, causing him to suffer grievances under Noelle... Was this kind of "for his own good" truly good?

The next day, at Evernight International.

The perfume launch had already been put on the schedule. The entire perfume department was bustling with activity, their admiration for Estelle growing by the day, while they completely ignored Noelle. Hearing that Nathaniel was looking for her, Noelle finally felt a sense of vindication. Under the envious gazes of the crowd, she walked toward the CEO's office.

"Nathaniel, you're looking for me? Is your headache feeling any better?"

Noelle walked in as if there was no one else around and reached out, wanting to give Nathaniel a massage. Nathaniel coldly raised his eyes and waved his hand, dismissing the secretaries before cutting straight to the chase.

"You've seen Christian's attitude toward you. Since he doesn't like you, you should interact with him less in the future. I will choose an appropriate time to announce Christian's true identity. From then on, you will no longer be his mother, but his aunt. You also don't need to come to Imperial Crest anymore."

Noelle's expression suddenly froze.

She wondered, "Did I hear that right? Announce Christian's identity? And revoke my privilege to freely enter and exit Imperial Crest?!"

Outsiders believed she was the future Mrs. Sloan precisely because of the existence of Christian, her supposed "biological son"!

"Nathaniel... isn't this decision too hasty? Christian is still young, and making it public now won't do him any good. Didn't we discuss in the beginning to wait until he comes of age..."

"I am not asking for your opinion," Nathaniel said, his eyes devoid of any warmth.

Noelle clenched her fists, her nails digging into her flesh, but her face still displayed a look of pure worry.

"But... Nathaniel, I'm worried that Christian will be cursed at. He's young, and his mental resilience isn't strong enough... You know that what my sister did back then was wrong, and those who were injured still harbor resentment against her..."

Nathaniel's eyes suddenly darkened.

Noelle's heart skipped a beat. She hastily shook her head with tears in her eyes.

"Nathaniel, of course I don't mean to blame my sister. I just mean that we can understand her committing arson to end her life, and our hearts can ache for her.

"But outsiders—those who were injured and had their treatments delayed because of my sister's fire—won't understand her. They are still saying it's good that she died... Under these circumstances, wouldn't announcing Christian's identity just give those people an outlet to vent their anger?"

"Over the years, the Lockwood family has faced immense controversy due to my sister's arson. But Mom, Dad, and I are adults, after all, so it doesn't matter if people gossip about us. But Christian..."

Noelle was full of worry, making it seem as if she truly had Christian's best interests at heart. However, she was bursting with joy on the inside. The hospital arson would forever be the shackle weighing down on Estelle. Even in death, she would be reviled by millions! But who would care about who actually started the fire? Estelle was dead anyway, and everyone in the Lockwood family insisted that she had suicidal tendencies. Naturally, the blame for the arson fell entirely on her. She was a dead person anyway. What did it matter if she took on a little more blame?

She thought, "But since Estelle is already dead, couldn't she just stay dead and not cause trouble? Why would Nathaniel suggest revealing Christian's identity? Did someone say something to him?!"

"Noelle." Nathaniel suddenly spoke, interrupting Noelle's train of thought. "I am only Christian's father; I cannot interfere with his entire life. Whatever he thinks or does, as his father, I only have reason to support him. Therefore, I am here to inform you—it is Christian who no longer wants to be your son. Do I need to make myself any clearer?"

Noelle said anxiously, "But Christian is still young. Making decisions on his own..."

"Whatever consequences his decisions may have, I will bear them for him. Do you have any other objections?"

"I..." Noelle never expected that even after saying all this, Nathaniel still wanted to make it public!

She thought, "No... Even though I hate that little bastard Christian, he is my only path to marrying Nathaniel!"

Biting her lip, Noelle burst into tears. "Nathaniel, since you've made up your mind, I won't stop you. I'm sorry, I spoke out of turn just now. I am, after all, just an outsider..." With that, she ran out crying.

Once outside, Noelle made a frantic phone call. "Mom, Nathaniel doesn't want me anymore. What should I do..."

Rose was equally anxious. "What happened? Damn it! I heard that little bastard Christian Sloan has been getting very close to Yara Lockwood recently. Could it be that Yara instigated this?! Noelle, you have to think of a way to make everyone sympathize with you right now, and while you're at it, trample on those two bitches, Estelle and Yara!"

Noelle fell deep in thought. Was there a way to kill two birds with one stone... Suddenly, a spark of inspiration hit her. "Mom, I know what to do!"

After hanging up, Noelle went straight to the perfume department, accessed some files, secretly took a bottle of perfume, and mailed it to the Lockwood Group.

One week later.

The Lockwood Group released their perfume one hour earlier than the Star Group's.

Estelle had been working day and night these past few days. This was the first collaborative perfume between Star and Evernight International. She had poured countless hours of blood, sweat, and tears into formulating it. After signing her name in the Perfumer section, the perfume went on sale right on time.

Her assistant complained from the side, "The Lockwood Group also launched a perfume an hour ago. Rumor has it that Noelle is the perfumer, and her fans are going crazy buying it. What is she trying to do? She knows full well that we are launching our perfume today too... Is she trying to pick a fight with us?"

Mommy, Daddy Has Already Regretted It

At the mention of the Lockwood Group, a flicker of disgust crossed Estelle's face. She hadn't forgotten how many perfume formulas they had stolen from her, giving all the credit to Noelle.

It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that every single famous perfume under Noelle's name actually belonged to her! She just didn't have the evidence yet. This was a score she would have to settle slowly.

Estelle pulled her thoughts back to the present. "Ignore the Lockwood Group. Our perfume will launch on schedule."

Her assistant's eyes darted around briefly. "Understood, Miss Lockwood."

One hour later.

The new perfume, co-launched by Star Group and Evernight International, sold out immediately upon release. The results were incredibly promising.

The assistant breathed a sigh of relief, remarking seemingly offhandedly, "Looks like even with the Lockwood Group launching their perfume today, it didn't affect our sales at all."

After speaking, the assistant nudged Estelle's phone and handed it to her.

Estelle's gaze narrowed slightly in confusion. Why was her assistant randomly touching her phone? Still, she didn't think much of it.

The sales department quickly processed the custom orders and shipped out the perfumes. Every department operated in perfect order.

As the workday neared its end, Estelle was just about to leave when she saw Rose Lowell and Noelle Lockwood walking over, arm in arm.

Noelle stepped forward. "Miss Yara!"

Estelle shot her a sideways glance. "Can I help you?"

"It's so late. Are you heading back alone, Dr. Lockwood? Would you like my mother and me to give you a ride?" Noelle smiled gently. Her words sounded like a complaint, but they were actually a calculated display of her intimacy with Nathaniel Sloan. "Nathaniel can be so thoughtless sometimes. You're an esteemed guest of Evernight International, Dr. Lockwood, yet he just left you here all by yourself. I'll definitely have to give him a piece of my mind next time."

Estelle, of course, knew that Nathaniel had already revoked Noelle's special privileges.

She picked up her bag, not even bothering to look back. "No need. If you have enough free time to play the bleeding heart here, Miss Lockwood, you'd be better off going to cry in front of Nathaniel again. It might actually do you some good."

Noelle's face twisted in sheer malice for a split second. Only after Estelle stepped into the elevator did she put on a look of utter dejection.

"Mom, I really want to get along with Dr. Lockwood, but she seems to absolutely despise me..."

Rose rolled her eyes and said deliberately, "Noelle, stop casting your pearls before swine! Yara treats you like a thorn in her side. How could she possibly want to be friends with you?"

Noelle feigned surprise. "How could that be... Does Dr. Lockwood really hate me that much? But, after all, she hasn't actually done anything to hurt me..."

"You can know a person's face, but you can never know their heart. Who knows what kind of dirty tricks she's pulling behind your back? You've been shielded too well by your father and me since you were a child. You have no idea how sinister people can be!"

The elevator lobby was bustling with people coming and going, and many turned their heads to look in their direction.

Noelle suppressed the dark gleam in her eyes and offered a gentle smile. "Mom, you're overthinking things. I believe Dr. Lockwood is a good person. Please don't say things like that anymore."

Some of the bystanders nodded to themselves. Those who weren't familiar with Noelle thought she seemed quite kind-hearted.

After the perfume was released, there were two delivery methods available for online orders. Local purchases were delivered on the very same day, while those requiring standard shipping would take no more than three days. Following the 10:00 a.m. launch, a significant number of customers had already received their packages by evening.

Reviews gradually began to pour in online.

[Star's perfumers are incredible! This perfume is absolutely not a letdown. Highly recommended!]

[It really smells amazing. It's magical, actually—this fragrance made everyone around me fall in love with it. Regardless of age or gender, they couldn't stop praising it.]

[Star's Chief Perfumer already has several massive hits under their belt. So impressive!]

[Star Group is definitely going to make a killing this time, right?]

The internet was flooded with rave reviews, but Estelle didn't pay much attention to them. Having worked tirelessly for three days and nights, she collapsed onto her bed and fell asleep almost the second she returned to her room.

Because of this, she failed to notice that around 1:00 a.m., the wave of positive feedback was gradually being overtaken by a completely different narrative—

[Do you guys seriously not think that the two perfumes released today smell exactly the same?]

[I'm a fan of Noelle's. I bought Noelle's perfume, and I also bought the one from Star. Yes, they are completely identical!]

[What's going on? Why are they the same? The Lockwood Group stated that their perfume was independently developed by Noelle, while Star Group claimed this one is the latest creation from their Chief Perfumer, Yara.]

[Someone definitely plagiarized. But who copied whom?]

Although some argued that Star's Chief Perfumer would never resort to plagiarism, Noelle was a massive celebrity with a relentless army of fans. Their sheer online presence was enough to twist the truth and call black white.

Right as the debate reached a stalemate, the Lockwood Group's official account posted an update at 6:00 a.m. that pushed the controversy to a boiling point. The post detailed Noelle's entire perfume-making process. From her initial inspiration and handwritten notes to the exact spice ratios, everything was displayed crystal clear!

Meanwhile, Yara's side hadn't offered a single response. To the public, it was obvious who had copied whom!

The next morning, Estelle discovered her phone was dead and wouldn't turn on no matter what she tried. She furrowed her brows. Was it broken? It had been working perfectly fine yesterday... Nathaniel wasn't at Imperial Crest either. She glanced at her alarm clock and decided to head to Evernight International first.

Upon arriving at the company, she immediately sensed that the way people were looking at her was off. Not far away, several employees were pointing and whispering about her.

"She looks so decent on the outside. How does she have the nerve to plagiarize..."

"And she calls herself a Chief Perfumer? That title was probably stolen too. So shameless."

"Mrs. Lockwood warned Miss Noelle yesterday that you can't judge a book by its cover. She told Miss Noelle to stay away from this woman, but Miss Noelle even spoke up for her! How malicious..."

"Poor Miss Noelle. This is already the second time she's been plagiarized!"

"What? She was plagiarized before?"

"Yeah, by that Estelle Lockwood! Miss Noelle's country bumpkin of an older sister. The moment she returned to the Lockwood family, she tried to compete with Noelle for favor. She stole Noelle's perfume formula, claimed it as her own, and almost fooled everyone! Thank goodness Mrs. Lockwood put righteousness before family ties and exposed her. That's the only way we learned the truth."

"Goodness! What did Miss Noelle ever do to deserve running into these two women?"

Estelle's footsteps faltered, her gaze darkening bit by bit.

Plagiarism...

Heh. Back then, she had developed a specific fragrance to treat Nathaniel's migraines, only for Noelle to steal it and falsely accuse her of plagiarism. And now, her new perfume had once again become Noelle's "independent, original" creation?!

Being branded a plagiarist was a massive crisis. Henry Kendrick would have definitely tried to notify her. However, because her phone was broken, she hadn't received any calls and had completely missed the prime window to defend herself.

Knowing she couldn't afford to delay, Estelle hurried toward her office, only to find someone already sitting at her desk.

Laura Jennings was arrogantly ordering the other employees to throw Estelle's belongings out. Spotting Estelle, Laura pointed a finger right at her nose, completely shedding her refined, high-society image. "Yara, you actually have the gall to show your face at this company?"

The surrounding employees also glared at her with anger. After all, once a perfume was labeled as a "plagiarized" product, all their hard work over the past period would go down the drain.

Laura looked immensely smug. "I said from the very beginning that your kind couldn't be trusted! And look where we are now. If you have even a shred of dignity left, pack up your trash and get out of here!"

SMACK.

A folder was chucked out of the office. Estelle caught it single-handedly and let out a cold sneer.

"Mrs. Sloan, nothing has been definitively proven yet, but you're already buying into the Lockwood Group's one-sided story without a second thought?"

Chapter 76: Nathaniel Sloan Suspects the Truth of the Plagiarism from 5 Years Ago

Laura Jennings hadn't expected Estelle Lockwood to actually dare talk back. Feeling utterly humiliated, she flared up in anger. "It's already come to this, so what more is there to decide! The evidence of your plagiarism is irrefutable. It's set in stone! Even if Nathaniel wants to protect you, he can't!"

Estelle lifted her eyes and shot her a glance. "During the half month I've spent at Evernight International, everyone in the Perfumery Department has watched me develop and revise the formula. Do you really think whether I plagiarized or not can be determined by a single word from Noelle Lockwood?"

Laura choked on her words.

The surrounding colleagues exchanged glances and nodded. Over the past few days, they had indeed watched the perfume formula take shape bit by bit.

"Miss Lockwood, we can understand that you want to defend yourself, but don't drag me down with you!" Right at that moment, the assistant who had been working closely with Estelle suddenly took two steps back and said pointedly, "I have no idea if you plagiarized or not. I wasn't even there when you wrote the formula. I don't know anything!"

Laura immediately felt emboldened. "You hear that? Even your own assistant implies you plagiarized. Are you still not getting out of here?"

Estelle abruptly turned around, narrowing her eyes. This assistant had been assigned to her by Nathaniel Sloan after she arrived at Evernight International. The assistant had clearly seen the entire process of her perfume blending, yet now claimed ignorance? Not to mention, it was this very assistant who had touched her phone yesterday, right before it broke and caused her to miss a call. Stringing all these incidents together, it was obvious! This assistant had been bought off by Noelle a long time ago.

Estelle's eyes turned icy. "Fine. Since Mrs. Sloan and all of you here believe I plagiarized and want to kick me out, I will leave.

"But don't ever expect to invite me back!"

Estelle turned and walked away. Her imposing aura intimidated the crowd. A junior perfumer whispered, "She is President Lockwood of Star, after all. Driving her away without President Sloan's permission... is that really a good idea?"

Laura announced loudly, "Nathaniel's things are my things! I'm telling her to get the hell out of my company, what's wrong with that?!"

Hearing this, the crowd finally felt reassured.

Meanwhile, in the CEO's office.

After receiving the news, Nathaniel immediately ordered his people to take down the trending hashtags and launch an investigation. Noelle's fans had been throwing vile, unbearable insults at Yara Lockwood for plagiarizing. And then... they started cursing out Estelle Lockwood as well.

Nathaniel couldn't help but recall an incident from five years ago. The Lockwood family had accused Estelle of plagiarizing Noelle. Estelle had denied it, but the Lockwoods produced evidence, and everyone had taken Noelle's side. Afterward, Estelle was brutally cyberbullied, leaving him no choice but to suppress all information related to the scandal.

But now, it was being brought up again. Nathaniel slowly closed his eyes.

Not long after, Rose Lowell and Noelle Lockwood came to visit.

"Nathaniel... I'm so sorry. I didn't know things would blow up like this. Where is Miss Lockwood? I'll go apologize to her..."

The mother and daughter were playing good cop, bad cop. Rose hurriedly interjected, "Oh, Noelle! You're the one who was plagiarized, yet you're the one going to apologize? What kind of logic is that?"

Noelle's eyes were red from crying. "But this incident has caused Evernight International a lot of trouble. Nathaniel, I didn't mean for this to happen..."

Rose turned to him. "Nathaniel, you really can't blame Noelle for this! When she found out she was plagiarized, she was prepared to just swallow her grievances. But the operations department was so outraged that they posted that statement on social media behind our backs! By the time we found out, it was already too late!

"Sigh, Noelle really didn't want to make a fuss over Yara, but, but... Oh, my poor daughter!"

Rose sighed heavily, acting as if they genuinely had no idea what was going on.

Nathaniel lifted his eyelids. "Ms. Lowell, you were unaware of that post?"

A trace of panic flashed across Rose's face before she hurriedly offered an apologetic smile. "Of course I was unaware, Nathaniel. I know that once this plagiarism scandal breaks out, your interests will be affected too. Noelle is always so considerate of you; naturally, she wouldn't do something like that."

A hint of mockery surfaced on Nathaniel's face. "Then what does Ms. Lowell think we should do about this?"

Rose's eyes darted around. "Of course... we should have Yara confess, and then come out and apologize.

"Noelle will keep her fans in check on her end. Once Yara apologizes to Noelle and admits to plagiarizing, we won't dwell on it. We can turn this big issue into a small one, and eventually make it go away completely!"

Nathaniel looked at the mother-daughter duo. After a long moment, he suddenly spoke. "Ms. Lowell, it's a pity that a matter like plagiarism can't be decided by the Lockwood Group's word alone. Star has plenty of evidence. All the data Yara left behind while formulating the perfume will be made public shortly. You want Yara to admit to plagiarism, but the Star Group will never allow it."

Rose's expression shifted. She really hadn't thought that far ahead, assuming Yara would be just as easy to manipulate as Estelle—that she could just throw a couple of accusations at her and force a confession. "T-this... But Yara really did plagiarize! Nathaniel, you can't be biased toward Yara in a matter like this!"

"What are you so anxious about, Ms. Lowell?" Nathaniel said mildly. "If Yara truly plagiarized, and it's set in stone, it won't be too late for her to apologize then."

"T-that's good..." Rose felt an indescribable panic rising in her chest. Her tone was full of insinuation as she added, "Nathaniel, you have to understand me as a mother. My daughter has been plagiarized twice, and both times she suffered a massive injustice. I just want to seek justice for Noelle!"

Noelle wept silently. The first time she was "plagiarized" referred to Estelle five years ago. The second time referred to Yara now.

Nathaniel slowly withdrew his gaze. "Of course, the one who plagiarized must provide an explanation."

Overjoyed, Rose pulled Noelle along and left.

After the two departed, Nathaniel stared at the stack of documents on his desk. He suddenly spoke in a hoarse voice, "Years ago, I might have gotten something wrong."

Luke White remained silent. Having followed Mr. Sloan for so long, he naturally knew which incident he was referring to.

Back then, the Lockwood family and Noelle had accused Estelle of plagiarism. The Madam was cyberbullied so severely that she couldn't even leave the house. Then, one day, she suddenly called Mr. Sloan and confessed that she was the one who had plagiarized, begging him to suppress the matter. Mr. Sloan had used his influence to delete all the posts and hashtags about Estelle from the internet, and the incident seemed to pass just like that.

However, in everyone's minds, Estelle was still a plagiarist. Even today, she was still being verbally abused by Noelle's fans.

Now, Mr. Sloan was certain that Yara was the Madam. As a Chief Perfumer, Yara disdained plagiarism. If Yara was like this, then would the Estelle of five years ago really have plagiarized? And if she hadn't, why did she make that call to Mr. Sloan?

Nathaniel looked out the window, lost in thought. Suddenly, his phone buzzed. He cast his eyes down at the screen, and his expression drastically darkened as he quickly strode toward the door!

"Mr. Sloan, there's a meeting coming up!" Luke said hastily. "Where are you going?"

"To find Yara."

Chapter 77: Nathaniel Sloan Defends His Wife: Suing Noelle Lockwood

Estelle Lockwood walked into the underground parking garage, her expression instantly darkening.

Over a dozen teenagers surrounded her car. Each wielded a long rod, viciously smashing the vehicle to pieces. The frame was already caved in, and the doors had been violently ripped off. Let alone driving it, even reassembling it would be impossible.

"Look, that's Yara Lockwood! Surround her, don't let her escape!"

Just then, the leader's eyes lit up. Pointing at Estelle, she spoke with self-righteous indignation, "Back when Estelle Lockwood plagiarized, we couldn't vent Noelle's anger for her. Everyone thought our Noelle was an easy target! That's why this Yara Lockwood dared to copy her so blatantly! As Noelle's knights, we must teach her a lesson!"

Noelle Lockwood's fans immediately surged forward, surrounding Estelle tightly.

Estelle narrowed her eyes. "You've lost your minds over a celebrity! Do you even know the penalty for public assault and property damage?"

The delinquent girl leading the group wasn't afraid in the slightest. "We're minors! Even if we break the law, nothing will happen to us! You better worry about yourself first!"

The other underage fans glared furiously. "Plagiarizing dog, go to hell! Noelle might be easy to bully, but we aren't!"

"Charge! Kill her! Noelle said we're minors, so it doesn't matter even if someone dies!"

Estelle's face turned icy.

Noelle Lockwood had really played her cards well! If something happened to her here today, others would only think she deserved it. After all, she plagiarized Noelle, so it was completely understandable for Noelle's fans to act out in a fit of emotion!

Five years ago, Noelle had used her fans countless times to twist the truth. It was the Lockwood family and these fans who had put her on such a high pedestal that she now completely disregarded human life!

Estelle made quick work of the mob, knocking them all to the ground before triggering the parking garage's alarm.

"What are you doing?! I'll kill you!" Right then, the delinquent girl's expression twisted in madness. Screaming, she swung her rod down at Estelle—

WHAM!

The anticipated pain never came. The delinquent was sent flying with a single kick, and Estelle fell steadily into someone's embrace.

She froze.

It was... Nathaniel Sloan.

With a swift spin, Nathaniel shielded her behind him, his eyes brimming with hostility. "Call the police! And find out exactly who let them in here!"

Luke White quickly replied, "The parking garage security guard took a bribe from Vivian Lowell..."

Nathaniel's voice was dark. "Take Vivian to the police station along with them. No bail, no settlements. They will face the full extent of the law!"

Before Luke could speak, another assistant secretary chimed in anxiously, "President Sloan, with this many minors, they won't really be sentenced to anything anyway. Besides, they were just feeling bad for Miss Noelle. If Yara hadn't plagiarized..."

Before the assistant could finish, Nathaniel shot him an icy glare. "You can get lost with them."

"I..." The assistant's face paled. He never expected to be fired just for speaking a few words on Miss Noelle's behalf!

After Nathaniel spoke, he had Luke drag the wailing fans away. Then, he cast a cold gaze at the woman in his arms. Meeting his eyes, Estelle's heart tightened.

Five years ago, when Noelle had falsely accused her of plagiarism, Nathaniel had looked at her with this exact same gaze! She didn't react this strongly when others framed or misunderstood her, but Nathaniel was different!

Memories flooded her mind, and her eyes unwittingly reddened. Like a defensive hedgehog unable to suppress its anger, Estelle snapped, "Do you want to accuse me of plagiarism too?!"

Nathaniel froze for a moment before frowning. "You think I came here to interrogate you?"

Estelle wanted to ask if that wasn't exactly what he was doing. Five years ago, he had done exactly that—listening only to Noelle's side of the story and forcing her to apologize to Noelle without asking a single question! Because she was from the countryside, and because she hadn't grown up in the Lockwood family, everyone automatically assumed she was a country bumpkin. They assumed she couldn't possibly be a perfumer, that she was inherently inferior to Noelle.

Even if the credit was hers, it had to be handed over to Noelle, simply because Noelle was the apple of everyone's eye! It was like this five years ago; was it going to be the same five years later?

Realizing she had misunderstood something, Nathaniel's voice grew tense. "If you know Noelle's fans are nothing but trouble, why didn't you run when you saw them? Did you

think you were invincible? That you could take on over a dozen people without getting hurt?"

Estelle's mind was a mess. Hearing his icy, indifferent tone, her temper flared. "Mind your own business!"

Nathaniel laughed out of sheer exasperation. With a temper like that, was she as stubborn as a mule? He had saved her, only to be met with a barrage of complaints. He really must have had too much time on his hands!

But meeting Estelle's red, slightly aggrieved eyes, Nathaniel's voice grew hoarse. "Mind my own business? Miss Lockwood, you are my business partner. If I don't look out for you, who will?"

Hearing the words "business partner," Estelle subconsciously looked up. "The collaboration was canceled. I've already moved out of Evernight."

Nathaniel frowned sharply. "Who said it was canceled? You are a perfumer hired by Evernight with a high salary. Evernight International hasn't even proven your innocence yet, so who told you the collaboration was off?"

Estelle trembled all over, looking at Nathaniel in disbelief. What had he just said? Did he mean what she thought he meant?

"Yara." Nathaniel set her down from his embrace. "I believe you."

Estelle's pupils contracted sharply. It felt as though a large hand was squeezing her heart, a bitter ache filling her chest.

They had been married for two years and separated for five, yet this was the very first time she had heard those three words from Nathaniel's lips. The words "I believe you" echoed in her mind. Nathaniel actually believed she hadn't plagiarized.

Yet for some reason, Estelle felt no joy. Instead, she couldn't help but feel a sour ache. She wondered why this "I believe you" had come so late. Why hadn't he said it five years ago? Why hadn't he said it when she needed someone to believe her the most?

What did it matter if he said it now? Did she even need his trust anymore? Or was Nathaniel just doing what he did in the past—pacifying her first, only to demand she admit to the plagiarism so she wouldn't cause trouble for Noelle?

Estelle couldn't calm down in the slightest. It was as if she wanted to vent all the grievances she had suffered, both five years ago and now, all at once.

"I have a clear conscience. I have nothing to hide, and the ones who should feel guilty are those who wronged me! So, whether you believe me or not, I won't let Noelle or the Lockwood family off the hook. If you still want to protect them and force me to confess to something I didn't do, let me tell you right now—no way!"

With that, she turned and walked away. Nathaniel didn't retract his gaze until her figure completely vanished from sight.

He instructed Luke in a deep voice, "Go pull the security footage from the Perfume Department. Prepare a press conference, and have the legal department on standby."

Luke nodded. "Yes, sir. But about the legal department..."

Nathaniel spoke coldly, "Yara didn't plagiarize. The plagiarist is someone else."

Luke froze. The two perfumes were completely identical; the plagiarist was either Yara or Noelle. When his boss said "someone else," could he possibly be referring to... Noelle?

He was going to sue Noelle Lockwood!

Chapter 78: He Clears Estelle Lockwood of Plagiarism

Estelle Lockwood went to Star, exported the perfume formulation data, and contacted their legal department to prepare for a lawsuit.

Just then, she received a phone call.

The woman on the other end spoke with an overbearing tone. "You're Yara, right?"

Estelle recognized the voice instantly. It was Rose Lowell.

Back when she had first returned to the Lockwood family, this very woman had stood on the stairs, chin raised high, asking in the same dismissive, arrogant, and contemptuous tone, "You're Estelle Lockwood, right?"

It was exactly the same.

Estelle sneered. "What can I do for you, Ms. Lowell?"

Rose got straight to the point. "I'm sure you've seen the public opinion online. I'm not the type to push someone into a dead end. As long as you admit you plagiarized Noelle, I can still leave you a way out!"

Estelle lowered her eyes, tapped the record button, and kept her voice calm and steady. "Ms. Lowell, you know very well who actually committed plagiarism."

Rose scoffed and raised her voice. "Ha, are you trying to say Noelle plagiarized you?"

"What is our Noelle's status, and what is yours? As the dignified heiress of the Lockwood Group and a major celebrity, would she ever need to steal your work?

"You, on the other hand, talk a big game about being a Chief Perfumer, but in reality, you're just an orphan with unknown parents! Who knows what you'd do for fame?"

Watching the blinking red dot of the recording, Estelle felt no emotional ripples.

She had heard all these words before. If not to gather evidence, she wouldn't have subjected herself to Rose's disgusting remarks.

Back then, she had stated that she designed the perfume and that Noelle Lockwood was the thief.

Rose, her own biological mother, had slapped her across the face, screaming insults.

"Who do you think you are! Noelle is our precious jewel. I know her character better than anyone! How could she possibly steal from you?

"You're just a country bumpkin from the middle of nowhere. Who knows if you even have clean hands!"

Recalling this, Estelle let out a cold laugh.

Perfect. She'd settle all these scores at once!

Rose was still hurling insults on the other end of the line when Estelle suddenly interrupted her. "I have enough material now. Mind yourself, Ms. Lowell."

CLICK. The call disconnected.

Henry Kendrick couldn't help but swear. "What the hell? She has the nerve to threaten you! Rose Lowell doesn't know you're Estelle Lockwood. If she did..."

Estelle scoffed. "If she knew I was her daughter, she'd only threaten me even more arrogantly. Alright, submit this recording as evidence. Plagiarism plus personal attacks—let's lock her up for seven days."

Henry thought about it. "Getting her thrown in jail would be pretty satisfying... Ugh! But she insulted you! I'm so mad! I'm going to tell my brother!"

KNOCK KNOCK.

Someone knocked on the office door.

The assistant spoke from outside. "President Lockwood, Vice President Kendrick, Evernight International is holding a press conference tomorrow morning. They've invited the two of you to attend.

"Mr. Sloan promised to help President Lockwood clear up the plagiarism scandal and also... make Noelle Lockwood apologize publicly."

Estelle raised an eyebrow.

Henry was shocked. "Nathaniel Sloan is helping us clear our names? And making Noelle apologize? Yara, did your ex-husband take the wrong meds, or has he just gone crazy?"

Henry wondered if Nathaniel was actually willing to go through with it. He frowned. Five years ago, that bastard had been so heartless toward Yara!

At the Lockwood family estate.

After the call ended, Rose furiously tossed her phone aside. "That Yara really doesn't know what's good for her!"

She secretly seethed. Yara and Estelle looked so similar, yet had completely different personalities. However, that face was the biggest threat to Noelle and had to be eliminated!

"President Lockwood, Madam, Miss!" The butler rushed in. "Mr. Sloan has invited the three of you to Evernight International's conference hall tomorrow morning at nine. He's holding a press conference!"

Austin Lockwood hesitated. "Nathaniel is holding a press conference?"

The butler nodded. "Yes, Assistant Luke White said it's regarding the perfume plagiarism incident. He also told the three of you not to worry."

Rose beamed instantly. "I knew it! Nathaniel plans to protect Noelle and force Yara to publicly admit to plagiarism and apologize! Noelle, Nathaniel is still on your side!"

Austin mulled over Luke's words and nodded. "That must be it, otherwise he wouldn't have told us not to worry. It seems that by tomorrow, that Yara will be kicked out of Imperial Crest."

A flash of hatred crossed Noelle's eyes. Kicking Yara out of Imperial Crest wasn't enough; she wanted her reputation completely ruined!

At eight thirty the next morning.

The press conference was about to begin.

The topic of the plagiarism scandal had been stirring up a storm lately. Since the 'victim' was the famous star Noelle Lockwood, the incident had topped the trending searches all day and remained there.

Nathaniel chose an open-air conference hall, welcoming all reporters and media. A sea of cameras and microphones pointed toward the center stage.

The crowd was buzzing with discussions.

"Yara really had it coming. A perfectly good Chief Perfumer, yet she couldn't keep her hands to herself!"

"Star's perfumes have been facing boycotts lately. I heard Yara's two kids are even being ostracized at their kindergarten!"

"Word on the street is that President Sloan will make the plagiarist apologize in public!"

"Oh my god, President Sloan dotes on Noelle Lockwood so much! Forcing Yara to apologize to her in front of everyone... the look on Yara's face is going to be priceless!"

"Look, Noelle and her family are here!"

Noelle had heard the chatter from the crowd long before she arrived. Her face flushed with a demure blush.

"Nathaniel is really something. Making such a huge fuss over a minor issue. He wants Ms. Yara to publicly apologize to me. How is she ever going to show her face in public after this?"

Rose couldn't stop smiling. She knew it! The person Nathaniel loved most was still Noelle!

"This is all Nathaniel's way of showing his devotion to you. Just wait for Yara's apology today and enjoy everyone's envious gazes!"

Estelle and Henry arrived as well. Amidst the crowd's disdainful glares, they took their seats in the front row.

Right next to Noelle and Rose.

Rose looked smug. "Some people actually have the nerve to show up. How shameless! She even has the gall to talk about evidence. See? Nathaniel is standing entirely on Noelle's side!"

Noelle acted coy. "Mom, don't rub salt in Ms. Yara's wounds. She has to apologize to me today; she must be feeling terrible already."

Estelle didn't even spare them a glance.

Henry, however, let out a sneer. "No matter how thick-skinned Yara is, she can't beat people who live in their own delusional bubbles."

At exactly nine o'clock, the entire venue fell silent as footsteps echoed through the hall.

Estelle reflexively looked up, meeting Nathaniel's sharp, profound gaze.

His eyes swept over the crowd before he spoke in an even, flat tone.

"Regarding the plagiarism incident, I have zero tolerance. Evernight International has already filed a lawsuit against the plagiarist and is demanding compensation for all damages."

His words meant that Nathaniel had already determined who the plagiarist was.

On stage, Nathaniel's voice continued. "Today's press conference is being held for one specific person. She deserves an apology from the plagiarist."

Chapter 79: "The original creator of this perfume is, Yara Lockwood."

As soon as he spoke, an uproar erupted in the audience.

Rose Lowell's face flushed with excitement. "Noelle, did you hear that!"

The others also looked at Noelle.

With things escalating to this point, almost everyone assumed that Noelle was the original perfumer and Yara was the plagiarist. Nathaniel Sloan's words were definitely meant to stand up for Noelle.

Someone flattered, "Rumor has it that President Sloan wouldn't marry anyone but Miss Noelle. Seeing it now, it's really true. President Sloan is truly deeply in love with Miss Noelle!"

"Yes, yes! Such a grand display, just to get an apology for Miss Noelle. Who wouldn't be envious?"

"Miss Noelle is so blessed. President Lockwood, Mrs. Lockwood, you also have a wonderful daughter!"

"Apologizing on such an occasion is a huge loss of face... President Sloan isn't giving Star Group any face at all. Miss Noelle, congratulations!"

The crowd's subtly mocking gazes fell on Estelle. She didn't feel anything, but Henry Kendrick furrowed his brows.

Henry thought that these people from the Lockwood family were truly disgusting. When Yara found biological parents like them back then, who knew how she had survived those two years.

After the bystanders had envied enough, Noelle finally blushed and said, "I didn't expect Nathaniel to care about me this much..."

"Hmph, if Nathaniel doesn't care about you, who else would he care about?" Rose said pointedly. "My daughter is well-bred and polite, unlike some people who can't do anything but flirt around and engage in petty theft!"

Estelle hadn't wanted to pay attention, but Rose was as annoying as a buzzing fly. "Ms. Lowell, the plagiarist's name hasn't been announced yet. I advise you not to jump to conclusions."

Rose was amused by this remark. She put her hands on her hips, her voice raising even higher. "Ha! The whole world knows that you, a shameless bitch, plagiarized my daughter's perfume formula! You're at death's door and still acting stubborn. Do you have no shame?!"

Austin Lockwood also furrowed his brows. "Miss Yara, with Nathaniel putting it this way, isn't it obvious who he's referring to? Originally, our Lockwood family planned to save you some face, but please don't go too far!"

Noelle's eyes turned red as she secretly shed tears.

The people around them couldn't bear to watch. "The plagiarist doesn't feel guilty at all and is even this arrogant?"

"I think she needs to be taught a lesson! Back then, when the Lockwood family's biological daughter plagiarized Miss Noelle, President Lockwood and Mrs. Lockwood both placed righteousness before family. This Yara still doesn't know what's good for her!"

Another person chimed in, "Exactly! President Lockwood and Mrs. Lockwood were willing to expose their biological daughter's plagiarism to defend their adopted daughter in the past, which shows how reasonable they are. For Yara to actually anger them, it just shows how out of line she is..."

Noelle kept her head down, unable to stop the corners of her lips from curling into a smile.

She thought, even if she had stolen Estelle's perfume formula and taken all of her credit, so what? No one believed Estelle's words. Even Estelle's biological parents had unhesitatingly taken her side, hadn't they? It was like this in the past, and it would be like this today.

What was Yara anyway, to dare to compete with her? Once she bore the crime of 'plagiarism' in the future, let's see if she could still continue as Chief Perfumer!

Thinking of this, Noelle feigned helplessness and said, "Mom, stop talking. I know Miss Yara is unconvinced, but... the facts are right in front of us. There's no reason not to admit it.

"As perfumers, we should follow our hearts, rather than plagiarize other people's work for fame and fortune."

Just as Noelle finished her hypocritical speech, before Rose even had the chance to boast about her, Nathaniel spoke again on stage.

"After multiple joint investigations by Evernight International and the police, the result of this plagiarism incident has been confirmed. The original creator of this perfume is..."

Hearing this, Rose was already growing excited. As long as Nathaniel announced Noelle's name, Yara would be branded with eternal shame from now on!

She couldn't help but mock, "Yara, weren't you just insisting that you didn't plagiarize? Listen to what Nathaniel has to say! This perfume was originally created by our Noelle. You thief, I will definitely ruin your reputation today—"

"The original creator of this perfume is Yara.

"After multiple investigations, retrieving surveillance footage, and interviewing relevant personnel, the police and our company have determined that the original designer of the perfume is indeed Yara."

Nathaniel's words cut off Rose's excited mockery and ridicule.

It was as if a mute button had been pressed on the scene. It instantly fell dead silent.

The crowd suspected they had heard wrong. The expressions on their faces froze for a moment. It took them quite a while to react, subconsciously looking at Noelle and Rose.

Noelle's face instantly turned deathly pale!

"Hmm, Ms. Lowell is right. A plagiarist should be completely ruined," Estelle suddenly laughed out loud in the dead silence, saying pointedly. "It's just a pity... the person who plagiarized isn't me, but your most beloved daughter. Ms. Lowell, why aren't you speaking anymore?"

The venue grew even quieter.

Wait! The crowd suddenly realized that what Yara said didn't seem wrong at all!

Mr. Sloan said that after a joint investigation with the police, it was confirmed that the perfume was originally created by Yara. Then wouldn't Noelle be the one who plagiarized?

Rose had acted so self-righteous just now, as if Yara had committed some heinous crime. Yet now, it turned out her daughter was the real plagiarist...

Rose's face looked as if she had been slapped twice. She flushed furiously, squeezing out a few words through her clenched teeth. "You, you..."

"Nathaniel, did you make a mistake?"

Just then, Noelle suddenly stood up crying, her small face covered in tears. As if she had just heard something shocking, her face was filled with astonishment, and she staggered back a few steps.

"How could I possibly plagiarize Yara... That is my perfume. Nathaniel, why are you treating me like this?"

Estelle narrowed her eyes and also looked at Nathaniel.

No one knew that she was feeling nervous at this moment. She was nervous... wondering if Nathaniel would change his mind at the last minute and make excuses for Noelle, just like he did five years ago.

If, if he...

But Nathaniel merely glanced at Noelle indifferently. "I am only speaking based on facts. If you have any objections, you can also present your evidence."

Noelle's fingers tightly gripped the hem of her skirt.

Where would she get any evidence... but why? Why! How could Nathaniel help Yara? She was clearly his fiancée! She loved him so much; how could he bear to do this...

"This... Nathaniel, what evidence is needed for this?" Rose's heart was about to break. She stood up and forced an awkward smile. "Noelle grew up with you as childhood sweethearts. You know her character best. That Yara is just a little bitch. Who knows, maybe those videos and evidence were all forged by Yara to slander Noelle!"

"Our Noelle has always been pure and innocent. She's the daughter of the Lockwood family and a big star, so how could she plagiarize! Isn't this matter obvious at first glance?"

Chapter 80: Forcing Noelle Lockwood to Apologize

Speaking of this, Rose Lowell felt even more confident.

"Our Noelle lacks nothing, and with the Lockwood Family backing her, she doesn't need a perfume to make money or boost her reputation at all. So, it's impossible for her to go to such lengths to plagiarize someone else's work!"

Rose Lowell sneered in contempt. "On the other hand, it's Yara Lockwood... She is an orphan with unknown parents. People like her are the ones who need a successful product the most to consolidate their status.

"Nathaniel, think about it. Noelle entered the industry purely out of her love for perfumery. Yara Lockwood, however, did it for fame and money. Between the two of them, who is more likely to plagiarize?"

Rose Lowell's words were loud and clear, and the surroundings plunged into silence for a moment. Austin Lockwood and Noelle Lockwood remained quiet, evidently sharing the same thought. Estelle Lockwood, however, let out a cold sneer.

Back then, Rose Lowell had used this exact same rhetoric... She really hadn't changed a bit! She remembered Rose Lowell saying, "Noelle has us protecting her. Making perfumes is just a casual hobby for her. She entered the industry out of passion, so why would she plagiarize? You, on the other hand, are so driven by fame and profit just to impress us. You must be the one who plagiarized her work!"

Whatever Nathaniel Sloan was thinking about, his eyes suddenly turned ice-cold. But before he could speak, Henry Kendrick interrupted him!

"So Ms. Lowell judges whether someone has plagiarized based on their family background? According to your logic, Noelle Lockwood is the wealthy and famous daughter of the Lockwood Family, so she doesn't need to plagiarize. Does that mean the dignified chief designer of Star Group and the apple of the Kendrick Family's eye would plagiarize?"

Henry Kendrick sneered. Rose Lowell was unbelievably biased! How could she even spout such twisted logic? "According to Ms. Lowell, your Lockwood Family has money, and rich people never do bad things. Meanwhile, Yara is an 'orphan' who would do anything for money and glory."

Hearing this, some people in the crowd began to frown, looking at Austin Lockwood and Rose Lowell with displeasure. The Lockwood Family was barely ranked in Crestfall. Not to mention, this kind of reasoning was simply absurd. Since when was money the standard

for judging a person's character? Right now, Noelle Lockwood, the big star with a supposedly stellar reputation, seemed incredibly hypocritical!

Gritting his teeth, Henry Kendrick ruthlessly vented the frustration for both Yara Lockwood and the Estelle Lockwood of the past.

"What is your Lockwood Family compared to my Kendrick Family? In terms of wealth, the Kendrick Family is a thousand times richer than you! In terms of reputation, the Kendrick Family is a century-old aristocratic family!

"By Ms. Lowell's logic, our Yara has money and power, so how could she possibly plagiarize? Meanwhile, Noelle Lockwood is inferior to Yara in every way, so the plagiarist must be her!"

Henry Kendrick delivered another heavy blow. "Oh, right. Although Yara's last name isn't Kendrick and she is merely the adopted daughter of the Kendrick Family, don't forget that Noelle Lockwood is also just a fake daughter of the Lockwood Family!"

Didn't the Lockwood Family look down on Estelle Lockwood? Didn't they despise her for being a country bumpkin? Then Henry Kendrick would use the Lockwoods' own logic to strike back!

As soon as these words were spoken, the entire venue fell dead silent. Rose Lowell was so furious she almost fainted. "Nonsense! You... you're spouting nonsense! Even if... even if the Kendrick Family is more powerful than our Lockwood Family, you can't bully people like this!"

"How is this bullying? Isn't this your logic, Ms. Lowell?" Henry Kendrick waved his hand dismissively after he finished speaking. "Of course, our Yara has always reasoned with facts. She didn't plagiarize, and that's the truth. We aren't going to be unreasonable and pestering like Ms. Lowell. We have evidence."

Then, a video began to play on the stage screen. Outside the perfume department of Evernight International, Noelle Lockwood and her manager were talking about something. After a while, the manager, making sure no one was around, quietly slipped into the perfume research and development room. She took out a sample bottle and handed it to Noelle Lockwood. Following that, the incident where Noelle Lockwood's fans ambushed Yara Lockwood in an attempted murder also shot up the trending search list.

The entire crowd was in an uproar. By this point, everything was crystal clear! The one who plagiarized was Noelle Lockwood, and the perfume was stolen from Evernight International! She stole Yara Lockwood's perfume, claimed it as her own, and then had the audacity to play the victim, slandering Yara Lockwood in an attempt to pin the blame of plagiarism on her. How could this woman... be so vicious?!!

At this moment, the number of viewers on the live webcast had reached a peak. Except for Noelle Lockwood's fans, everyone else was spitting in disgust.

[So she directed and acted out this whole drama herself! The plagiarist turns black into white, while the original creator suffers all the grievances. Noelle Lockwood really plays a good game!]

[How can she be so disgusting! She even righteously talked about keeping one's original intention in perfumery and forever despising plagiarists... She even hypocritically advised Yara Lockwood to turn over a new leaf. Who gave her the right?!]

[She's two-faced! She appears gentle and harmless, but in reality, every word she says and everything she does is pushing Yara Lockwood to a dead end!]

[She basically wants Yara Lockwood dead, doesn't she? Otherwise, how did her fans find Yara Lockwood's car and ambush her in the parking lot?]

[After all, as long as Yara Lockwood is dead, no one will ever expose the fact that she's a plagiarizing dog!]

[We can't call her a plagiarizing dog anymore; she should be called a murderer!]

"AH! No, it's not true! It's not true!!!" Rose Lowell closed her eyes and screamed. "AH! Shut up! Noelle didn't plagiarize!"

Henry Kendrick couldn't be bothered to pay attention to the barking. He sneered, "Didn't you say the plagiarist should apologize?"

Nathaniel Sloan looked coldly at Noelle Lockwood. Noelle Lockwood only felt a wave of panic. Nathaniel Sloan's gaze was like a knife, piercing deeply into her heart. Even when she framed Estelle Lockwood and set the fire to kill her back then, she hadn't felt this kind of panic! She thought, "No, no... Nathaniel, don't..."

"Apologize."

However, his icy voice shattered Noelle Lockwood's fantasy. Nathaniel Sloan spoke emphasizing every word, "You plagiarized, so you should apologize."

Estelle Lockwood suddenly tilted her head up. Her heart clenched sourly at those words, and her eyes uncontrollably grew damp. It felt like anger, yet also like some other inexplicable emotion that couldn't be relieved. Back then, Nathaniel Sloan had said these exact words to her. At the time, he had clearly promised to help her investigate and find evidence. He said he believed she hadn't plagiarized and told her not to worry, to just wait peacefully at home for news. Yet, just a day later, Nathaniel Sloan concluded that she was the one who plagiarized. He suppressed all public opinion on the internet, drove her to the Lockwood Family's home, brought her in front of Noelle Lockwood, and told her, "Estelle Lockwood, apologize."

"You plagiarized Noelle Lockwood. Even though she isn't holding it against you, you should apologize."

Estelle Lockwood trembled all over, refusing to apologize even if it killed her, and she ended up receiving a harsh slap from Rose Lowell. Nathaniel Sloan, however, claimed she brought it upon herself, saying this was the consequence of plagiarizing and refusing to admit it. Why? She hadn't plagiarized. Nathaniel Sloan had said he believed her one day, only to stand on Noelle Lockwood's side the next.

And now, the person being forced to apologize was Noelle Lockwood. Estelle Lockwood had been waiting for this apology for five years. So, she wouldn't refuse it. Even if bystanders were saying that they shouldn't make things too ugly and should leave the Lockwood Family some dignity, Estelle Lockwood absolutely had to wait for this apology. Looking at Noelle Lockwood, she slowly curled her lips. "Miss Lockwood, where is my apology?"

Chapter 81: Her Heart Is Beating Very Fast

Noelle took a terrified step back.

Everyone was forcing her to apologize. Why? Wasn't she the golden girl? So what if she had plagiarized? Yara should consider it an honor!

No... she couldn't apologize now, or everything she had worked for would be ruined! Absolutely not!

Noelle's eyes darted around. Suddenly, she spun around and slapped her manager hard across the face.

"How could you frame me? To think I trusted you so much! You clearly told me that the perfume belonged to a friend of yours, and you hoped I could release it under my name.

"I agreed because you've been with me for so many years. I never imagined you stole it from Miss Yara! How... how am I supposed to face anyone now?"

Tears streamed down Noelle's face. Crying uncontrollably, she shook her head desperately. "I'm so sorry, Miss Yara. I'm so sorry. I really didn't know my manager would do something like this. I really didn't..."

She bowed deeply to the camera. "I also never expected my fans to mob Miss Yara in a fit of emotion. I will guide my fans better in the future. This is all my fault..."

Her manager was dumbfounded. "Noelle, you..."

"I knew it was you, you damn manager! You framed Noelle!" Rose charged forward like a madwoman, punching and kicking the manager. "It's all because of you that my daughter is being forced to apologize! It's all you!"

The manager wanted to speak up, but remembering that her family members still worked at the Lockwood Group, she swallowed her words, trembling.

"I... I had a momentary lapse in judgment. Miss Yara, please don't blame Noelle. It's all my fault. If you're going to blame anyone, blame me..."

Noelle finally breathed a sigh of relief.

Estelle couldn't help but sneer. It was always like this. No matter what Noelle did, there would always be a scapegoat. In the past, the scapegoat had been her, the true daughter. Now, it was the manager.

A mocking expression surfaced on her face. "What does Mr. Sloan think?"

Rose immediately turned around, saying fawningly, "Nathaniel, look, Noelle just wanted to help out of the goodness of her heart. This really has nothing to do with her! She has already apologized. She's innocent! Why don't we just let this matter..."

"Whatever the manager said, she believed. Even if the manager gave her the perfume, Noelle released it as her own work without doing any investigation. Now that such a massive scandal has erupted, you're telling me she's innocent, Ms. Lowell?" Nathaniel interrupted coldly.

The venue fell silent once more.

Noelle was in disbelief. She had clearly just cleared her name. What was Nathaniel trying to do? Was he trying to force her to her death?

Nathaniel looked coldly at the members of the Lockwood family.

"Because of Noelle's claim that 'Yara plagiarized,' her fans smashed Yara's car and mobbed the Star building, causing tens of millions in property damage. Furthermore, due to the Lockwood Group's smear campaign twisting the truth, Star Group's perfumes were mass-returned and their reputation tanked, resulting in a loss of nearly fifty million.

"Do you really think all of this can be offset by a single sentence claiming that 'Noelle is innocent,' Ms. Lowell?"

Rose's face paled. "N-Nathaniel, what do you mean by this..."

Nathaniel's gaze was frosty as he shot her a sidelong glance. "Compensate, apologize, and make up for all the losses suffered by Star and Yara. After that, we can talk about whether you're innocent or not."

Luke White immediately stepped forward with a lawyer. "President Lockwood, Mrs. Lockwood, Miss Noelle, the public outcry this time was entirely caused by the Lockwood Group.

"Therefore, you are required to fully compensate Miss Yara and Star Group for emotional distress, property damage, lost wages, public relations expenses, and a series of other costs. The total comes to two hundred and fifteen million. This is the itemized bill. Please review it and sign."

Rose looked as if she had been struck by lightning, freezing in place.

How... how did they suddenly have to pay over two hundred million in compensation?

Henry hadn't expected this either. He looked at Nathaniel in shock, feeling that something wasn't quite right.

Hadn't Mr. Ex-Husband always been fiercely protective of this fake daughter, his precious first love? Why was he exposing her today, forcing her to apologize, and now handing her a compensation bill worth over two hundred million?

How was this showing any care for Noelle?

But that wasn't all. Nathaniel spoke again, his tone impassive.

"As a member of the Evernight Group's fragrance department, Noelle has caused immense losses to the company. I hereby announce that you are fired.

"From now on, without an appointment, Noelle is not allowed to set foot on Evernight Group premises."

The venue fell silent once more as the crowd exchanged bewildered glances.

Rumor had it that Noelle was Nathaniel's fiancée. Yet now, Nathaniel had fired her and wouldn't even let her through the company doors.

Estelle instinctively looked up, her gaze colliding directly with the man's. She reflexively looked away.

Her heart was beating fast.

Nathaniel had defended her and helped her vent her anger. However, she hadn't forgotten how, five years ago, he had forced her to apologize, coldly stating that she had brought everything upon herself.

The memory of that feeling was so suffocating she could barely breathe...

On the Lockwood family's side, all three of them were reeling in shock.

Rose reflexively shrieked, "Fired?! How... how can you do that! Nathaniel, didn't we just explain everything clearly? It's all the manager's fault! It has nothing to do with Noelle!

"She... she'll be an asset to you if she stays at Evernight! She's been making perfumes since seven years ago and has so many famous works to her name. Are you really going to be this ruthless over a single mistake?"

Noelle bit her lower lip. "Nathaniel, are you really going to fire me? You know my level of perfumery... Your headaches were even suppressed by the scents I crafted for you."

The crowd nodded. Noelle did have genuine talent.

Estelle's eyes darkened. How ridiculous. Even now, Noelle was still taking credit for her work!

But she had no proof. And even if she did, the Nathaniel from back then wouldn't have believed her anyway.

Estelle didn't want to listen anymore. She turned to leave.

"Yara..." Henry couldn't bear it. He knew that while they could expose Noelle for plagiarizing Yara, they couldn't expose her for plagiarizing Estelle. All the evidence had been destroyed five years ago.

But right at that moment, everyone present heard Nathaniel's cold interrogation.

"Noelle, was that aromatherapy scent back then really made by your hands?"

Estelle whipped her head around, her eyes widening.

Noelle's entire body shuddered as panic surged through her like a tidal wave, making her tremble uncontrollably. "Nathaniel, what do you mean? Of course it was me... otherwise, who else could it be?"

"Back then, I poured my heart and soul into developing that aromatherapy scent for your headaches, only for it to be snatched away by my sister... Nathaniel, do you actually think that scent belonged to her?"

"I do," the man said decisively.

Nathaniel's single sentence plunged the venue into absolute silence. Even the livestream chat went dead.

It was only after a long while that someone quietly posted a comment.

[What does that mean... Was Noelle plagiarizing five years ago too? Is the true daughter the actual original creator?]

Chapter 82: Setting Up Daddy and Mommy

Estelle Lockwood froze, remaining completely motionless.

She stared at Nathaniel Sloan in disbelief, thinking she had misheard him.

Nathaniel said... he believed the aromatherapy formula from five years ago was hers, and that Noelle Lockwood was the real plagiarist.

Back then, Nathaniel had indeed told her that he believed her. He had told her not to be afraid or worried, that he knew she was a good girl who would never steal someone else's work. But Estelle also remembered exactly what happened afterward—a nightmare that took her years to escape.

She wondered why Nathaniel had started believing her again, right after causing her so much pain.

Noelle trembled. Utterly terrified, she could no longer suppress the fear surfacing on her face. "N-Nathaniel, no, it's not like that..."

Rose Lowell hastily tried to explain. "How is that possible? Nathaniel, did someone say something to you?"

Austin Lockwood remained slightly more composed. "Nathaniel, I know today's events reminded you of what happened back then, but we investigated it thoroughly at the time. Besides, Estelle confessed to it herself. So I think..."

"You should all be glad that I don't currently have the evidence in my hands," Nathaniel interrupted calmly. His icy gaze seemed capable of piercing right through the three members of the Lockwood family.

Noelle wept piteously, tears streaming down her delicate face. "Nathaniel, you don't believe me... I saved your life back then, yet you don't believe me! *Sob*... What's the point of even living..."

"Noelle!!"

"My precious daughter!"

Austin and Rose's voices rang out in unison as Noelle went limp and "fainted."

The crowd exchanged bewildered glances, completely unsure of what to make of the situation. The live-streaming reporters scratched their heads, caught in a dilemma over whether to cut the feed or keep filming. Although Noelle had fainted, barely anyone besides her die-hard fans was speaking up for her anymore.

Luke White had security escort Rose and the rest of her family out. Only after their wailing faded away did Estelle finally snap out of her daze. She felt she needed some time alone to calm down.

As this Chapter of the plagiarism scandal drew to a close, Estelle was just about to turn and leave when Nathaniel suddenly spoke. "Don't you have anything to ask me?"

Estelle froze. What was there to ask? About the incident from five years ago? There was nothing left to ask. Nathaniel might be defending her now, but the pain he inflicted on her back then was just as real.

She lowered her gaze. "I have nothing to ask. Henry, let's go."

Nathaniel took a long stride forward, intending to chase after her, but Henry blocked his path. "Mr. Sloan, Yara doesn't want to see you. Can't you understand that? She's in a bad mood, and you chasing after her is only going to make it worse."

Nathaniel forced himself to halt at those words.

Meanwhile.

Zachery and Mia, who had been watching the live stream, fell into silence.

After two minutes, Zachery whispered, "What's going on? Scumbag Daddy believes Mommy instead of Noelle?"

Mia scoffed. "But the plagiarism label is still pinned on Mommy. He didn't help her back then, so what's the point of acting all fake and nice now?"

"Could there be some sort of misunderstanding?" Zachery asked.

Mia wanted to say that was impossible, but then she reconsidered, feeling she shouldn't jump to conclusions. Old Mr. Kendrick always cast a divination whenever he faced a

dilemma. Having grown up with him, Mia had also picked up the habit of tossing coins to read fortunes when she was bored.

She immediately tossed three coins into the air, but then hesitated when she saw the result.

"Mia, what do the trigrams say?"

Mia's expression shifted from hesitation to conflict, finally settling into an indescribable struggle. "The reading says... we can try to get them together..."

"If true lovers are meant to be, all misunderstandings will naturally fade."

Elsewhere.

Christian was also watching the broadcast. He wondered if there had been some misunderstanding between his mommy and daddy five years ago.

Even though his grandmother had told him that Daddy loved Noelle, he wasn't stupid. He could tell whether Daddy actually cared about Noelle or not. Now that his father was interrogating Noelle over the events from five years ago, Christian thought that if they cleared up the misunderstanding, maybe his parents could get back together.

If that happened... he could finally, rightfully, become his mommy's child in the eyes of the world.

Following the live stream, the Lockwood Group gritted their teeth and paid out two hundred million in compensation, desperately trying to minimize the public relations fallout.

Noelle laid low for quite a while because of the scandal. Although her hardcore fans were still fighting tooth and nail in her defense, her current reputation was completely in the gutter. Even though she shoved all the blame onto her manager, the public still branded her a plagiarist whenever her name was brought up.

Noelle could barely sleep at night! She fumed over how this label, which used to belong solely to Estelle, was now firmly pinned on her. Damn Yara! Damn her!

Furthermore, due to Nathaniel's strict orders, she was barred from both Imperial Crest and Evernight International. Many people were already starting to doubt if she was actually Nathaniel's fiancée. The public persona she had painstakingly cultivated for years was on the verge of collapsing.

She had to think of a way out of this...

Two days later.

The perfume was re-released to the market. In a blessing in disguise, sales skyrocketed.

On Saturday, a sudden KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK sounded on Estelle's bedroom door. The two little ones were outside.

Mia and Zachery exchanged a meaningful glance, recalling their master plan. The three kids had discussed it: if there really was a misunderstanding, they would do everything in their power to get their parents back together.

With this in mind, Mia cleared her throat. "Mommy, can we go to the movies?"

Estelle was surprised but didn't refuse. "Sure. What do you want to watch?"

Mia's eyes darted around mischievously before she selected a horror movie and flashed a sweet smile. "Mommy, I want to watch this one. Let's go this afternoon!"

When the time came, they would have the little young master bring Scumbag Daddy to the theater, and then the kids would sneak away! Mia giggled internally. A horror movie, corner seats, a man and a woman all alone... hehe...

Meanwhile.

Christian sat obediently in Nathaniel's office. "Daddy, I want to go to the movies."

Nathaniel's hand paused mid-signature, slightly taken aback. Due to his health condition, Christian rarely went out, let alone watched movies. In fact, he had never even been to a movie theater.

Naturally, Nathaniel couldn't refuse. He gave a gentle smile. "Whatever movie you want to see, Daddy will go with you."

"I want to watch a horror movie," Christian replied. "Uncle Zane said I could watch a little bit of horror to stimulate my senses. There's a screening this afternoon. Daddy, let's go watch it, okay?"

Nathaniel couldn't shake the feeling that Christian's way of speaking today was quite different from a few days ago. The Christian from a few days prior had been lively and energetic, whereas today, he seemed to have reverted to his usual quiet self.

However, it was a good thing that his son was willing to leave the house. But a horror movie... Since when did Christian like watching things like this?

At one o'clock in the afternoon, at the movie theater.

As soon as they entered the screening room, Mia pushed Estelle down into her seat. "Mommy, Zachery and I need to go to the restroom. You wait here for a bit!"

Estelle instinctively tried to stand up. "I'll go with you."

"No need, Mommy! Zachery and I aren't little kids anymore!"

With that, the two dashed off and vanished from sight. Estelle shook her head. And they claimed they weren't kids.

Five minutes later, Mia called her. "Mommy, we ran into Aunt Penelope at the entrance! She said she's taking us to eat cake. You watch the movie first; we'll be back later!"

Estelle called Penelope Sullivan to confirm. The two little ones were indeed with her, which put Estelle's mind at ease.

However, Estelle was a bit baffled. The screening room was enormous, and there was absolutely no one else in the audience for this showing. So why had Mia specifically chosen seats in the very corner?

At the same time, Christian was telling Nathaniel, "Daddy, I have something to tell Uncle Zane. Your seat is Row 15, Seat 28. Go on in first."

Nathaniel raised an eyebrow. Wasn't that seat a little too isolated?

Chapter 83: Mr. Sloan Is Still My Servant

Estelle Lockwood sat in her seat inside the screening room. Before she could dwell on her confusion for too long, the movie began.

Just then, she sensed someone approaching her.

Were there other viewers for this movie? Estelle was about to turn sideways to make way, but the person suddenly stopped. Puzzled, she looked up, her eyes instantly going wide. "Why is it you?!"

Nathaniel Sloan raised a brow. He wanted to ask the same thing: why was it her?

After Christian pushed him into the screening room, the boy had run off with Zane Grant. Not wanting to waste Christian's good intentions, Nathaniel had followed his ticket's seat numbers, only to unexpectedly run into someone.

Taking a long stride, he sat down right next to her.

Estelle was so shocked she nearly jumped out of her seat. She pinched herself, then glanced at the horror movie playing on the screen. Closing her eyes, she muttered to herself, "I must be seeing things. There are ghosts in this movie... It's perfectly normal to see a ghost while watching a horror movie."

Nathaniel was left speechless. He nearly laughed out of sheer annoyance. He wondered if this woman's imagination was a bit too wild—did she really prefer to treat him like a ghost rather than open her eyes and look at him?

"Miss Lockwood. What a coincidence," Nathaniel spoke, shattering Estelle's self-deception.

Estelle opened her eyes and found him still sitting right in front of her. Frowning, she accepted reality. "Why are you here?"

"This is a movie theater. That's a rather pointless question, Miss Lockwood."

Nathaniel's tone was flat. The implication was obvious: he was at a movie theater. If not to watch a movie, what else could he be doing here?

Estelle choked up for a second. She only asked because seeing Nathaniel Sloan at a movie theater felt incredibly out of place! Was he really the type of person who had the time and mood to watch a movie? Not to mention, the reviews for this horror film were absolutely terrible...

After racking her brain, Estelle could only come up with one possibility. "Are you stalking me?"

Nathaniel genuinely laughed in exasperation. "Hah. I accompanied Christian here to watch a movie. What kind of person do you take me for, Miss Lockwood?"

Ever since the press conference ended that day, Estelle hadn't seen him once. It was obvious she was intentionally avoiding him. He had clearly helped prove her innocence, yet he hadn't received a single word of thanks. Instead, he was being dodged like the plague. Anyone would be in a bad mood over that.

Hiding in the corner of the screening room, the three little ones were speechless.

They had talked Penelope and Zane into leaving, then quietly slipped inside just to see what their Daddy and Mommy would do alone in an empty theater.

Then, Christian heard his father's cold, indifferent voice.

The boy gave a slight pout, wringing his hands in frustration over his father's ineptitude. He thought, "Daddy! I created an opportunity for you, but you need to put in some effort yourself! What kind of nonsense are you saying? What girl would be happy to hear such ice-cold words?"

Zachery and Mia scoffed internally. They just knew their scumbag father was no good. He was acting so cold; his previous warmth must have been entirely faked.

The next moment, they heard Estelle say coolly, "I can't help it. If it were anyone else today, I wouldn't think that way. But with someone like you, Mr. Sloan, I can't be sure. After all, looks can be deceiving. Who knows what you're plotting."

Zachery and Mia exchanged glances, realizing that Mommy wasn't doing much better either.

Nathaniel raised an eyebrow. "Care to explain? What kind of person am I?"

Did this woman take the wrong medicine today? She definitely hadn't acted like this a few days ago when he helped prove her innocence.

Estelle looked away.

Noelle Lockwood had apologized, but only to Yara Lockwood. The dirty water splashed onto Estelle had yet to be washed away. And at a time like that, Nathaniel had said... he believed she hadn't plagiarized five years ago.

Estelle didn't know how to feel about that. If he had said those words earlier, she would have been ecstatic. But hearing them now only felt a bit ironic. She had promised herself she wouldn't care about Nathaniel anymore, yet when she heard him say that, an uncontrollable wave of grievance washed over her.

Only when you loved someone would their actions make you feel pained, worried, or wronged. If she didn't love him anymore, then no matter what Nathaniel said or did, it shouldn't affect her.

But right now, her emotions were being swayed by his words.

Estelle didn't dare think too deeply into it, opting to avoid him for the time being. She never expected Nathaniel to bump right into her today!

Taking a deep breath, Estelle feigned composure, attempting to drive the man away with passive-aggressive sarcasm. "What other kind of person could you be? The very first time we met, Mr. Sloan, you accused me of deliberately trying to scam you. If you assume the worst in others, don't blame them for assuming the worst in you."

Nathaniel narrowed his eyes, catching the trace of forced calm on her face, and suddenly smiled. "I see. Then it is indeed my fault. I apologize, Miss Lockwood."

With that, he settled comfortably into the seat beside her. "The movie has started. Let's watch."

Estelle nearly choked on her own breath. How could he be so thick-skinned?!

She abruptly stood up, intending to walk out. If Nathaniel wouldn't leave, then she would!

But halfway down the aisle, she stopped in her tracks. Wait a minute. She was here first; why should she be the one to leave? For some reason, walking away now made it feel like she was admitting defeat.

However, staying behind to watch a movie with Nathaniel felt incredibly strange.

Watching her small face shift between red and pale, the amusement in Nathaniel's heart grew, and his mood improved significantly. Sometimes, teasing her was quite fun. She was rather cute.

"Are you leaving, Miss Lockwood? Very well, I won't see you out."

Those words instantly provoked Estelle's rebellious streak. The person who had been hesitating just a moment ago immediately sat back down, putting up a stubborn front. "I already bought the ticket. Why should I leave?"

Nathaniel's lips curved in a silent smirk. "Then why were you walking away just now, Miss Lockwood?"

Estelle scoffed. "Who said I was leaving? I wanted to go buy bubble tea."

Nathaniel didn't expose her lie. "And you don't want to buy it anymore?"

"Not exactly." An idea seemed to strike Estelle. She smoothed her hair, shot him a sideways glance, and parted her red lips. "It just suddenly occurred to me that you're currently still my servant, Mr. Sloan. Shouldn't you be the one running errands like buying bubble tea?"

Nathaniel narrowed his eyes. He seemed to be studying her face, trying to discern whether she genuinely wanted bubble tea or just wanted to get rid of him.

Half a minute later, though, his voice dropped to a husky pitch. "What flavor do you want?"

"Mango, I guess," Estelle replied casually.

Nathaniel's eyes darkened slightly. He had once tested Yara Lockwood using a mango allergy. Thinking back on it now, an inexplicable suspicion arose in his mind—perhaps Estelle wasn't allergic to mangoes at all.

The only reason he thought she was allergic was because the Lockwoods had said so, and Estelle had indeed never eaten mangoes afterward. But what if the Lockwoods had lied to him?

"Alright." Nathaniel pulled himself from his thoughts and rose from his seat. "I'll go buy it."

Estelle curled her lips. She kind of wanted to leave, but for some inexplicable reason, she found herself staying put.

Buying a cup of bubble tea should have taken ten minutes at most. Yet, half an hour passed, and Nathaniel had still not returned.

A single thought instantly surfaced in Estelle's mind: Nathaniel had left.

Chapter 84: Nathaniel Sloan, This Is a Movie Theater, Have You No Shame

Countless times in the past, Nathaniel had made promises he sounded like he meant: he would come home for dinner, he would be back soon, she should wait for him and he would pick her up right away.

But in the end, he always broke his promises.

He was either called away by Noelle Lockwood or delayed by business. In short, in Nathaniel's eyes, everything else took priority over her.

All of Estelle Lockwood's distrust toward Nathaniel rushed back to her mind. She immediately stood up. He had definitely left. Just like before, he had been summoned away by another phone call, completely forgetting there was someone waiting for him in the movie theater. An inexplicable surge of anger welled up in Estelle's heart. If he was gone, he was gone. It wasn't like she cared! She wasn't going to wait around either!

Estelle grabbed her bag and stormed toward the exit, only to crash into a solid wall of muscle with a loud THUD.

Nathaniel raised an eyebrow, looking down at the dizzy woman who had just slammed right into his arms. "There's no need to be quite so eager."

Eager?! Estelle's head spun for a couple of seconds before the anger she had just suppressed was instantly reignited by that word. Who was being eager? She was furious!

Unable to hold back her sarcasm, she sneered, "What exactly is this milk tea made of, Mr. Sloan, that it took you half an hour? I thought you'd gone missing and was just about to call the police!"

Catching the mockery in her tone, Nathaniel's eyebrow twitched upward again. "The milk tea shop by the entrance didn't have mango flavor, so I had to go to one further away. I tried calling you."

This only made Estelle angrier. She whipped out her phone and opened her call log. "Is that so? Then why didn't I get a call from you, Mr. Sloan?"

"Yes, it makes sense that you didn't get the call," Nathaniel nodded.

Estelle's temper flared. Remembering the countless days and nights she had spent waiting five years ago, and realizing that Nathaniel was still trying to fool her today, she was just about to turn and leave when she heard the man's flat voice from behind her.

"Because you blocked me."

It was as if someone had hit the pause button on the entire theater. Estelle froze for two seconds before suddenly checking the block list on her phone. Nathaniel's name was sitting right there on the screen. Her ears immediately flushed bright red.

Thankfully, the screening room was pitch-black, so no one could see her embarrassment. Feigning composure, she put her phone away. "Oh, so that's why." After saying that, she snatched the milk tea from his hand and hurried back to her seat to hide her guilty conscience.

Nathaniel pushed up his gold-rimmed glasses, taking in her flustered retreat before leisurely following her back.

Hiding in a corner, the three little ones couldn't help but feel disappointed. Zachery muttered quietly, "Mia, is your idea actually going to work? You said watching a horror movie in a theater would bring them closer, but it's not doing anything at all."

Mia put on an enigmatic expression. "You don't get it. It's a ghost movie! I've seen everyone say that when a person gets scared, they'll bury themselves in the other person's arms. If we want to play matchmaker and help Mommy and Daddy clear up their misunderstandings, we have to find a way to make them bond."

Christian nodded in agreement, but Zachery remained skeptical.

Just then, a massive, horrifying ghost face flashed across the movie screen. Mia's eyes lit up, staring intently at the backs of Estelle and Nathaniel.

Zachery and Christian exchanged confused looks. They wondered why Mia wasn't scared of the horror movie, and what would happen if their mommy wasn't scared either. No, no, that probably wouldn't be the case.

As they were thinking this, someone in the seats ahead of them suddenly moved. Secretly thrilled, Zachery and the other two little ones hurriedly peered over.

Hearing a faint RUSTLE, Nathaniel narrowed his eyes slightly. He suddenly understood why Christian had insisted on making him come to the movies—and to a horror movie, no less. Unfortunately, Estelle had never been afraid of these things.

However... Nathaniel suddenly leaned closer to her.

Estelle, who was entirely engrossed in the film, suddenly felt a wave of body heat radiating from beside her. She couldn't help but turn her head and frown. "Why are you sitting so close to me?"

Nathaniel's voice was husky. "For a sense of security."

Estelle's eyes widened. It was as if she had just stumbled upon some earth-shattering secret. She looked incredulously at the female ghost on the screen, then back at Nathaniel, and asked in shock, "Are... are you scared?"

Nathaniel fell silent for a moment. He didn't want to let down Christian's good intentions, and besides... With that in mind, he hummed flatly and said expressionlessly, "I'm scared."

Estelle was deeply shocked. The three little ones were equally stunned.

Mia felt that something was wrong with this scene. In her imagination, her mommy was supposed to get scared and snuggle into her scumbag daddy's arms. But now, why was it the other way around?

Zachery was equally stunned. Only Christian's eyes glinted with indifference; he almost wanted to sneer. He figured his daddy was being completely shameless just to woo their mommy.

Estelle felt an indescribable sense of weirdness. As the man leaned closer, she found herself completely enveloped in his scent. From anyone else's perspective, it looked exactly like Nathaniel was pulling her into an embrace.

Uncomfortable, Estelle said, "If you're scared, let's leave." It was just a movie, anyway. Besides, five years ago, they had never even finished watching a single movie together. Why waste time on it now?

To her surprise, Nathaniel gave her a deep look before calmly averting his eyes. "No need. It's good to rest and relax for a while."

Estelle couldn't understand him at all. He was clearly scared, yet he insisted on staying longer. What was wrong with him? This atmosphere was far too bizarre. Finally unable to stand it anymore, she snapped, "If you're not leaving, I am."

She had just stood up, but the man's arm was loosely wrapped around her waist. The moment she was on her feet, she was suddenly yanked back down! And because she had shifted her body, she didn't fall back into her own seat. Instead, she landed right on Nathaniel's lap!

Estelle's expression froze.

She was wearing a dress. As her calves brushed against the fabric of his suit trousers, she tumbled directly into his arms. To steady herself, her hands instinctively looped around the man's neck.

His burning breath fanned against the side of her neck. Unused to the proximity, Estelle squirmed, but in her struggle, her dress hiked up a fraction.

Nathaniel's breathing instantly grew heavy.

Her warm, soft body was pressed against his chest, her calves inadvertently rubbing against his legs. Yet, utterly oblivious, she kept wriggling around in his lap, trying to struggle back to her feet.

After struggling two more times, Estelle found herself still firmly planted on his lap. Growing impatient, she snapped, "Nathaniel..."

Before she could finish, she felt something hard poking against her.

Her face immediately went pale, then gradually burned with a bright red flush.

Watching this unfold, the three little ones nearly wept tears of joy. Deeply moved, Mia whispered, "Mommy and scumbag Daddy are hugging! Our plan worked!"

"Now it's our turn to make an entrance!" Zachery exclaimed, letting out a cheer as he dashed out from their hiding spot.

Christian tried to stop him, but it was too late. He muttered that he felt his daddy's condition wasn't quite right, and that it really wasn't the best time to go out there.

Over on the other side, Estelle stiffened the moment she heard Zachery's voice. Frantic, she scrambled to push herself off Nathaniel, but the hard object beneath her didn't subside; instead, it only grew more... Her cheeks burned furiously as she hissed through gritted teeth, "Have you no shame? Let go of me!... Ah!"

She barely managed to lift herself for a second before Nathaniel pressed her right back down.

The man's voice was hoarse. "I can't. If I let go now, they'll notice."

Chapter 85: They Look Like a Family of Five

Estelle Lockwood froze stiffly in Nathaniel Sloan's embrace.

Zachery looked at the two of them hugging and couldn't help but feel gratified. Even though the process had been a bit ridiculous, they were finally hugging!

The movie was almost over. Zachery decided to strike while the iron was hot. "Mommy, Uncle Sloan, I'm hungry. Let's go get something to eat!"

Estelle's face flushed even redder. She gripped the back of the seat so tightly that her veins bulged, just to keep herself from putting all her weight on Nathaniel's lap.

When the two adults didn't move, Zachery spoke up again. "...Mommy?"

Nathaniel had his arms wrapped around her waist. She was sitting on his lap, completely blocking that particular area from view. Estelle didn't even dare to look at Zachery. Her mind raced, and just as she was about to say something, Nathaniel spoke up in a hoarse voice.

"Miss Lockwood sprained her ankle."

"Let me take a look!" Zachery immediately offered.

"That won't be necessary. Christian, take them out first. I'll help Miss Lockwood out."

From the corner of his eye, Nathaniel glanced at the woman in his arms. If he didn't send the children away soon, Estelle would probably explode from embarrassment.

Before Zachery and Mia could react, Christian ushered them out of the room. The screening room instantly fell quiet.

Her face burning red, Estelle gritted her teeth. "You can let go of me now!"

"I can," Nathaniel replied, loosening his grip and slightly raising an eyebrow.

Estelle quickly used the back of the seat for support and stood up. Her legs were so weak and sore that she almost fell right back down. She hurried into the aisle, taking several deep breaths. As she walked out, she didn't forget to shoot a fierce glare back at Nathaniel.

Nathaniel ruthlessly suppressed the desire in his eyes, straightened his suit, and followed her out.

When Estelle stepped out of the screening room, she noticed that the other theaters were at least half full, if not completely sold out. Yet, their screening room had only held her and Nathaniel from start to finish. Meeting the guilty, shifting gazes of the three little ones, she suddenly remembered how Zachery and Mia had relentlessly pestered her to watch a movie.

Hah.

"Booking out the entire screening room... what a big spender," Estelle said coolly. "Who did it?"

Zachery coughed twice and braced himself. "I did it, and I'll take the blame. Mommy, it was all me!"

Christian grew anxious. He wasn't sure if they had gone too far and actually made her angry. But even if she was mad, he had to step up. He couldn't let Zachery take the fall alone!

"Ms. Yara, please don't blame Zachery. I'm the one who paid to book the room. It has nothing to do with them."

Mia's eyes welled up with tears of emotion. She wondered how the young master and her silly brother Zachery could be so sweet. "No, Mommy, it was my idea! The young master and Zachery were just listening to me!"

Estelle was speechless.

She looked at the three united little dumplings in front of her with a headache. "Admitting your mistakes so quickly is a good thing, but will you dare to do it again next time?"

Zachery looked up at the ceiling, and Mia looked down at the floor. Neither dared to meet Estelle's gaze.

Christian told a tiny lie, his head bowed and his face flushed. "Ms. Yara, we won't dare do it again."

It was obvious he didn't mean a word of it. However, Estelle was curious. When did the relationship between these three kids become so good?

Christian was Noelle Lockwood's son. Estelle could view Noelle and Christian as two separate individuals and would never blame the child for the things his mother had done. But Zachery and Mia were still kids. Before they had even returned to the country, they had heard about this young master who was pampered by the Sloan Family. She still remembered what Zachery had declared back then: "I will be sworn enemies with that scumbag woman's son!"

And yet, look at them now. Still, Christian was so obedient and adorable. It was only normal that Zachery and Mia would become good friends with him.

Estelle wasn't genuinely angry with the children. "Since you're hungry, let's go eat first."

Nathaniel walked out right at that moment and naturally chimed in. "There's an Evernight restaurant nearby. I've already booked a table. Let's head over together."

With that, he reached out and took Christian's and Mia's hands. Seeing Estelle still standing there in a daze, he glanced back, gesturing with his eyes for her to follow.

Estelle swallowed hard. How had she inexplicably ended up going to dinner with Nathaniel Sloan? And Nathaniel's actions... they were way too natural! It was almost as if they were a real family of five.

Estelle immediately shook her head, tossing the unrealistic thought out of her mind.

Both Nathaniel and Estelle were incredibly good-looking. Combined with the three adorable children, they drew quite a few lingering stares.

"Wow, they must be a family of five! They look so happy..."

"Yeah, those three kids specifically paid to book out the theater so their parents could have some time alone."

"I'm so jealous... The mom is gorgeous, and her figure is amazing. You can't even tell she's had three kids..."

Estelle caught bits and pieces of their whispering as she walked by, and her mouth twitched.

The restaurant wasn't far. As the major shareholder, Nathaniel naturally received the best private dining room. Along the way, Estelle spotted a business partner. She told Nathaniel to take the children to the restaurant first while she stayed back to chat for a moment.

After finishing her pleasantries, Estelle bid her partner farewell. She asked a waiter for the location of the premier VIP room and was just about to head over when she unexpectedly ran into two people.

Laura Jennings and Noelle Lockwood walked in arm in arm. Laura held her chin high and demanded, "Take me to the premier VIP room."

Before the waiter could even reply, Noelle spoke up in surprise. "Miss Yara, what are you doing here?"

Estelle frowned. She only wanted to have a meal with the children. Running into these two women was truly bad luck. Too lazy to exchange fake pleasantries with Noelle, she turned to leave.

Laura had finally reacted. She immediately furrowed her brows. "Yara, Noelle is talking to you. Are you deaf?"

People nearby started to look over. Given Laura's high status, seeing her in a conflict with Estelle immediately prompted a few onlookers to approach and ask what was going on.

Estelle was annoyed. She let out a cold laugh. "Am I not allowed to be here?"

Laura instantly flared up. "What kind of attitude is that? Do you have any idea how expensive this restaurant is? What gives you the right to be here?"

"Ms. Jennings, please don't be angry," Noelle offered hypocritically. She then stepped forward, feigning helplessness. "Miss Yara, don't always be so aggressive. Can't we just talk nicely? I just saw you were here and wanted to say hello..."

"That won't be necessary," Estelle rejected her indifferently. "Miss Lockwood and I aren't on good enough terms to exchange greetings. After all, you plagiarized my work not too long ago. It should be understandable that I want nothing to do with you."

Noelle's face paled. "I..."

"Though speaking of which, I do admire you, Miss Lockwood. Even after you plagiarized and falsely accused me, causing Evernight International to suffer losses in performance and reputation, Ms. Jennings still treats you exactly the same. You're quite skilled at coaxing your elders."

Estelle curled her lips, not holding back in the slightest.

The three little ones, who were heading to the restroom together, suddenly stumbled upon this scene. Christian wanted to step forward and help, but Zachery held him back.

Chapter 86: But Isn't There Still Mr. Sloan?~

Zachery leaned in and whispered something into Christian's ear. Christian blinked in astonishment. "Will that really work?"

Zachery patted his chest. "Little Young Master, don't you trust me? Come on, let's stick to the plan!"

Christian pursed his lips. "Okay."

Meanwhile, as Estelle's voice faded, dead silence fell over the scene. The plagiarism scandal involving Noelle had been causing quite an uproar recently. The Lockwood Group had falsely accused Evernight International, dragging them into a storm of public opinion. Although the matter was now resolved, Evernight International had still suffered an undeserved disaster. Yet, as Nathaniel's mother, Laura Jennings was chummy enough with the chief culprit to be dining together...

Noticing the gazes of those around them, Noelle's eyes turned red. "Miss Yara, I've already explained what happened back then. It was entirely my manager's fault. I know you blame me, but I truly had nothing to do with it.

"I've also paid the price. I never expected you to despise me this much. Miss Yara, I don't understand—how exactly did I offend you...?"

Noelle was disguising herself as a victim. As long as Estelle continued her aggressive push, everyone would definitely take Noelle's side! A brilliant idea suddenly struck her. "Miss Yara, you look so much like my sister. Could it be that you actually are my sister, and that's why you hate me so much? But even if you hate me, you shouldn't disrespect your elders..."

The crowd froze for a moment. Quite a few people knew about the events from back then. They immediately scrutinized Estelle's face—she really did look like her! It was just that the true heiress from back then had been so meek and timid, never even daring to lift her head. For a moment, they hadn't connected that true heiress with Yara!

"Noelle's sister... isn't that the woman who framed Noelle time and again, attempted murder, and ultimately committed suicide by arson...?"

"Oh! Now that you mention it, I remember. That fire injured so many people. That woman was so willful—could she really be Yara?"

"I remember too! As soon as the true heiress returned to the Lockwood family, she tried every trick in the book to frame Noelle. Noelle was always covered in injuries back then..."

"If Yara is actually Estelle, then her hatred for Noelle makes perfect sense."

"How does Estelle even have the nerve to hate Noelle? She didn't go to jail only because Noelle was kind-hearted!"

A smile finally resurfaced on Noelle's face. "That's right," she thought. "Whether it's Yara or Estelle, anyone who stands in my way deserves to die!"

Estelle's face turned icy, her gaze sharp.

Laura also snapped to her senses. "That's right! Yara, are you really that woman from back then? Well! Five years ago you targeted Noelle, and now you're targeting her again! Why didn't I just kill you back then, you bitch!

"The Lockwood family brought you back and treated you to the best of everything, yet you hurt the apple of their eye. Wasn't it only natural that you were kicked out!

"To think you still bear a grudge. It's been five years, and you're actually still plotting revenge against Noelle. Get out! This restaurant belongs to my son, and you are not welcome here!"

Noelle flashed a victorious smile, staring smugly at Estelle.

Estelle swept her gaze over the crowd before suddenly letting out a scoff. "Noelle, the moment I accuse you of plagiarism, you immediately change the subject. Who exactly is the guilty one here?

"I was just minding my own business standing here, but you insisted on coming over to pick a fight, only to slap a label of disrespecting my elders on me. What, does the Earth revolve around you? Whatever you say goes?"

Hearing their evaluations of her past self, Estelle knew exactly how many times Noelle had stepped on her reputation to climb the social ladder during the five years she had

been away from Crestfall. She had gotten so used to stepping on a dead person that she always wanted to squeeze out every last drop of value!

Estelle's tone turned harsh and cold. "Then again, Miss Noelle insists that I'm the true Lockwood heiress, and that's why I hate you—but I'm rather curious. If I really were that true heiress, why shouldn't I hate you?"

Noelle's eyes reddened, looking utterly innocent. "Miss Yara, you..."

Estelle's voice rang out with undeniable force. "Who was the one that usurped the true heiress's life for eighteen years? Who continued to parade around under the title of the eldest Lockwood daughter even after the true heiress returned? Who stole the limelight at the true heiress's birthday banquet, and who mocked the true heiress for being a country bumpkin?

"Weren't all of these things done by you, Miss Noelle?

"As a fake heiress without a single drop of Lockwood blood, you stole everything from the true heiress, only to turn around and claim that because she hated you, she was wicked.

"Miss Lockwood, why don't you ask everyone here who the truly wicked one is?"

Noelle trembled all over, instinctively checking the crowd's expressions. Many people were finally catching on, their expressions turning subtle.

In the past, they had only known that the true Lockwood heiress was supposedly vulgar and crass, which was why her family despised her. But upon hearing Estelle's words, some people began to exchange meaningful glances.

"The true heiress grew up stranded in the outside world, so it's perfectly normal that she didn't learn proper etiquette. But at a banquet once, Noelle feigned surprise and asked, 'Sister, you actually don't know etiquette?' Thinking back on it now, that was... that was such a manipulative move!"

"Noelle always said she wanted to return everything to the true heiress, but in reality, she refused to give up her position as the eldest daughter, refused to step down as the heir, and wouldn't return the shares..."

"And then there's that marriage agreement... Old Mr. Sloan clearly arranged it for Mr. Sloan and the true Lockwood heiress. Yet for years, Noelle has constantly insinuated that she is the rightful Mrs. Sloan, calling the true heiress a mistress. I have no idea where she gets the nerve!"

Noelle trembled violently, her eyes bright red. "N-No... Miss Yara, you don't understand the situation at all. Back then, my sister..."

"One moment you claim I'm the true Lockwood heiress, and the next you say I don't understand the situation at all. Noelle, shouldn't you get your logic straight first?" Estelle interrupted coolly. "Or is it that you're just grasping for any excuse to cause me trouble?"

Noelle covered her lips and sobbed.

Unable to watch any longer, Laura lashed out loudly, "Noelle only wanted to greet you out of concern! Who knew you'd be so ungrateful! Somebody! I said to kick her out—is everyone deaf?"

The manager and several waiters hastily rushed over.

Estelle wasn't intimidated in the slightest. "When you fail to stir up trouble, you resort to abusing your power to kick me out. Next time, spare me your fake concern. It sickens me."

"How insolent!" Laura was furious, pointing at Estelle and cursing at the top of her lungs. "Do you even know how expensive this restaurant is? Can a broke doctor like you even afford a meal here? Get lost! Make her get lost!"

Noelle stood meekly behind Laura, her head lowered in silence, looking as if she were heartbroken. But Estelle knew this was Noelle's usual trick. After all, Laura was the one doing the cursing, leaving Noelle to maintain her image as an innocent, pure little flower.

Hah...

Just as the waiters were about to move in to kick her out, a tall, noble figure appeared.

Nathaniel had waited for Estelle for a long time. When she didn't show up, he came out to see what was going on. To his surprise, as soon as he reached the entrance, he saw Laura and Noelle blocking her way.

The man frowned. He was just about to speak when he suddenly saw Estelle curl her lips into a smile. Then, in her high heels, she sashayed over to him with captivating charm. She slipped her arm through his and lightly addressed the furious Laura:

"Ms. Jennings is absolutely right. I really can't afford it. However, don't I still have Mr. Sloan?"

Chapter 87: Teaming Up to Get Even for Estelle Lockwood

Nathaniel Sloan raised an eyebrow.

Laura Jennings's eyes widened sharply, her fingers trembling. "You... you have no shame! Let go of my son!"

Noelle Lockwood's eyes grew red, making her look like a long-suffering, legitimate wife. "Nathaniel, you and Miss Yara... Mrs. Sloan, please don't be angry. There might be some misunderstanding..."

Unable to stand seeing Noelle compromise herself like this, Laura roared, "Yara Lockwood, don't push your luck! How could my son possibly be having a meal with you!"

Estelle Lockwood brushed a strand of hair back. "If Ms. Jennings doesn't believe me, why not ask Mr. Sloan? What do you say, Mr. Sloan?"

Nathaniel calmly looked away, his expression indifferent. "Yara is my guest."

Laura was clearly shocked by these words. She couldn't believe her son would dine with this shameless tramp. Turning to look at Noelle, she found the younger woman crying silently. A surge of resentment immediately rose in Laura's heart.

"How could a seductress like her be worthy! Nathaniel, don't let this disreputable homewrecker turn your head. Noelle is the right match for you..."

"As the matriarch of the Sloan Group, you shouldn't throw such words around," Nathaniel interrupted coldly.

Reprimanded by her own son, Laura instantly felt humiliated and grew even more defiant. "Why... why should she..."

"Grandma, you'll have to ask Aunt Noelle about that!"

Right then, a child's voice piped up.

The adults turned around to see "Christian" standing to the side. The disdain in his eyes was practically overflowing.

Zachery and Christian had swapped outfits, and Zachery had immediately run over.

Laura was clearly taken aback. "Christian, you're here too? Nathaniel, aren't you afraid this harlot will be a bad influence on him?"

Zachery let out a cold little chuckle. "Grandma, you're wrongly blaming Daddy. He didn't invite Miss Yara to dinner today for his own sake, but for the company."

"Nonsense!" Laura rebuked sharply. "She's just a woman, what does she have to do with the company..."

"Because Aunt Noelle plagiarized, Star was extremely dissatisfied with Daddy, and the partnership nearly fell through," Zachery said faintly. "The initial investment for this partnership was too massive. If it falls apart now, everything will be irretrievable. That's why Daddy specifically chose today to apologize to Miss Yara."

Estelle blinked and instinctively looked over. She wondered what Christian was talking about. However, she quickly realized that the little boy was just standing up for her.

Nathaniel, on the other hand, gave him a long look, somewhat surprised.

Before Laura could speak, Zachery continued, his gaze landing on Noelle, intentionally or not. His voice was loud enough for every other guest in the restaurant to hear clearly. "I heard that everyone in the company has been working tirelessly over this incident. I couldn't bear to see Daddy so exhausted, so I came along to put in a good word with Miss Yara and save the partnership.

"Daddy has to clean up the mess that the Lockwood Group caused. As one of the main culprits, Aunt Noelle isn't thinking about how to apologize, but instead has the mood to go shopping with Grandma.

"If it were me who caused such a huge problem, I would have found a way to make up for the losses a long time ago. I don't know how Aunt Noelle can still eat, drink, and have fun with a clear conscience."

When Zachery finished speaking, the restaurant fell into a dead silence.

After a long while, someone whispered, "So Mr. Sloan reserved the Heaven Number One private room just to apologize to Miss Yara..."

"That makes sense. Even though Star isn't very well-known domestically, they carry a lot of prestige internationally. In the end, this perfume plagiarism incident happened because Evernight International didn't guard against Noelle Lockwood, allowing her to steal the formula. It's totally understandable that Miss Yara doesn't want to collaborate anymore."

"It's more than reasonable for Mr. Sloan to treat Miss Yara to a meal to save the partnership..."

"But looking at Noelle's attitude toward Miss Yara just now, she didn't intend to apologize at all. She even deliberately misled everyone. What are her true intentions?"

"And what about Laura Jennings? Does she even remember she's Mr. Sloan's mother? Her own son was sabotaged by Noelle, yet she's helping Noelle and insisting on obstructing this partnership. You'd think Noelle was her biological daughter!"

Laura's face flushed a deep crimson. "I am not! Nathaniel, don't listen to their nonsense!"

"Nathaniel, it's not like that." Noelle suddenly took a step forward, her eyes brimming with tears as she shook her head helplessly. "The reason I stopped Miss Yara just now was because I wanted to apologize to her. Mrs. Sloan was just a little emotional, but she doesn't have any bad intentions."

After she finished, she turned to Estelle, feigning absolute sincerity. "I know the Lockwood Group is at fault this time. Since we happened to run into each other today, Miss Yara, I hope you can give me a chance to properly apologize."

Estelle narrowed her eyes as if she had just heard a joke. "Apologize?"

Noelle hid the venomous glint in her eyes, acting like a fragile, innocent victim. "Miss Yara, I truly don't know how to make it up to you. You can treat me as a servant. Only then will I feel a little better..."

Her words made the onlookers exchange bewildered glances, but Laura was incredibly moved. She thought about how kind Noelle was. It wasn't even her fault, yet she was still trying to make amends! Conversely, that Yara had merely been slandered a little. She hadn't suffered any actual losses, yet she insisted on being so aggressive!

Estelle curled her lips into a smirk, musing over the idea of treating her as a servant. Speaking of being treated as a servant, she was reminded of a certain incident.

Not long after she had first returned to the Lockwood Family, Noelle had insisted on taking her to a socialite gathering. Then, at the party, Noelle had pulled her forward and introduced her to everyone as her family's servant.

At the time, Estelle had clarified that she was Noelle's older sister. However, Noelle had just let out a helpless laugh and said, "I'm sorry. This servant of ours is always fantasizing about being a wealthy heiress. I apologize for making a fool of ourselves."

After that, Noelle had looked at her and ordered, "Aren't you going to come over here and peel my crab?"

The entire group of wealthy heiresses had burst into laughter.

Estelle later told Rose Lowell about the incident, but Rose had only reprimanded her, telling her that she was so vulgar that attending the banquet would only embarrass the Lockwood Family. Rose insisted that Noelle had only called her a servant to save face for the family. Since everything Noelle did was for the sake of the Lockwood Family, she demanded to know why Estelle couldn't just endure it.

Pulling her thoughts back to the present, Estelle suddenly smiled. "President Sloan, since this is an apology dinner for me, you wouldn't mind if I invited a few friends over, would you?"

Nathaniel raised a brow slightly. He had no idea what Estelle was planning, but he agreed anyway. "You may."

Estelle nodded, dialed a number, and then instructed the staff, "Serve a few more king crabs."

Not long after, Henry Kendrick arrived at the restaurant, bringing along quite a few wealthy heiresses and young masters.

Noelle's face turned faintly pale, a bad premonition settling in her gut.

The Heaven Number One private room couldn't accommodate that many people, so Estelle had everyone take seats in the main dining hall. With the three children seated beside Estelle and Nathaniel, a highly bizarre dinner commenced.

Putting on a pitiful and delicate act, Noelle walked over to Nathaniel and was about to sit down next to him when she suddenly heard Estelle's cold, clear voice.

"Miss Lockwood, did I give you permission to sit?"

Chapter 88: That Person Is the True Heiress of the Lockwood Family, Nathaniel Sloan's Wife

Noelle Lockwood stood up helplessly. Her eyes were red, and she bit her lower lip, trembling. Looking utterly pitiful, she said, "Miss Yara, I don't understand what you mean..."

She looked as pathetic as could be. Any man who saw her would not be able to help but feel tender and protective toward her. Unfortunately, the guests were Estelle Lockwood's friends, and Nathaniel Sloan had never bought into this act.

Estelle's lips curled into a meaningful smile. "Noelle, didn't you say you wanted to be my servant and wait on me? Since when do servants eat with their masters? Come, peel these crab shells for me."

Laura Jennings immediately wanted to curse her out, but Nathaniel shot her a cold glance. The words caught in her throat, and she muttered awkwardly, "Nathaniel, she's going too far..."

"Too far? Could it be that being my servant was just empty talk? Am I actually supposed to put her on a pedestal?" Estelle asked faintly.

Everyone around them looked over. Noelle's expression twisted. She wanted nothing more than to hack Estelle into pieces! She had just been saying that! How dare this Yara actually treat her like a servant and order her around? Who gave her the nerve?!

But Noelle put on an innocent, fragile facade again. "Mrs. Sloan, please don't get angry at Miss Yara. I'm doing this willingly... Miss Yara, let me help you."

After all, Noelle was a huge star. Seeing her acting as a servant in the restaurant attracted a lot of onlookers.

As she was peeling the crab, her eyes darted around. Suddenly, she let out a cry, "AH!" The crowd turned to look and saw that the crab shell had cut Noelle's hand.

Laura said heartachingly, "Is this enough?! There should be a limit to how much you pick on someone. Noelle is injured now. Can you just drop it?"

A light smile lingered on Estelle's lips. "She's injured? Is it serious?"

Noelle wept silently. "It's nothing..."

Laura slammed her chopsticks down with a CLACK. "How could it not be serious?! You made her peel crab shells without even giving her any tools! You made her do it barehanded! Isn't that going too far?!"

Peeling king crab shells barehanded was indeed painful and made one prone to injury.

Estelle nodded, but merely remarked nonchalantly, "But if I gave her tools, the CLINK CLANK of cracking the shells would be too loud. It would disrupt our meal."

Henry Kendrick's friends immediately chimed in, "Exactly. She's just a servant. Why care so much about her?"

"If she were making a CLANG CLANG CLANG noise while we were eating, wouldn't it be noisy?"

Henry already knew what Estelle was trying to do. He suppressed his heartache, and a cold sneer surfaced on his lips. "Yara, your servant isn't up to par. Yet you still keep such a useless servant around. You're too kind-hearted."

Laura's anger flared through the roof. "All of you, shut up! Nathaniel, you saw that! Even with you here, Yara is making things difficult for Noelle like this! And you're just going to let it slide? Do you even have any respect left for me, your mother, or for Noelle?!"

Hearing Henry's words, Noelle felt a vague sense of familiarity, but she couldn't remember where she had heard them before. She didn't dwell on it and tried her best to maintain her innocent, pitiable act. "Mrs. Sloan, it's fine. Please don't get angry on my behalf..."

Noelle had already secretly contacted her assistant to record this scene and post it online. Although her plagiarism scandal had previously dragged her reputation to rock bottom, she still had a large group of die-hard fans. Once this video of her 'being treated as a servant by Yara' was released, it would surely evoke sympathy from the general public.

Sure enough, voices sympathizing with Noelle and questioning Yara were already popping up online.

Nathaniel's eyes were dark and profound. He couldn't figure out what Yara was trying to do. She seemed to be making things difficult for Noelle, but in reality, this did her own reputation no favors. Instead, it made Noelle an object of public sympathy.

Noelle's eyes darted around again. While peeling the next king crab, she deliberately cut her hand, and blood immediately gushed out. "AH!"

"Enough!" Laura shot up from her seat and grabbed Noelle's hand, screeching, "Yara, what exactly are you trying to do?! Noelle is not your servant! She is of noble status. How can she be a servant?!"

The scene instantly fell silent.

Estelle slowly finished a piece of crab meat and elegantly wiped her mouth before casting a sidelong glance at her. "Miss Noelle Lockwood is of noble status and cannot be a servant? However, I'm not entirely sure which aspect of Miss Lockwood's status is so noble."

Noelle lowered her eyes. Of course, her status was noble. She was the daughter of the Lockwood Family. Wasn't that noble enough? But she had always portrayed herself as humble in front of outsiders, so she couldn't say this herself. Fortunately, Laura would say it for her.

Laura frowned, finding Estelle's words laughable. "She is the dignified eldest daughter of the Lockwood Group, the apple of the Lockwood Family's eye! How is that not noble?!"

"Ah, so her status is noble because of the Lockwood Group." Estelle nodded and then smiled, seemingly bringing up an irrelevant matter. "I wonder if Miss Lockwood remembers an incident from five years and ten months ago at a socialite gathering. You forced someone to peel king crabs for you barehanded."

Nathaniel paused in his movements.

How could Noelle possibly remember something that happened almost six years ago? She felt that Yara was just looking for an excuse to pick on her!

"It seems Miss Lockwood doesn't remember," Estelle smiled faintly. "Then let me remind you.

"At the banquet, you brought a woman with you and claimed she was your servant, making her peel crab shells for you. But king crab shells are incredibly hard; peeling them barehanded would definitely make her bleed. Yet, you didn't allow her to use any tools. You said the CLINK CLANK of the shell-cracking tools was too loud and would interrupt the conversation with your friends."

As soon as those words were spoken, the surrounding crowd's gazes toward Noelle instantly turned disdainful. When she peeled crab shells barehanded, she cried and whined, subtly and overtly accusing Yara of bullying her. But it turned out that Noelle herself had treated someone else the exact same way.

Laura clearly hadn't expected this either. Her expression stiffened for a moment before she stubbornly retorted, "You... you said it yourself! That woman was Noelle's servant! It is only right and proper for a servant to wait on Noelle!"

"Ms. Jennings makes a fair point. If she was a servant and Noelle paid her, then it would be justifiable. But..." Estelle paused. The smile vanished from her eyes, leaving only a pitch-black abyss. "But the 'servant' Miss Lockwood spoke of at that time..."

Estelle's gaze swept across the room. Seeking justice for her past self, she spoke with resounding clarity: "She was the true blood of the Lockwood Family, the real daughter who had just returned to the family! And at the same time—"

She turned to look at Nathaniel, emphasizing every word, "She was also Mr. Sloan's lawfully wedded wife."

Nathaniel's gaze instantly turned as sharp as a blade, piercing straight toward Noelle!

Estelle's expression remained indifferent. "Miss Noelle Lockwood, you, a fake daughter, are of such noble status that you cannot serve others. Therefore, the real daughter of the Lockwood Family and Nathaniel Sloan's wife was fit to serve you. Is that what you mean?"

Chapter 89: Help Me Do a Paternity Test

A dead silence fell over the room.

Everyone was shocked by Estelle's words, subconsciously turning their gaze toward Noelle.

Noelle's expression contorted horribly, her gentle smile barely holding together.

"N-no, that's not true. Miss Yara, I know you hate me, but there's no need to make up such lies to frame me..."

"Nathaniel, you know I've always felt guilty toward my sister. How could I ever torment her like that?"

Laura Jennings snapped back to her senses and immediately muttered, "Exactly! Noelle is kind-hearted and a good girl. How could she do such a thing? Besides, Estelle was vulgar to begin with. Making her a servant was letting her off easy..."

BANG!

Nathaniel slammed his teacup onto the table, his eyes sharp and chilling.

"Mother, say one more word, and I won't mind revoking your status!"

Laura's eyes widened. A lump formed in her throat, and she awkwardly shut her mouth. In her heart, however, she couldn't help but curse, "First Estelle, now Yara. For the sake of these two vixens, Nathaniel doesn't even care about his own mother! Only Noelle is truly devoted!"

Nathaniel looked at Noelle, his sharp, scrutinizing gaze making her shiver. "Nathaniel, I really didn't..."

"Yara, do you have proof?" Nathaniel suddenly asked.

Estelle paused.

Everyone looked over as well. Noelle's eyes lit up, and a fragile, innocent expression quickly surfaced on her face.

The three little ones were furious, especially Zachery, whose face flushed red with anger. He wasn't stupid. His scumbag dad asking his mommy for proof right now clearly meant he didn't believe her story. He would only believe it if he saw the evidence! But Noelle's mistreatment of his mommy back then was real. Besides, it had been almost six years; where were they supposed to find proof? When all was said and done, he was still protecting Noelle!

Estelle had clearly realized this as well. Her gaze turned cold. She really had underestimated Noelle's weight in Nathaniel's heart.

"Proof?"

Nathaniel's eyes were calm and unrippled, yet he stared at her like a deep, fathomless pool. His voice was hoarse. "...Yes. Do you have proof?"

Proof meant either security footage or... Estelle herself stepping forward to testify. As long as Estelle herself was here, he would believe whatever she said.

Estelle let out a scoff and said coolly, "I have no proof. Whether you believe it or not is entirely up to you, Mr. Sloan."

"So you don't have any!" Laura was the first to cry out. "Ha! After all that talk, you don't even have a shred of evidence. You just wanted to falsely accuse someone out of thin air!"

Noelle also couldn't help but let out a soft chuckle. "Miss Yara, since you can't produce any proof, you should speak less of such things in the future. As an outsider, you don't know the full story of our relationship with my sister, so please refrain from commenting on it."

Estelle felt an icy chill in her stomach. The mango milk tea she had just drank felt overly sweet, making her nauseous. She couldn't help but mock, "You don't believe what I say, Mr. Sloan? You absolutely must see proof before you'll believe it?"

Nathaniel refused to yield an inch. Yara had already leaked the fact that she was Estelle in so many ways, yet she stopped just short of the final step. Why?

"Aside from physical evidence, if my wife herself told me this, I would also believe it."

Estelle smiled in sudden realization and raised a mocking eyebrow. Forget it. At the end of the day, he was just certain she couldn't produce any evidence and thus couldn't condemn Noelle. He claimed he needed proof to believe anything... Yet back when Noelle accused her of pushing her down the stairs, there had been no proof whatsoever. Nathaniel had still believed Noelle's words, leaving her to go to her prenatal checkups alone while he busied himself taking care of Noelle. When she accused Noelle, she needed proof. But when Noelle spread rumors and framed her, Nathaniel believed it without even asking.

And to think she had actually felt a fleeting moment of affection for him while they were watching the movie just now...

The air grew increasingly oppressive, and a wave of disgust washed over her.

Estelle stood up abruptly. She couldn't stand being here for another second!

"Miss Lockwood can refuse to admit it, and Mr. Sloan can refuse to believe it. However, it just so happens that the restaurant where that gathering was held is now under my name. Restoring the security footage from five years ago won't be difficult at all."

Noelle's face turned deathly pale.

The three little ones exchanged glances. Zachery shot the other two a look. After a moment of hesitation, Christian followed along with Mia.

Laura was furious enough to faint. "What is the meaning of this? She frames Noelle and then just walks away?"

Biting her lower lip, Noelle shook her head weakly. "Mrs. Sloan, you don't need to get angry on my behalf..."

Nathaniel watched Estelle walk away. Upon hearing this, he was just about to speak when he saw 'Christian' let out a sarcastic sneer.

Zachery pinched his throat to alter his voice. "Grandma, wasn't Aunt Noelle the one in a rush to see proof? Aunt Yara went back to get the evidence. What are you so anxious about?"

Laura subconsciously raised her voice. "What evidence? It's completely fabricated..."

"Right, right, right. Stealing the true heiress's identity is fabricated, stealing her room is fabricated, and stealing her engagement is fabricated. So treating the true heiress like a servant must definitely be fa-bri-ca-ted too!

"Who is Aunt Noelle, after all? She's the most pure, innocent little angel there is!"

For a moment, Laura was completely choked up by 'Christian's' sarcastic remarks.

Before she could retort, Zachery set down his chopsticks. "Daddy, I'm full."

With that, he immediately slipped away, disappearing from sight in less than half a minute. As he ran off, however, he failed to notice Noelle's hand subtly brushing over the top of his head.

Laura was livid. She slammed her chopsticks down. "I'm not eating! Every single one of them is like this. I'm full from all this anger!"

Nathaniel stood up calmly. "Since you aren't eating, I'll have someone take you back to Sloan Manor."

Laura was displeased. "That's it? You're just letting that Yara walk away? She should at least apologize to Noelle!"

Nathaniel's eyes were calm, but his gaze sliced over Noelle like a knife. "Once the security footage is found, it won't be too late to talk about apologies."

"You..." Laura wanted to chase after him, but Nathaniel had already left without a shred of hesitation.

They were surrounded by people. Some believed what Yara had just said, while others did not, but regardless, Noelle couldn't escape the pointing fingers and whispers of the crowd.

Laura was truly infuriated. "First Nathaniel, then Christian. One by one, they've all been bewitched by that Yara!"

Noelle wept helplessly. "I don't know what Miss Yara said to Christian. Ever since she arrived, he's grown more and more disgusted with me as his mother. I really don't know what to do..."

Laura concealed the disgust knitting her brows. She had never liked Christian Sloan. She had no idea why Nathaniel valued this son so much. If he wanted a son, wouldn't it be fine to just have one with Noelle? Why did he insist on raising the one left behind by that woman...

Suddenly, a flash of inspiration struck Laura, and a possibility crossed her mind. "What if this little bastard isn't even Nathaniel's biological child!"

As long as Christian wasn't Nathaniel's son, he could be kicked out. Correspondingly, Yara would have no reason to stay at Imperial Crest either!

Then, Laura noticed a few strands of hair clinging to Noelle's sleeve. "Is that Christian's hair?"

A flicker of emotion passed through Noelle's eyes. "Ah, it must have accidentally gotten on me just now."

Laura rolled her eyes thoughtfully, plucked the hairs off, and made a phone call to the hospital. "Hello? I need you to run a paternity test for me."

Meanwhile, Zachery caught up with Estelle and whispered his complaints to Mia. "I don't know what got into that bad woman just now. She plucked two of my hairs. She's crazy!"

Chapter 90: The Misunderstanding No One Knew About

Mia looked at the top of Zachery's head. Although he had only lost two strands of hair, she still helped him scold her, "Exactly, she's crazy! You're going bald!"

Zachery was speechless.

There was absolutely no need for that!

Estelle Lockwood returned to Imperial Crest, said a few words to the three little ones, and went back to her room.

Chapman couldn't help but find it strange. "Miss Mia, why did you come back with Young Mr. Christian? Where is Mr. Sloan?"

Before Mia could speak, Zachery piped up sarcastically, "Heh, he's probably out there having so much fun he forgot to come home."

Nathaniel Sloan had just stepped into the villa when he heard "Christian's" voice. He paused in his tracks.

Over there, the three little ones had already spilled everything that happened today. Finally, Zachery asked, "Grandpa Chapman, you be the judge. Didn't Ms. Yara's words make sense? Why wouldn't Daddy believe her?"

Although Chapman felt that Young Mr. Christian was a bit too lively today, he still answered, "Young Master, perhaps Miss Noelle really did treat the Madam that way back then, but Mr. Sloan has always relied on evidence in everything he does. If he punished Noelle Lockwood without any proof, how could he convince others?"

Zachery furrowed his brows tightly. He scoffed at the idea of relying on evidence.

Over the past few years, he had secretly learned many hacking skills and looked into a lot of things, including certain events from five years ago. His mommy had suffered so much. Every time Noelle shed a few tears, his scumbag of a daddy would believe her and turn around to reprimand his mommy.

For instance, the perfume plagiarism, intentionally falling down the stairs, and that fire... There was never any evidence for those incidents, yet his scumbag daddy believed them all. But now, when it came to his mommy confronting Noelle, his daddy suddenly wanted to talk about evidence! Wasn't this obvious favoritism?!

Suddenly, Chapman thought of something. "That banquet... I think I remember it!"

Zachery's eyes lit up. "Grandpa Chapman, what do you remember? Did Mom—uh, did Ms. Estelle say back then that Noelle bullied her?"

To his surprise, Chapman shook his head. "If I remember correctly, the Madam made a video call to Mr. Sloan during that banquet, saying that everyone was taking great care of her. Both Dr. Zane Grant and I were present at the time, and we heard it clearly."

Zachery's smile instantly vanished. He wondered how that could be possible, and why his mommy would do that. Suddenly, he turned his head and saw Nathaniel.

Heh.

He understood now. Chapman must have seen Nathaniel as well, so he couldn't go against Nathaniel's wishes. He could only make up a lie to deceive his young, fragile heart. That nonsense about making a video call and saying she was happy was all a load of crap! His mommy didn't even like making video calls! Let alone to Nathaniel—it was impossible!

Filled with disgust, Zachery turned and went upstairs without even saying hello.

"Ah, Young Master..." Chapman called out.

Christian calmly shook his head as well. "Grandpa Chapman, he thought you wouldn't lie to him, but you disappointed him."

After speaking, he took Mia's hand and also went upstairs.

Chapman wanted to cry but had no tears. "Mr. Zachery..."

How had these two little ones changed so much recently? Moreover, what he said was indeed the truth! He wondered if there was some misunderstanding between Mr. Sloan and the Madam back then that no one knew about.

Chapman turned around, wanting to say something, but he saw Nathaniel with his eyes slightly lowered, shaking his head. Nathaniel looked upstairs, a trace of inquiry flashing in his eyes.

Upstairs, Estelle buried herself in the blankets. She reasoned that it was only normal for Nathaniel to defend Noelle. After all, that was exactly how things were five years ago, so why was she feeling so disappointed? She had known this for a long time; she shouldn't be sad.

Estelle pressed a hand over her heart and slowly pursed her lips.

Just then, her phone rang.

Henry Kendrick had sent a video. Since that banquet was nearly six years ago, there was only one video clip left. However, it clearly showed how arrogant Noelle was at the party.

Estelle wanted to go out and show it to Nathaniel, but she suddenly stopped in her tracks.

She wondered what the point would be even if she showed it to him. If he didn't believe her when there was no evidence, would he help her just because she had proof now? They were all so biased toward Noelle. If she presented the evidence, they would probably just think she was causing unnecessary trouble.

In the past, Estelle had wanted someone to protect her, which was why she relied on Nathaniel. When Noelle framed her, she had hoped Nathaniel would stand up for her. But Nathaniel had disappointed her time and time again.

So now, it seemed there was no need for that anymore.

She turned around and called Henry. "Someone recorded a video of what happened today. Noelle will definitely seize the opportunity to clear her name. When the time is right, post the security footage online."

Henry was taken aback. "Huh? You're not going to show it to your ex-husband first? Having Nathaniel step forward would be much more effective than us releasing the footage ourselves."

Estelle's tone was flat. "There's no need. Just keep a close eye on the public opinion online."

Henry could clearly sense the indifference and unhappiness in her voice. He wondered what the ex-husband had done this time.

After discussing the matter, Henry didn't hang up. He hemmed and hawed until Estelle asked, "Is there anything else you want to say?"

Henry hesitated for a moment. "Yara, do you plan on giving up that identity for the rest of your life?"

He was asking about her identity as Estelle Lockwood. Even an outsider like Henry could sense that there was only a paper-thin barrier between Estelle and Nathaniel. When it came to the issue of her identity, the truth could be exposed at the slightest poke. Yet, Estelle hadn't relented even once.

Estelle answered very calmly, "The identity of Yara Lockwood has nothing to do with Nathaniel. She is just a doctor who can come and go as she pleases. But as for Estelle Lockwood, no matter what achievements I make in the future or where I live, I will always bear the brand of being Nathaniel Sloan's ex-wife."

She had come back for revenge anyway, and she would have to leave eventually. Admitting to it would only cause more trouble.

Meanwhile, in Nathaniel's study.

He looked at the online discussions with a dark expression. Sure enough, someone had taken a video in the restaurant today. Yara's words were recorded, followed by his own remark, "Do you have evidence?", which was also captured.

His words acted like a royal decree for Noelle's fans. It made them even more convinced of Noelle's innocence, prompting them to fiercely attack Yara.

That had not been his intention at all. He only wanted...

Nathaniel contacted the PR department to handle the online rumors, only to find out that Henry had beaten him to it. Obviously, Estelle had obtained the evidence long ago, yet she hadn't even come looking for him.

Did she not want to prove her innocence? Or... did she feel that proving her innocence to him was meaningless?

Nathaniel didn't understand why his heart was aching with a dull pain. It was Estelle who had wanted to marry him, it was Estelle who had faked her death to leave, and it was Estelle who had suddenly come back. He had always been the one left behind, so why was she the one acting aggrieved now?

BEEP BEEP BEEP. Nathaniel's private phone rang. It was Zane Grant.

"What's wrong?"

Zane got straight to the point. "Your mother came to our hospital for a paternity test. She ordered them to keep it a secret from me, but the doctor doing the test still quietly tipped me off."

Nathaniel furrowed his brows. What kind of stunt was Laura Jennings pulling this time? "Whose paternity test is she doing?"

Zane found it equally bizarre. "You might not believe this, but she actually wants to do a paternity test for you and Christian. She suspects that Christian isn't your biological son..."