

Rather than stopping them, the housekeeper merely chuckled approvingly at the rambunctious two. After they had disappeared into the house, she turned to Natalie and welcomed her warmly, saying, "Ms. Smith! You're here."

Natalie flashed a friendly grin at the housekeeper in return. "Is Ms. Mackenzie home?" she asked.

"Yes, she's entertaining guests today," the housekeeper replied. She then looked curiously at Shane, who was standing beside Natalie.

Natalie smiled. Holding onto Shane's arm, she announced, "This is my boyfriend, Shane."

"Hello, Mr. Shane," the housekeeper politely greeted.

"Hello." Shane gave her a slight nod.

The housekeeper turned back to Natalie, then exclaimed, "This is wonderful! If Ms. Mackenzie were to meet Shane, she'd certainly be overjoyed."

"Why?" Shane inquired, raising an eyebrow.

The housekeeper beamed at him. "Ms. Mackenzie has always thought that Ms. Smith's life was a little too barren of romance. That lack of experience was rather apparent in her designs. She's been longing for her to experience love in the hope that it'd translate into her work."

"Oh?" Shane narrowed his eyes, examining Natalie's face, which was now crimson with embarrassment. "Have you really never been in a relationship before?"

Natalie mumbled an inaudible reply.

She was too ashamed to admit that she, a grown woman of twenty-six years of age, had yet to experience her first love.

Shane's lips, however, curled up slightly. He seemed pleased at the thought.

A moment later, another thought struck Shane, and his face grew grave once more.

If Natalie had never been in love, how did Sharon and Connor come about, then?

Shane took another long, hard look at Natalie's lovely face as if he could find the answer to his riddle there.

Unfortunately, he was greeted with nothing but Natalie's utter bewilderment.

"Shane, what are you looking at me like that for? Is there something on my face?" Natalie asked self-consciously as she searchingly felt her face all over.

Shane quickly averted his gaze, then said coolly, "No."

"Oh," Natalie answered hesitantly.

Right then, the housekeeper saved Natalie and Shane from the inadvertent awkwardness that ensued. "Ms. Smith, Mr. Shane, please come in."

"All right," Natalie said cheerfully, pulling Shane along with her. They passed through the same door the twins had raced through earlier and entered the house.

Once Natalie and Shane were in the living room, the housekeeper directed them toward the sofa and poured them glasses of water. "Please have a seat. I'll let Ms. Mackenzie know you're here," she suggested helpfully.

She then dutifully proceeded upstairs in the direction of the study.

Shane glanced around his rather antiquated surroundings with interest. Frowning, he asked Natalie in a low voice, "Where are Sharon and Connor?"

The two children had vanished ever since they disappeared behind the door as if the house had swallowed them whole.

Natalie was heartened at the sight of Shane's concern for the children.

The more anxious Shane was about them, the more it was evident that he cared for them. If Shane could love them despite thinking that they weren't his own flesh and blood, how much more would he love them once he found out that they were?

A rush of emotion overcame Natalie as she felt a sudden compulsion to confess to Shane that Sharon and Connor were indeed his children. She couldn't help but wonder how Shane

would respond to the revelation.

However, Natalie quickly quelled this impulse. She picked up a glass of water and took a sip to calm her racing heart, then said, "Don't worry, they've gone to the playroom. It's their favorite spot in Ms. Mackenzie's house."

"The playroom?" Shane asked quizzically. The idea of the old-fashioned house having a playroom struck him as rather out-of-place.

Natalie laughed. "Ms. Mackenzie especially had it renovated for Sharon and Connor. It's filled with toys for them."

As comprehension dawned upon Shane, his worry was instantly put at rest.

At that moment, voices trickled down from upstairs, along with footsteps that grew louder as their owners came down the stairs.

After putting down her glass of water on the table, she turned in that direction in time to see four people walking down the staircase.

Leading the way was none other than her mentor, Mercede.