

CHAPTER 1

Lily Christian woke up with a headache and dry mouth in the middle of the night.

She was over the moon because she had finally created the “First Love” formula, the perfume she had worked on for many years. After winning the upcoming competition, Lily and Nathaniel Hall’s wedding would be on the agenda.

The couple met in university, known each other for five years, and dated for three. Lily left everything behind to focus on perfume formulas and finally managed to help Nathaniel expand his company. Thinking of the beautiful future ahead, she indulged more in drinking.

She rubbed her temples, wanting to get some water to quench her thirst. However, she heard strange noises coming from the adjacent room.

Lily lived alone in a rented apartment. Occasionally, Nathaniel would stay overnight, but he typically slept in the other room.

The noise Lily heard made her worry if Nathaniel was feeling unwell. When she got closer to the source, she heard a woman’s voice instead.

“Nate, won’t Lily hear us?”

Although the woman’s voice was unclear, Lily was sure it belonged to someone she knew. She instantly felt disheartened.

Lily had developed insomnia due to her extensive research on perfumes. She started relying on sleeping pills over the past few years, making her somewhat resistant to its effects.

“I’ll become a top perfumer tomorrow after my new product wins an award. It’ll secure my status in this industry, and you’ll have tons of investment opportunities knocking on your door. Then you can recruit as many people as you want! How could Lily compare to me?”

Lily identified who was speaking as she clenched her fists. It was Melanie Thayer, Lily’s good friend from college. She was having an affair with Lily’s fiancé. Lily had heard the rumors before but chose not to believe them

stepping-stone in the grand scheme of things. Do you think I would’ve tampered with Lily’s perfume formulas during the amateur competition if it her name. I only want to know if you love her or me,” Melanie’s voice was delicate, and she sounded sensual whenever she stretched her words to a higher pitch. However, it was

widened her eyes, wishing she could see the shameless couple right through the door. The sounds she soon heard made her nauseous. She clenched her fists so tightly that her nails dug deep into her palms till they bled. Doing that helped Lily stop herself from barging into the room. She

champion at the regional perfumery competition. She received countless offers, including one from one of the prominent industry players, La Beauté Group. However, she rejected them to focus on what was a problem with her perfume. Everyone ridiculed her, calling her a perfumer without a sense of smell. Back then,

concern. He suggested Lily work behind the scenes while Melanie joined the competitions

go through her life's hurdles together, yet she was just one of

told Lily it was just two random letters he picked. Lily believed his foolish excuse, but it was

Nathaniel expand his company unconditionally. It was ridiculous now that Lily thought about it. Lily's fury gradually diminished as calmness took over. After losing sleep for the entire night, Lily finally heard the footsteps

drawers. Finally, she found a gold-printed name card. Three years ago, the CEO of La Beauté Group, Alexander Russell, gave Lily his name card

noticed Alexander did not hang up the call, so she continued, "We met at the regional perfumery competition three years

that." The man's deep voice and three simple words somehow calmed Lily's

a business proposal to make, and I

my office at 9 a.m.

to hang up when she quickly stopped him. "W-Wait, Mr. Russell, it might be too late tomorrow. What about today? Plus, it's inconvenient for me

and blabbered. After blurting out her words, she could not help

ordinary company. It owned over 67% of the market share in the beauty industry nationwide, not to mention its vast range of product lines and terrific

for Lily that he agreed to meet with her, yet she dared to negotiate the details of

for Lily to talk with Alexander the following day. Going

silent for three minutes at the other end of the call. Lily thought she was about to get rejected when Alexander said, "Okay. Meet

"T-Thank..."

Before Lily could finish, Alexander continued, "Remember to bring your passport along."

"Wait, what?" Lily asked, puzzled. Alexander had hung up the call.

Lily digested Alexander's words and wondered if she had misheard him. However, she did not have the time to think deeper. Lily quickly changed her clothes and made herself look presentable before leaving. Fortunately, Gardens Road was not too far away, and she managed to arrive on time. Lily was about to enter the cafe when someone stopped her.

“Ms. Lily Christian?” The man called out her full name, but Lily had no idea who he was.

“Mr. Russell is waiting for you.” Then, he motioned for Lily to move in another direction. Lily looked in the direction the man pointed and saw a Lincoln Limousine parked by the roadside.

Lily understood what the man meant instantly. Without further hesitation, she strode toward the limousine, and the driver opened the door for her. She could not see much of what was inside the vehicle except for a pair of long legs wearing shiny leather shoes.

When Lily got into the car, she shuddered instinctively due to the air conditioner’s cold air. Then she looked at the man and said, “Good morning, Mr. Russell. I...”

“Get straight to the point,” Alexander’s response was short, simple, and indifferent.

Lily stopped talking abruptly to take a closer look at his face.

CHAPTER 2

Lily had to buck up when dealing with someone like Alexander Russell, so she got straight to the point, “I understand that La Beauté Group is also participating in this season’s perfumery competition tonight. I have a new formulation and wish to join your team.”

“We’ve already chosen our participating member,” Alexander said slowly.

Lily knew about this. “But you can have more than one entry. I just want to be an addition, not a replacement to the team...”

Alexander bluntly interrupted Lily. “Why should I trust you?”

Lily quickly opened her bag and removed a stack of documents from it. “This is First Love’s research and data formula. I hope it’s enough to prove my sincerity in working with you. You offered me a role three years ago, so I assume your company understands my capabilities. I’ve even brought a sample for you.”

“What sample?”

After talking for some time, Alexander’s expression finally changed. He raised his brow, seemingly interested.

Lily nodded and suddenly stretched out her hand toward Alexander. A whiff of sweet fragrance wafted along with her movement. It was a pleasant scent and not intense at all.

Alexander stared at Lily’s hand silently. Her skin was fair, and her fingers slender. The sweet scent lingered in Alexander’s nose, alluring him.

“I’m confident First Love will be among the Top 3 in the competition. It will undoubtedly be the icing on the cake for La Beauté Group.”

Afterward, Lily retracted her hand, but unexpectedly, Alexander grabbed her wrist. He held her with just the right amount of strength. Lily could not break free, but she was not feeling pain either.

“Do you think La Beauté Group needs such a thing?” Alexander asked.

“This is just a welcoming gift. If you think it’s not sufficient, I have a suggestion. I’ll allow your company to own the trademarks for the perfumes I formulate over the next two years,” Lily negotiated.

She had expected Alexander to be apprehensive. Still, she knew there was room for negotiation as long as they were still talking. Lily was running out of time and could not find a better person to work with than Alexander.

“Indeed, it isn’t sufficient.” Alexander let go of Lily’s wrist, setting her free. There was still a faint fragrance from her perfume that lingered on his fingertips. He lowered his gaze, concealing the scheming look in his eyes. “Unless... you’re included in the offer too.”

“M-Me?” Lily did not understand what Alexander meant.

“Did you bring the thing I asked for earlier?” Alexander asked suddenly.

Although Lily had no idea what Alexander was up to, she still brought the thing he asked. “Y-Yeah, I brought it.”

“Marry me, and I’ll help you settle your problems,” Alexander said indifferently.

‘W-What did he say? H-He wants me to marry him?’

Alexander’s proposal shocked Lily to her core. Only then did Lily realize that the limousine was opposite the clerk’s office. Alexander chose that location and told Lily to bring her passport because he intended to marry her.

“You can leave now if you’re unwilling.” Alexander opened the door and motioned for Lily to quickly decide.

“I-I didn’t say anything like that,” Lily hurriedly said as she held onto the door handle, afraid Alexander would kick her out of the limousine.

“That means you’re willing then.” Alexander got out of the limousine, smirking. “Let’s get done with this. I have a meeting at 10:30 am later.”

Lily was speechless, unable to believe there would be someone rushing to marry her. She gripped the car door as she stared at the man before her. Breathlessly, she asked, “May I ask why you would want to marry me?”

‘Why me? Why so suddenly?’

“Aren’t we talking business here? You need help to get revenge on MN Inc., while I need a wife. I believe it’s a fair trade.” Alexander’s tone was casual, and he sounded natural. It was just that the playful look in his eyes gave Lily a sense of familiarity, but she could not remember from where exactly.

Lily and Nathaniel would not have a future together anymore. With Alexander's background and status, marrying him would not bring her any losses regardless of what he wanted from her. She revealed a determined gaze. "Deal!"

She only wanted karma to hit the shameless couple hard.

The marriage procedures were not complicated, so the two quickly settled it as they had all the necessary documents. After the duo left the clerk's office, Alexander carefully kept their marriage certificate. Then he wore his sunglasses to conceal the happiness in his eyes. Lily chased after him, breathless. "Mr. Russell, about our collaboration..."

Alexander abruptly stopped and turned to look at his new wife. Through Alexander's sunglasses, Lily could feel his gaze turning colder by the second. It made her subconsciously loosen her grip on Alexander's blazer.

"From today onward, you should get used to your new identity. Am I right, Mrs. Russell?" He circled his arm around Lily's waist, his breath fanning her cheeks. Lily went into a trance for a moment.

"Pass the perfume's information and sample to Edward. He'll handle it."

Then Alexander let go of Lily and got into the limousine. Lily followed behind but got left standing outside the car instead.

"Mrs. Russell, is there a problem?" Alexander turned to look at her. His phone was buzzing in his hand, waiting for him to accept the call.

"H-Honey? Could we keep our marriage a secret for now?" Lily blushed, but she was afraid of delaying Alexander's schedule. She said hurriedly, "I still have some personal matters to tend to, so it won't take long."

Lily could not see Alexander's eyes as he wore his sunglasses. She found it difficult to read his current mood and expression.

"Come to La Beauté Group before 5 pm later," after saying that, Alexander answered the call and put the phone to his ear, "What is it?"

Lily nodded and closed the door for her new husband. She watched as the limousine drove into the distance, but it still was not time for her to let her guard down. There was still a battle awaiting her.

She went to have lunch first and bought herself some new clothes before driving to MN Inc. During that time, Nathaniel gave her a few calls, but she did not pick up.

As soon as a car stopped, Nathaniel's secretary, Anthony Moore, came up to Lily anxiously. "Lily, you're finally here! Mr. Hall is going crazy from looking for you!"

After working diligently at Nathaniel's company for the past three years, Lily was still a mere lab technician.

With a steady pace, Lily walked into the office building and asked, "What's wrong?"

Anthony shook his head. "I'm not sure, but it seems urgent."

Only Nathaniel, Melanie, and Lily's assistant knew Lily was the one who constantly set high sales records for the company. Everyone else thought Melanie was the company hero and that she was the centerpiece of MN Inc.

Lily had never cared about such titles back then, but now she cared even less about them.

When she arrived outside the CEO's office, she could hear Nathaniel's roaring voice. "You're with her every day, and now you are telling me you don't know where she is?! What kind of attitude is that?! Listen to me, Olivia Hart! Don't undermine my authority because you have Lily to back you up! I could fire you tomorrow if I wanted to!"

Following that was the sound of him slamming the office's phone hard. That made Lily frown.

'He couldn't find me, so he's venting his anger on my assistant.'

Lily knocked and entered his office. Anthony knew he should not be around, so he closed the door behind Lily.

Crash!

A cup smashed right by Lily's feet. The shattered pieces of ceramics even brushed across her skin. Nathaniel thundered, furious, "Where have you been the entire morning?!"

CHAPTER 3

Lily looked down at her instep and raised her head calmly. "What's wrong?"

"Where are the First Love's documents?! We can't find it in the lab. Do you know what day it is today?! Rather than staying in the lab, you chose to wander around?!"

Nathaniel followed Lily's line of sight and saw the small cut on her instep. He felt guilty for a while but soon thought of the upcoming competition, which was more critical to him.

"Isn't the new product's reveal and competition starting tonight? I thought I still had some time left, so I bought myself some new clothes to prepare for it."

Before Nathaniel could speak, Melanie beside him laughed. "Why? Are you planning to attend?"

"Can't I?" Lily turned to look at her former friend and asked back.

Melanie's smile deepened. "It's not that. I'm just worried you will feel out of place. Also, didn't you avoid participating in such activities in the past?"

"Yeah, you've never liked these places nor pursued fame and fortune. You can stay at home and wait for our good news! Now, where are the documents?" Nathaniel approached Lily and reached out, wanting to pat her shoulder, but Lily deftly turned sideways to avoid Nathaniel's hand.

Nathaniel froze for a moment, and a kraft paper bag in Lily's hand immediately caught his attention. "Are the documents complete?" He took the bag and checked it carefully with concern before handing it to Melanie.

With her action so natural, Melanie took it and glanced casually. A satisfied smile appeared on her lips. It's not that Melanie did not understand the fragrance, but she still lacked talent compared to Lily.

In addition, after hooking up with Nathaniel, Melanie even gave up her acquired efforts. Over the years, she probably forgot almost all her knowledge, taking all Lily's credit and enjoying her achievements.

Holding the stacks of documents, Melanie almost heard the trophy beckoning at her. "Where are the samples?" Melanie questioned closely.

"You can pick them up at the laboratory before you leave for the competition," Lily responded.

Lily noticed the shameless couple's excitement as they exchanged glances in front of her. Feeling disgusted, Lily asked, "Nate, can't I participate in tonight's event?"

Nathaniel blanked for a while and immediately frowned. "Lily, what's wrong with you? Didn't I tell you this is for your good? Did you forget about the new talent competition two years ago? You..."

"Of course, I'm not saying it will fail, but think about it. There's always an 'if.' If something goes wrong, then..."

Nathaniel did not say anything after that. It was as if he cared about Lily wholeheartedly. If Lily hadn't heard Nathaniel's concern with her ears and seen it with her own eyes, the shameless couple would have moved her to tears. Every word the couple said was considerate and kind, yet Lily found it disgusting.

"Well, since that's it, I can only wish you two good luck tonight!" Lily said smilingly. Then she turned around. "I'll return to the lab now."

Nathaniel nodded hurriedly. "That's right, hurry up and prepare the samples. Make sure nothing goes wrong, understood?!"

Lily hooked her lips and sneered. Oh, of course, she would ensure nothing went wrong.

On the way, she called Olivia, and the voice over the phone sounded concerned. "Lily, are you okay? By the way, Mr. Hall has been looking for you for almost a day."

"I know," Lily focused on the road and said, "Olivia, have you prepared the things I asked you to?"

"It's ready, but you've adjusted First Love many times. Are you sure you want to add it to the perfume now?" Olivia asked worriedly. She had been Lily's assistant for a long time and had no doubts about Lily's capabilities and connoisseurship.

However, Lily had adjusted First Love's formula over the past several months and was finally pleased with its results. Tonight was a big night for First Love, so Olivia wondered why Lily would add to it at this time.

"Do you trust me?"

"What are you saying? Of course! I trust you, but are you sure you won't compete in person?" She could not help but ask again, even though she knew the answer would be no. She knew how much effort Lily put into producing each new perfume.

Lily had studied many best-selling perfumes, but no one knew about her because Melanie stole the spotlight. Olivia felt aggrieved just thinking about it.

Lily smiled, knowing that Olivia was on her side. "What's mine will always be mine," She said meaningfully, "Nate and Mel will collect the samples later. Just do what I've said. Thank you, Olivia."

"Don't worry. I'll handle it!"

After hanging up the phone, Lily turned into La Beauté's underground parking lot. La Beauté had a massive building that covered an extensive area. Even the parking lot was an impressive size.

Fortunately, Alexander was well prepared. Lily followed Alexander's location and positioned her car in the parking space. Edward was already waiting there.

"Ms. Christian, please come with me." Edward quickly told Lily about the current situation as they went up the private elevator, "We've given the documents and samples to the project department. Your perfume will compete alongside La Beauté's other two scents tonight."

"Thank you." Lily nodded.

It was already good of Alexander to do this. Take MN Inc. as an example. They had made preparations three months before the start of the competition, from theme selection to planning. If they suddenly added another perfume to their lineup, they would have to carefully consider their risks on whether or not the perfume will top the others.

Edward quickly briefed Lily in just a few words, but Lily guessed that the staff at La Beauté would not accept her perfume so readily. They might even use any means necessary to suppress her.

Still, Lily knew she must win flawlessly against MN Inc.

She saw Alexander sitting behind his large office desk with a thick stack of documents to his left and right. He was reviewing them when Lily entered his office.

Perhaps hearing the movement, Alexander looked up. At that moment, Lily felt a little nervous.

"Come here." Alexander put down his pen.

Lily walked over obediently. Alexander looked up and down, narrowing his eyes. "Are you hurt?"

With Alexander's reminder, Lily suddenly remembered that a piece of broken ceramic had left a cut on her instep. She was about to assure Alexander that she was okay when her body abruptly lightened up. Alexander had swept her off the ground.

CHAPTER 4

Alexander placed Lily on the sofa and turned to get some ointment and alcohol swabs. He cleaned Lily's wound and carefully applied some medicine.

The small cut had already stopped bleeding on the way to La Beauté. With the ointment applied now, Lily's skin felt iced cool.

Lily looked at the man in front of her, lowering his head and focused on applying the ointment. Alexander's impassive expression made it seem as if it was nothing. However, Nathaniel had never done something like this for Lily over the years because he never cared about Lily.

After applying the ointment, Alexander looked up and saw Lily's absent-minded expression. "What is it?"

"N-Nothing..." She shook her head and quickly put down her feet. "Thank you."

"You are my wife, so there's no need to say thanks. However, there is one thing I hope you'll remember," Alexander said as he screwed the cap onto the ointment tube.

"Please, what is it?" Lily nodded.

"I don't care about the past, but since we're married, you can no longer be involved in the indistinct relationship..."

"I won't!" Before Alexander could finish, Lily interrupted, "You don't have to worry. At least in this marriage, I'll guarantee my loyalty. I hope you will too."

Alexander raised his eyebrows as he did not expect she would have the courage to ask for any requests.

"I know our marriage is just beneficial to you. Although I do not know your purpose, I hope we can keep some principles in this marriage. If one day you fall in love with someone else, I can accept divorce, but I have zero tolerance for cheating in marriage."

She had already experienced betrayal once. She would never allow it to happen again.

Alexander raised his brow. "What a coincidence, likewise."

Seeing him grinning, Lily got lost in thought for a moment.

'This man is God's greatest masterpiece,' she thought, 'Not only does he have an extraordinary mind for business, but his appearance is also perfect and impeccable.'

At first, Lily only wanted to cooperate with Alexander, but she did not expect to marry him. Maybe she had been so unfortunate for so many years that her fate finally started to change.

At 7 pm sharp, Lily arrived at the venue with Alexander. She did not expect him to go there in person. After all, this competition was just nothing for La Beauté. Their beauty products typically only participated in international competitions.

When the car arrived, coincidentally, she saw Nathaniel's car parked at the venue entrance. He was wearing a dark blue suit with his hair styled. He looked handsome, and right after he got out of the car, he immediately turned around to help Melanie get out, full of care.

A sarcastic smile escaped from the corner of Lily's lips. Lily was laughing at herself. She wondered how she could be so blind before.

"Shall we get out of the car?" Holding her hand, Alexander turned his face and asked.

Lily shook her head.

If Lily got out of the car holding Alexander's hand and walked in front of the shameless couple, they would be shocked and panicked. Still, it was not the result Lily wanted. It was far from enough.

She wanted to recoup all her hard work for the past few years with interest. Although it was not a grand competition, there was still a particular procedure to follow.

The judges were industry experts from various provinces to ensure fairness and impartiality during the competition. Three hours before the competition started, representatives of each company submitted all perfumes that were participating in the competition in person.

During these three hours, the judges would judge and rate the quality of the fragrance, the top notes, heart notes, and base notes of the scent.

The results were out, but they had not yet announced them.

Lily did not enter the venue. She and Alexander stayed in the exclusive VIP room together. They could see the venue's live situation through the large projection screen in the room. Nathaniel and Melanie rode high as if they had already bagged the awards.

Lily watched quietly. 'Laugh and smile as much as you can. Days like this will soon be over.'

The lights in the hall slightly dimmed, meaning the judges will soon reveal the results. The guests socializing and entertaining others turned their attention toward the stage. As usual, the ceremony started with minor awards.

Nathaniel did not care about them. He was not concerned, even if MN Inc. did not win any. He looked toward the podium confidently while holding Melanie's hand.

"We will announce the first, second, and third places in the competition," the host cleared his throat and continued, "Before we announce the winner, I would like to emphasize that this competition is fair, just, and open. There will be no restrictions. No matter how influential a company is, it could sign up for the competition as long as they meet its requirements. We also want to warn everyone that the perfumer's character is more critical than the product's quality. We will strictly prevent and track down all suspected plagiarism!"

Meanwhile, in the VIP room, Lily tightened her grip on her wine glass. She pursed her lips as she looked at Nathaniel and Melanie on the screen.

Of course, Melanie and Nathaniel did not realize that the host's remarks had something to do with them. The shameless couple even took the lead in applauding.

"That's right! Although MN Inc. is a small company, we have always committed to originality and innovation. Plagiarism is shameful in this industry! We disdain such behavior even if the finished product is unsatisfactory," Nathaniel said righteously.

Melanie, beside him, found the right opportunity and added, "Yes. Although I'm only an intermediate perfumer, even if I can't compare to the masters and predecessors in this industry, I've always warned myself to be practical and diligent to make a brand that our country can be proud of."

Applause broke out in the venue, and the reporters also seized the opportunity to take harmonious-looking pictures. However, the host looked stern as he said, "Does that mean MN Inc. guarantees the originality and authenticity of its competition entries?"

"Of course!" Nathaniel said confidently.

Shortly after, he thought something was off about the entire situation. His company had participated in many exhibitions and competitions, but the host had never asked him such questions directly.

He dared not say anything else, even though Lily had developed these perfumes, not Melanie. Despite that, he still had confidence in the products' originality. By thinking of this, his expression became proud again.

"Hmph." Lily snorted discreetly, "He sounds righteous."

The host stared at Nathaniel, looked at the crowd, and said solemnly, "There is a special situation in this competition. Two companies have submitted the same product for the competition, and even the products' names are similar."

Although the host did not call Nathaniel out directly, the host had directly questioned MN Inc.'s sincerity just a moment ago. Anyone could have figured out who the host suspected of plagiarism. However, no one knew who the other company was.

Nathaniel's expression changed again.

If his company got caught with plagiarism, it would be even more humiliating than not winning an award. The judges had suspected MN Inc. of being insincere in front of many other companies and industry media. It would ultimately ruin MN Inc.'s reputation as soon as news of their plagiarism was out.

CHAPTER 5

"In the spirit of fairness, we've decided to postpone awarding to the top three. Instead, we'll announce them after some investigation."

When the host said that, Nathaniel and everyone else were in an uproar.

“Why must they postpone the award ceremony? It’s unfair to everyone!”

“The judges should disqualify both companies since they’re involved in a controversy!”

“Hey, tell us the names of the two companies!”

Various comments were on the scene, and the reporters were even more excited. Initially, everyone thought the competition would go on without a hitch and did not expect any complications, so there would be no concerning headlines the following day.

Still, Nathaniel was sure his company would be fine, so he confidently stepped forward and raised his voice, “You guys are right! Given the situation, the organizing committee should disclose the results right now. I believe the representatives of the two suspected companies are present so we, as their peers, can witness their unjustness. Won’t that be more convincing?!”

Compared to the bustling scene on the screen, Alexander’s attention was on the woman beside him. Lily held a wine glass in her hand but did not take a sip, and her lips kept an indifferent smile.

After so many years, Lily finally belonged to him. Alexander had waited for three years. He always thought a sc*mbag like Nathaniel did not deserve Lily.

He would be the first to object if Lily and Nathaniel were to get married. However, the two had hit a crossroad on their own, which saved Alexander the trouble. Still, things had to happen this way because Lily could not see who the real Nathaniel was.

Lily and Nathaniel had been together for so long, and Lily had become timid and cautious. She even started speaking softly like a mouse. But at that moment, sitting before the screen, Lily became confident again, and her determined eyes proved that she had not changed. She was still the arrogant girl behind the scenes.

“I’m heading out.” Lily put her wine glass down and looked back at Alexander.

Alexander nodded. “Remember, I’m here.”

Although Lily did not intend to let Alexander take action personally, his words made her feel relieved. She nodded gratefully, opened the door to the VIP room, and walked out.

The venue was still chaotic as Nathaniel took the lead in prolonging the disorder. He was the person who shouted the most among the crowd. Meanwhile, Melanie could not hide her complacency. She had never stood so close to Nathaniel before this and became the focus of everyone’s attention.

The host’s brows furrowed until someone ran up to the stage and whispered in his ear. The host relaxed, turned to Nathaniel, and said, “We wanted to be discreet about the plagiarists for the sake of sportsmanship, but since everyone strongly demands we reveal the suspects’ names, the organizing committee will disclose the two companies and their competition entries publicly.”

“A plagiarist is a thief that does not deserve anyone’s respect! We should curse and exile these scoundrels!” Nathaniel excitedly exclaimed. He thought he was certainly not the person in question.

Since that was the case, he wanted to slander the plagiarists as much as possible. He thought MN Inc.’s popularity would rise and significantly improve its reputation if he preemptively defamed the suspects. Nathaniel seemed to have seen a brighter and countless wealth for his company.

The host glanced at him and adjusted the microphone. “Two companies have submitted the same perfume. These perfumes are both named First Love.”

Melanie was stunned after hearing this, while Nathaniel pretended to be surprised. “First Love, huh? That is MN Inc.’s work, so I wonder which company dared to submit the same perfume as us.” Melanie looked around as if she wanted to find the culprit among the crowd.

The host did not keep everyone guessing and continued, “Yes, the other company that submitted the same product as MN Inc. is Rebirth!”

“R-Rebirth?” Nathaniel was puzzled. “Which company is that? Forgive me for being ignorant, but I have never heard of them.” Nathaniel behaved modestly but was ecstatic in his heart. Although he did not know that company, he did not care as long as he could attain his award.

“Rebirth? Isn’t that La Beauté Group’s sister company, which they founded last year?” Someone familiar with the industry said.

“Yes, I’ve also heard of Rebirth. They are new in the industry, and La Beauté Group is their backer.”

“I see. I wonder if Rebirth’s representative is here. I want to know because my company has worked diligently for over three months to formulate First Love. I wonder how Rebirth got hold of my product,” As Nathaniel said, he tried to convince others that he was not the plagiarist in question.

At this time, a gentle and courteous man came on stage, “Good evening, everyone. I am the PR manager of Rebirth, and my surname is Will. We are also surprised by what has happened tonight. Rebirth did not expect to submit the same product as the other company, especially since they are highly similar. At first, we were willing to respect the organizing committee’s opinion to verify and resolve the matter privately. However, since the other company did not agree, we will accept the on-site authenticity identification.”

Will was polite and gentle. His words were loud and clear. On top of that, most people nodded in agreement due to La Beauté Group’s reverence.

Nathaniel realized the situation was not looking good, so he said casually, “I agree with the on-site authenticity identification too. Although MN Inc. is small compared to La Beauté Group, we are fearless because we know we are in the right. We can attest to our originality!”

“Yeah! I made First Love on my own, so I wondered why there was a copy,” Melanie added timely. Her tone was heartfelt and eager.

It was tough for everyone to distinguish both companies' sincerity, so they could only look to the host. Meanwhile, Rebirth's representative was calm and straightforward as he said, "We have submitted First Love's data records and research containing its characteristics and features to the judges. I believe the organizing committee will make a fair judgment."

"Oh, we've handed them in too. I'm sure the judges can distinguish who the real plagiarist is," Nathaniel said righteously.

"There's no need. The judges already have the results." The host received an envelope and looked at Nathaniel first. "Mr. Hall, can you confirm that Ms. Thayer was the one who developed First Love on her own?"

"Of course she did!" Nathaniel nodded affirmatively. "Mel is the most outstanding perfumer in my company and is well-known in the industry. She also made my company's previous best-selling perfumes."

The host nodded and looked at the person in charge of Rebirth next. "Mr. Will, can you tell us who in your company developed your First Love?"

Will responded smilingly, "Coincidentally, the perfumer who developed our First Love is also here today, and we would be honored to introduce this person to the public." Will leaned in and stretched his arms outward. Then a figure slowly stepped out from the back of the venue.

CHAPTER 6

The figure wore a simple and plain white dress. The lights focused on her body, and everyone was dazzled when she walked out with a graceful aura around her. Lily dressed simply and did not wear any jewelry. Her makeup was also faint, yet it accentuated her natural beauty.

"L-Lily?!" Nathaniel could not believe his eyes and could not digest what exactly happened. He instinctively took a few quick steps forward and faced Lily. He lowered his voice and said, "What are you doing here?"

"I came here to participate in the competition, of course." Lily glanced at him. Her lips revealed a mischievous smile as she leaned over and continued to move forward.

"Lily!" Nathaniel pulled her wrist, his low voice exasperated, "Stop fooling around! This is not the occasion for such things!"

Alexander squinted at the screen in the VIP room, looking at Lily's restless hand. Then his glance sharpened suddenly.

The next second, Lily pulled her arm away from Nathaniel's grasp with force. "Mr. Hall, since you know this is an important occasion, I suggest you behave yourself!" Her words echoed throughout the venue, and she was already on the stage.

Her transformation greatly exceeded Nathaniel's expectations, and he looked at the woman standing on the stage in surprise. Lily had always been well-behaved, so how did she...

"Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. I'm Rebirth's very own perfumer, Lily. I was the one who made First Love." Lily was unhurried, and every word she spoke was clear. Everyone present could hear her.

Looking at Lily on the stage, Melanie gripped the wine glass in her hand and gritted her teeth to maintain a superficial smile. She glared at Nathaniel, signaling him to salvage the situation urgently. However, Nathaniel had firmly locked his gaze on Lily as he wondered what she would do.

"The organizing committee has informed me there was a clash in creativity with First Love. I was surprised to hear that, but I believe the judges will make a fair decision. Still, I am willing to accept further investigation." Afterward, Lily took two steps back away from the microphone. She looked decent and elegant, which made her seem honest.

"L-Lily? I feel like I've heard of this person before."

"Yeah. I remember her winning the Best New Perfumer award in the province contest, but I hadn't heard from her since."

"That's old news. At a competition in Finland two years ago, she made a blunder, and everyone called her a perfumer with no sense of smell."

"Oh, that's it! Now I remember who she is!"

The looks in the crowd's eyes changed when they looked at Lily. They disdained her, teased her, and wanted to watch the drama unfold. The competition's standards were not as high as others, and many influential companies in the industry did not participate. Only the smaller and more medium-sized companies took part.

Regardless of the award's standard, one could heighten their company and perfumer's popularity to grow their profit if they won an award.

Although Rebirth relied on La Beauté Group, it was not long after that Rebirth made a name for itself. Still, Rebirth did not use La Beauté Group's senior perfumers during this competition, so the judges considered it fair for them to participate.

Melanie heard the discussions around her and steadied her flustered heart. Then he approached the stage smilingly. "I apologize for delaying everyone's time. I'm Melanie, MN Inc.'s perfumer, and I am honored to meet so many elites in our industry," she paused and continued smilingly, "I have not been in the industry for long. I only started three years ago, but I have studied perfumery for a long time. Still, I never expected someone to steal my hard work. I-It's..."

Melanie scoffed and shook her head, "How should I say this? I guess I can only thank the person who stole my work because it means others have recognized it." She turned and playfully winked at Lily, not blushing once.

Lily stood rooted and watched Melanie smile menacingly at her. Lily could not help but admire Melanie for lying so effortlessly. Although the two ladies smiled and spoke politely, the situation had started on a rocky path.

The host spoke at the right time, "Both sides seem reasonable to us. Is this truly a clash in creativity?"

Then the crowd burst into an uproar again.

"I have never heard of a clash of this proportion after all my years in this industry!"

"Yeah! It would be possible if it were just the product's name, but even the perfume's scent is similar. It's too much of a coincidence!"

"It must be plagiarism!"

"We must not tolerate plagiarists! It is a shame to the industry!"

Melanie grabbed the microphone. "I, too, despise plagiarism, but I believe the judges will bring justice to the competition!" She was full of confidence compared to the calm Lily.

"What about you, Ms. Christian?" The host asked.

"I believe in the organizing committee and my work." Lily smiled blandly and did not say much, but her eyes revealed her determination.

The host then mediated the dispute with a smile. "Since that is the case..." Before he could finish, he furrowed his brows and twitched his nose twice. "Uh..."

The crowd quickly understood what made the host stutter because most also twitched their noses from smelling something bizarre. To be precise, it was a terrible odor. Not only was it smelly, but it was also fishy. Everyone felt disgusted when the odor mixed with a fragrance.

"What's that smell?"

Everyone present was familiar with the perfume industry and was used to smelling various scents. However, they could not tolerate the sudden stench.

"Organizers, didn't your staff clean the venue before the competition? Why does it stink?!" Someone questioned.

The host hurriedly explained, "We've ensured the venue was spotless before this. It's impossible..." Before finishing, he moved a few steps to the side and looked at Melanie, conflicted.

Melanie wanted to say a few more words, but before she could hold the microphone, the host avoided her like the plague. Melanie was stunned and revealed a puzzled expression.

Everyone followed suit when they saw the host's actions. They immediately understood the situation and leaned toward Melanie. Then they hurriedly backpaddled.

"T-The stench is coming from her!"

“What a horrid smell! Someone, quickly open the windows!”

Melanie heard the crowd’s criticism, and her face turned ashen. She felt extremely humiliated. Melanie had also smelt the strange odor but did not think it came from her. She wanted to look downward and sniff it but was too embarrassed and confused to do anything about it.

“Lily!” Nathaniel shouted with a bitter and pained expression, “W-Why did you betray me?!”

CHAPTER 7

The crowd was astonished. Few people knew Lily’s whereabouts after she disappeared from the industry, let alone her relationship with Nathaniel.

At this moment, the reporters were the most excited ones. Initially, they thought they would only get to write an ordinary news article about the event tonight. No one expected there to be any plagiarism and betrayal affairs. It was exhilarating for them just thinking about it.

Lily watched as Nathaniel walked toward her while he said regretfully, “You’re part of us at MN Inc. When did you become a social climber and move to another company? You did not inform me, and... you even took my company’s product with you?”

His voice was not loud, but because there was a microphone next to him, everyone in the audience could hear him.

“She’s a traitor then. Now I see why there’s an issue of plagiarism,” someone said in realization.

“Everyone praised her too highly back then. I remember the media had exaggerated her talent when she won the Best Newcomer award. Look at her now. Tsk...”

“It’s a crime to steal a company’s confidential information. We should call the cops on her!”

“Not only does she not have a sense of smell, but she does not have a conscience. I have to say she’s quite the beauty, but what’s the use of that when she’s a thief?”

Everyone said nasty things about Lily, and Nathaniel had to suppress his smugness at this moment. Although he had no idea what was going on, at least he managed to save his company from the current crisis.

Then Nathaniel looked at the person-in-charge of Rebirth victoriously, feigning kindness as he said, “I think your company must’ve misunderstood something and fell victim to deceit. It is all merely a misunderstanding. Surely, your company is not at fault here. However, everyone knows that a product belongs to its creator. It is obvious that First Love belongs to MN Inc.”

“Mr. Hall, you said that...” A voice that sounded abruptly interrupted Nathaniel’s words.

Lily had an indifferent smile on her face the whole time. She turned to look at Nathaniel and asked calmly, "You said I'm working for MN Inc.?" She was so calm that it made Nathaniel anxious for no reason.

Still, Nathaniel managed to reduce his uneasiness as many people were watching. "You won't be one of us anymore in the future. It is a regret that such a thing happened today."

Lily chuckled as if she heard a joke and continued to ask, "Was I ever an employee of MN Inc. in the past?"

Before Nathaniel could speak, Lily continued, "Mr. Hall, I never seem to have signed any contract with MN Inc. Do we have a written agreement? Did you ever give me a paycheck? Do you have anything to prove that I worked for your company?"

"Proof? Everyone in MN Inc. can testify that you worked with us before. What proof do you need?"

"That means you don't have it then?" The question Lily casually asked silenced Nathaniel.

He had taken advantage of Lily's loyalty, and there was no such contract nor paycheck. He did that to prevent Lily from using the contract against him. Lily's salary was never consistent because she did not care about money.

Nathaniel also paid for her rental automatically through his bank account each month, and Lily was not much of a spender. One would say Nathaniel paid for most of Lily's living expenses, so he thought it unnecessary to provide Lily with a paycheck.

Nonetheless, Lily had brought the matter up and moved to another company, leaving Nathaniel untenable. Even if they brought this case to court, the jury would view Nathaniel as the unreasonable party.

"Regardless if we have proof, there is no need for us to show it to you here," Melanie said harshly, unable to remain silent anymore after watching everything as she stood among the audience.

Raising her chin, she looked at Lily arrogantly. "This is not a place for you to grandstand. As your former friend, I won't pursue this matter further, but I hope you leave at this instant."

Melanie's words seemed to have reminded Nathaniel of something. He took a step forward and grabbed Lily's sleeve, staring at her as he said, "Lily, we'll talk about this later regardless of what kind of misunderstanding we had."

He used his gaze to warn Lily that she needed to listen to him if she wanted to keep their relationship. Unfortunately for him, Lily was no longer the same person he once knew.

"Mr. Hall, how could you not defend your rights after the organizing committee has identified you and Ms. Thayer as the victims of plagiarism? I believe the judges of this competition will be fair and square to all of us." Lily took a step back and freed herself from Nathaniel's grip.

Smiling, she looked at the host. "We have submitted the research data and sample of First Love to the committees, and we trust that the outcome will be fair to us."

“Hold on!” Nathaniel raised one hand and looked up. “As Ms. Christian was an employee of my company before, it is possible for her to get the research data and samples from us. If the information is identical, how would the committee decide who is right or wrong?”

Nathaniel was not confident. After all, the research data and samples came from Lily, and they would contain identical information.

Now that Nathaniel could no longer stop Lily, he had to ditch her and seize the opportunity to make everyone believe Lily was the thief who betrayed her past employer. It was the only way Nathaniel could save his company’s image.

At this moment, someone went up to the host and whispered. The host straightened his back and looked at Nathaniel. “Mr. Hall, don’t worry about this. The judges have come to a decision, and... even though the information, data, and samples from both sides are similar, they are not entirely the same. There are still minor differences.”

“Oh?” Nathaniel was surprised.

On the other hand, Melanie was already feeling slightly uneasy as she wondered how their information, samples, and data would differ.

Even though everyone’s attention was on the stage, those who stood closer to Melanie instinctively moved further away from her. Melanie could also smell the strange odor, albeit faint, but she could not make a big deal out of it.

“The judges have concluded Rebirth’s First Love perfume as the winner! Congratulations!” The host did not beat around the bush, announcing the competition result immediately.

The sudden announcement made Nathaniel turn ashen. “T-That’s impossible!” Nathaniel yelled, “Absolutely improbable! My company has worked on that perfume for a long time! We’ve spent so much money and effort on developing First Love. How could Rebirth win?! First Love belongs to MN Inc., and we have evidence to prove it!”

“The organizing committee cannot suppress small businesses like us just because Rebirth has La Beauté Group’s support! It is unfair to the newcomers to this industry. Although my company does not have the best capabilities and technology, we are serious about contributing to the industry’s growth through our work! If the organizing committee does this, it will disappoint the members of MN Inc. and other small companies like us who have worked hard! You are suppressing us!”

Many resonated with Nathaniel’s argument. There were only a few leading companies in the perfumery industry. Many small companies would continuously participate in competitions and exhibitions, hoping to have their brands known to more people and to expand their market shares. Still, their efforts will be futile if more influential companies constantly suppress them.

“He’s right! Since the two products are similar, why did Rebirth ultimately win?”

“This is daylight robbery! Mr. Hall, you should call the cops!”

Lily raised her brow and looked at Nathaniel as he stood righteously, manipulating people to trust him. “Mr. Hall, since you keep talking about evidence, let me show you some.” Lily turned to her side and took two tiny bottles from one of Rebirth’s employees.

CHAPTER 8

“These two bottles are the samples from Rebirth and MN Inc., respectively. Mr. Hall, please try them and see if there’s any difference.” Lily raised her hands high so everyone present could see the bottles she was holding.

“So what if there’s a difference or not?” Nathaniel narrowed his eyes slightly. Then he continued disapprovingly, “Even the judges said the scents and the ingredients are alike. What will charade this prove?”

“This can prove why Rebirth won the competition. Mr. Hall, you insisted I stole MN Inc.’s product, didn’t you? Since you insisted it’s plagiarism, and there’s a difference between the samples, the original product should be the better one, am I right? Since you think it’s unfair, this is your best chance to clarify everything to everyone in our industry and the media.”

All along, Lily had a faint smile and spoke in a gentle voice. Due to the incident in the past, many held prejudices against Lily. However, they found they could not say harsh things to her when she was smiling.

Nathaniel looked at Lily, frowning profoundly and wondering what tricks Lily had up her sleeves as he thought, ‘What is wrong with her today? Why must she make a scene here? Also, I can’t believe she doesn’t listen to what I say anymore.’

“Oh right, you aren’t a professional perfumer after all. Understandably, you are unsure about the more technical things. However, Ms. Thayer should be able to identify the differences since she is the creator of First Love, right?” Lily asked in a thought-provoking manner as she turned to look at Melanie, standing behind Nathaniel.

Melanie held the wine glass in her hand tightly and tried to suppress the panic rising in her heart. She knew better than anyone how Lily created First Love.

It was difficult for Melanie to figure out Lily’s sudden appearance and why Lily put the spotlight on her, asking her to distinguish between the two samples. She was unsure of Lily’s intentions.

Melanie pursed her lips and said, “It’s unfortunate for MN Inc. and Rebirth that such a thing happened today. Of course, First Love’s formulation got leaked, but what’s the point of distinguishing which sample is fake or authentic now? Lily, I don’t know what happened, but we were friends in college. I refuse to pursue this matter any further.” Melanie turned around gracefully and slightly lifted the corner of her dress off the ground, preparing to leave the scene.

“But I want to pursue this matter. What should we do about that?” Lily’s clear voice possessed a hint of tease. She would not let Melanie get away so quickly. It made Melanie stop in her tracks and turn around to stare at Lily with widened eyes.

“Lily, you’re going too far with this!” Nathaniel tilted his head slightly to avoid the cameras that focused on him before he lowered his voice to rebuke Lily impatiently.

“Is this too much for you?” With a smirk, Lily put the two sample bottles on the table and removed the corks that secured the openings.

Then she looked at the audience and thundered, “Everyone, I created First Love based on the unique feelings between a man and a woman. This concept was the source of inspiration for this product. At the same time, I wished for this scent to evoke nostalgia and yearning among its users. I used a sweet fragrance as its base, and there should also be a slight astringent scent, but its aftertaste would still be sweet. The difference between these two samples is in its base notes.”

Some curious people have already moved forward to have a smell, while some tried to distinguish the difference with test strips. However, they were still puzzled.

“The scents are similar, so what’s the difference in their base notes?”

A perfume had its evaporation process, and it would take some time for the base notes to appear. Now that Lily had evoked everyone’s curiosity, the crowd had little patience to wait for that.

Lily smiled. “All of you have already smelled the difference in the base notes.”

“When did we...”

Someone realized what Lily meant first. “It was on someone! It was the smell earlier!”

A hint of panic flashed across Melanie’s face as she realized where the strange stench came from. Furious, she shot Lily a glare and thought, ‘Did she add something to my First Love sample?!’

Lily looked back at Melanie smilingly, but her gaze was as cold as glacial. Indeed, Lily asked Olivia to add a particular ingredient to Melanie’s sample.

When its base note appeared, it would give off the stench of a rotting fish. Lily was sure Melanie would use the First Love sample on herself to stand out. However, the tampered perfume’s base note had appeared just in time.

“You’re right. No wonder there was a stench earlier.”

“I didn’t expect the base notes to differ so much when its top notes are so similar!”

The situation engaged the audience in a discussion among themselves. Soon, someone raised their doubts, “Shouldn’t the samples be the same, regardless if it’s plagiarism or stealing a company’s product?”

“It’s obvious this is a trap.”

Nathaniel turned to look at Lily before he walked toward Melanie. “Even if there were a mistake in formulating the perfume, it would not be such a fatal one. Moreover, Ms. Thayer has put so much effort and testing into this product. Let’s look at this from another perspective. If it’s plagiarism or theft on our side, why would we change the perfume’s formulation and produce a flawed product? Someone stole our First Love formula and ruined our sample to frame MN Inc.”

At that point, Nathaniel paused as he shot a sharp gaze in Lily's direction.

"Ms. Christian, we did not want to hold you accountable because you are a former employee of MN Inc., and we did not want to make things look bad for you. However, you have been overbearing and accused us of your crimes. Due to that, I must take legal action against you to protect my and Miss Thayer's reputation. That is it. I will file a lawsuit later. As for Rebirth, I will also need to sue the company if your side insists on protecting a thief."

Nathaniel stood rooted, righteous, and awe-inspiring. He did not back down and, with such logic, made everyone believe MN Inc. was indeed the victim in this competition.

"How shameless!"

"The organizer should have investigated things properly! Do the judges even know what they're doing?"

"They deliberately distorted the truth, didn't they?!"

"People like her shouldn't even be here! She should get out of here now!"

The crowd was furious and could not suppress their anger, even if Rebirth had La Beauté Group's support. Some reporters had already started broadcasting the scene live on social media because they could not wait to spread the word.

Meanwhile, a man with a noble aura in the VIP room narrowed his eyes, about to burst from anger. After being in the business world for many years, he had met various people, but it was rare for him to meet such a shameless pack.

He looked at his recently wedded wife standing alone on stage, her figure desolate and helpless. The man buttoned up his cuffs and reached for the door handle. His fingers were about to touch the metal door handle when he heard Lily's sweet and pleasant voice.

"That's right. I changed the formulation and the sample."

Alexander froze in his spot for a second before he turned around to look at the screen. Lily had her head held high, looking dazzling under the spotlight.

There were no traces of panic or anger on her face. Instead, she exuded absolute calmness. Seeing that she was confident, Alexander retracted his hand. Perhaps he should trust her more.

CHAPTER 9

Unexpectedly, she took the initiative to admit it. Everyone was stunned, including Nathaniel.

"Since Mr. Hall has insisted Ms. Thayer was the one who formulated First Live, she should know it inside and out, so why won't Ms. Thayer tell me the difference between the two samples? What did I do to the formula, and which note have I changed?"

"I-I..." Melanie was ashen-faced. She had hardly been to a laboratory in two years. Even if she had not forgotten her knowledge, each perfume used different formulas and raw materials. Even its weight would vary slightly.

Melanie constantly hung out with Nathaniel while Lily busied herself formulating First Love. What trophies or honors would be out of reach as long as she could hook up with him? She thought wasting her time on First Love's data was not worth it. Melanie instinctively grabbed the corner of Nathaniel's clothes and pursed her lips.

Nathaniel noticed her nervousness, so he took a step forward and protected Melanie behind him naturally. "You were the one who tampered with the formula, so how would Mel know what you did to it? You've already admitted to tampering with MN Inc.'s perfume, so I think we should end this charade and..."

"I only admitted to changing the formula, not stealing it. The formula belongs to me, so I can change it as I see fit. Melanie should be familiar with First Love since she claims it as her own. Why does she seem otherwise? Or is this a case of a thief framing a thief? Is Mel the one who stole others' formulas and work?" Lily exposed Melanie unceremoniously without being subtle and leaving no trace of mercy.

Being accused and exposed on such an occasion, Melanie could not refute it. Lily had caught her off guard, so she raised her hand and pointed at Lily, "You're slinging mud at me! Y-You..." Melanie had fallen backward from the stage before she could finish speaking.

"Ah..."

"Mel!" Nathaniel, who was closest, exclaimed and held Melanie's fallen self. "Sorry, because of Ms. Thayner's state, MN Inc. has to leave the stage," Nathaniel said as he turned to look at the host, his tone polite yet blunt.

Then he turned to Lily, his glance relaxed. "But we won't let others slander us like this!"

Lily raised her eyebrows and watched him hurriedly pick Melanie up to leave the venue.

'Tsk tsk tsk. Mel knows she is wrong and can't defend herself without evidence, so she acted as if she fainted.'

Although Melanie's fakeness was old-fashioned, it was still quite effective. At least she had temporarily escaped her current predicament. The farce ended because of MN Inc.'s departure. The organizing committee continued awarding the participants accordingly, but they withheld First Love's award due to the controversy.

Although Lily had mentally prepared herself for everything, the reporters still surrounded her as she left the venue.

"Ms. Christian, did you plan today's controversy?"

"You disappeared from the perfume industry two years ago. Was it because of that previous competition when everyone slandered you?"

"Ms. Christian, why did you go to Rebirth? Mr. Hall mentioned you were MN Inc.'s employee, so are you quitting or breaching a contract?"

"It was rumored you and Mr. Hall of MN Inc. were in a relationship. Are you taking revenge on something he did?"

Each question was more clever than the next. Lily smiled lightly and did not evade the maliciousness that came her way. "You'll get the answers you are looking for in time." She left that last sentence for the reporters before getting into the limousine under Rebirth's escorts.

The car door closed, instantly shutting out the flashing lights and noise outside. The cold air in the limousine made Lily shiver. The next second, there was a warm jacket draped over her shoulders.

"You haven't left yet?" Lily was surprised. She thought Alexander had left long ago.

"It was such a wonderful show, so how could I not stay to watch?" Alexander sighed and withdrew his hand, sighing softly. "Unfortunately, the results were a bit unsatisfactory."

Lily shook her head. "It's not the end, only the beginning."

"Oh?" Alexander raised an eyebrow.

Lily continued, "I'll not allow others to steal what is rightfully mine."

She was foolish in the past and gave up everything for love, even going so far as to rebel against her family. She did all that, only to get nothing in return. She still had hopes and dreams before today, but Nathaniel's actions had utterly broken the tenderness in Lily's heart.

He knew First Love was Lily's life's work, and she had given up several awards and honors for so long. Still, he insisted she was a thief. Nathaniel did all of this for Melanie.

Lily's phone vibrated in her pocket, so she took it out and glanced at it. She saw it was Olivia calling and answered the call, "Olivia."

Immediately after, a burst of triumphant laughter sounded from the other side of the call. "I'm so happy! Hahaha, I can't explain how satisfying that was to watch! You did a great job, Lily!"

Olivia's laughter made her voice tremble. Lily moved aside and looked at Alexander. She cleared her throat awkwardly and said, "Olivia, do you need to laugh so maniacally?"

"Of course I do!" Olivia said while cackling, "I thought you'd be obedient to Nathaniel forever, but I didn't expect you to tell me to add those ingredients to their formula for that. You don't know how arrogant Melanie was when she took the sample from me. She got eggs on her face on the live stream, which was satisfying!" Olivia was so excited and spoke hurriedly, so Lily could not interject.

"B-But will you leave MN Inc. since you had a falling out with them? I noticed you went to Rebirth. When was that? Are they reliable? Have you negotiated your terms and conditions with Rebirth?" Olivia asked Lily questions at a million miles an hour.

Lily blushed as she listened to Olivia on the phone. However, Alexander did not look over and gazed out the window. Still, he could hear every word.

"This has to be fate, right, Lily?!" Olivia asked excitedly.

Lily recalled her encounter with Alexander. He was willing to help her and even married Lily.

"O-Olivia, let's not talk about that. Nathaniel will certainly trouble you concerning today's incident, so you must deny everything and push the blame on me, understand?"

Olivia disapproved of Lily's plan. "Don't worry, Lily. I'm not afraid of him and will quit if push comes to shove."

She had long been accustomed to Nathaniel's incessant behavior. She would only remain silent should Nathaniel question her.

"But what about you, Lily? You've slandered Nathaniel in public, and he will be looking for you. How about you crash at my place tonight, and I can protect you."

Lily was about to respond when she saw Alexander look over, his gaze sharp. She hurriedly replied, "N-No, that's okay. I have other arrangements. All right then, I'll call you tomorrow." Lily hurriedly hung up the call as she finished speaking.

If it were not for Olivia's reminder, Lily would have forgotten that it was hers and Alexander's wedding night.

CHAPTER 10

Lily glanced at Alexander quietly but found he was looking at her. She did not know when his sight had already fallen on her. She was caught in the act and began to blush.

"Do you have other plans tonight?" Alexander asked. He was close to Lily and made her feel butterflies in her stomach.

The stubbornness in Lily's bones made her refuse to back down. She met his obsidian eyes and tried her best to maintain a calm expression. "If you recall, tonight is our wedding night. What other arrangements would I have, Mr. Russell?"

Lily pretended to be relaxed and natural, but her hands pressed hard on her knees, revealing the uneasiness in her heart.

Alexander's brows and lips twitched. "Very good." He straightened up, and Lily eased, but she was not completely relieved.

The car soon stopped at its destination, and Lily thought her husband would take her back to his private residence. However, they had unexpectedly stopped at a spa club entrance. There were orange-yellow sign boards all around, making one feel at peace.

However, as Lily looked at her husband suspiciously, he seemed to guess what she thought. "It's too sudden to make many preparations today."

"It doesn't matter to me," Lily said softly. She knew their marriage was just a beneficial one, so there was no need for any extravagant ceremonies. But when she saw the rose-decorated restaurant, she felt sincerely touched.

Only two of them were in the vast restaurant. The staff had neatly arranged the dishes, and the waiter kept his distance, giving the couple enough room for their intimate night. It was apparent that Alexander had reserved the entire restaurant for him and his wife. He had the influence, but how did he do all that so quickly?

"We have plenty of privacy here, so don't worry about this leaking on the news," Alexander said calmly while gracefully cutting into his steak.

"T-Thank you, Alex." Lily was typically good at speaking but did not know what to say in this situation.

Alexander stopped abruptly and raised his eyebrows, staring profoundly into Lily's eyes. "Thank you for what?"

"Thank you for keeping your promise of working with me and for your arrangements in everything you did today," Lily responded. Although she was impulsive in marrying Alexander, Lily did not regret it.

Alexander lightly chuckled when he heard Lily's series of thanks. It was discreet, but one could tell he was delighted. Immediately after, Alexander placed the steak he had cut onto Lily's plate. He withdrew his fork and said thoughtfully, "There might be more for you to thank me for."

...

After a warm and romantic candlelit dinner, the couple entered a suite Alexander had prearranged. The suite was quite expansive, and there was a private hot tub. The sounds of its water would make one drift off into reverie.

Naturally, Lily thought if she should ask Alexander if he wanted her to soak in the hot tub with him. Lily's face was flushed red, and her body was tense as she quickly looked away and walked toward the kitchen to pour herself a glass of water.

Alexander noticed her nervousness and turned around to remove his blazer. He picked up a bottle of red wine and two glasses and brought them over to her. "Are you interested in a glass of wine?"

"N-No..." Lily wanted to refuse but instantly changed her mind. "Y-Yes." Supposedly, alcohol would give one courage. She was not a coward but undoubtedly lacked courage. It was as though she had used up all her courage when she approached Alexander and spoke of her cooperation with him.

After pouring the wine, Alexander raised his glass toward Lily. She stared at the red liquid, gritted her teeth, and clinked her glass with Alexander's. Then Lily downed her wine in one gulp. She was so hurried that she choked and coughed violently.

Alexander laughed, raised his hand, and patted her back gently. "I'll go for a soak. You take your time." He gave Lily ample time to prepare and also gave her a chance to retreat and regret her downing of the wine. Then he turned to walk toward the hot tub.

Lily was puzzled as she watched Alexander walking away. She hurriedly poured herself another glass of wine and downed it again. After drinking almost half a bottle of wine in one go, it took effect, and Lily started to feel tipsy. She straightened herself and could vaguely see the hot tub and Alexander.

Alexander sat in the hot tub with his arms stretched and back facing Lily, revealing only his broad upper shoulders. His muscles were prominent, and the water droplets on his back glowed with a crystal sheen against his skin.

Lily's throat was dry as she walked straight over. She stood on the dividing line between the dry and wet areas. Alexander could hear her movements but did not look back. He was patient and gave Lily the chance to collect herself.

Lily did not give herself to overthink and quickly removed her clothes, only her outerwear. She walked barefoot behind Alexander and entered the hot tub to sit beside him. The water was a little hotter than usual, and she started sweating slightly as soon as she entered the water.

The alcohol's effect was as if it evaporated with the water vapor, and the courage Lily had finally mustered disappeared. She quickly crossed her arms unnaturally. Lily had never stripped in front of a man before. She even limited Nathaniel to holding hands and kissing.

"Phew..." She took a deep breath. The two were close to each other, and their body temperatures differed from the water. However, their bodies were hotter than the water.

Alexander held Lily's waist with one hand and cupped her chin with the other, forcing her to look at him. "I'll give you one last chance." He paused, the flames in his eyes burning faintly. "If you're not ready, we can..."

Lily clung to him as her teeth knocked against Alexander's lips because of her sudden forced kiss. There was even a faint smell of blood as she closed her eyes tightly and did not say or think about anything. She only showed her determination with her actions.

There was nothing unearned in this world, and one would not take anything for granted. There were only equivalent exchanges— pain and gain.

Lily brought a softness and warmth into Alexander's arms, and he had no reason to refuse. Everything went smoothly, and they found it hard to contain their emotions, almost overwhelming Lily.

Alexander quickly noticed something was off, so he picked her up and got out of the hot tub. Lily's long hair was wet, and her eyes were closed while her long eyelashes trembled involuntarily. She looked gorgeous.

