

“What did you say?” Annie instantly froze.

Shane, too, glanced at Natalie warily.

Apologizing to Annie profusely in her head, Natalie quickly muttered her last statement a second time.

Instantly, Annie’s face blanched as she staggered back a few steps, reeling from the shock. Andre rushed forward to support Annie, who would have collapsed otherwise. Everyone else seemed utterly dumbfounded by the turn of events.

Natalie felt a tinge of remorse for what she had said, though there was no way of retracting her words now.

“Please excuse us, Ms. Mackenzie. I’ll bring Annie home to rest for a while. We’ll come back later to visit you,” Andre said ruefully, a forlorn expression on his face.

Mercede nodded graciously. “Of course. We’ll see you out.”

She then gestured for the housekeeper to accompany the Hills out of the house, leaving only Natalie, Shane, and herself in the living room.

Mercede took a seat on the sofa and indicated for them to do so. Hauling Natalie over, Shane asked, “Why did you say that Stanley had a girlfriend?”

“Yes, my dear. I would very much like to know why as well,” Mercede said languidly, crossing her legs.

Having been Natalie’s mentor for years, Mercede was able to deduce right away that Natalie had been lying. However, she had not interfered out of consideration that it was none of her business.

Natalie cleared her throat rather embarrassedly. “I didn’t want to lie either, but I was thinking of Joyce.”

“Joyce?” Mercede furrowed her brows in an effort at recollection, looking sympathetic. “Ah, so that’s why.”

“What do you mean?” Shane questioned, still uncomprehending.

Natalie sighed. This was turning out to be a lot more complicated than she thought. “Joyce likes Stanley,” she explained.

Shane took a sip of water before he reasoned, “Are you trying to matchmake Joyce and Stanley?”

Natalie bit her lip as she asserted, “Yes.”

“That’s not realistic at all,” Shane pronounced curtly. “Stanley obviously dislikes Joyce.”

Surprised, Natalie retorted, “How do you know that?”

“I saw the way Stanley was looking at Joyce,” Shane replied briefly.

Resignedly, Natalie said, “All right, I know I’m not being realistic too. But Joyce is my friend, and I’ll still do everything in my power to help her succeed. It’s selfish, but I’m doing my best to reduce the competition for her.”

As if struck by that last thought, Natalie looked at Shane anxiously. “Shane, do you think I’m...”

“No!” Shane immediately interrupted Natalie. In a gentler tone, he continued while ruffling her hair, “Do whatever you think is best. Even if you kill someone, I’ll help you to hide the body! I’ll always be here to support you. “

Natalie felt immensely moved by Shane’s unconditional support, and all her uncertainties promptly took flight.

She reached out and hugged Shane. “Thank you. I’m so lucky to have found you,” she murmured into his ear.

Shane wrapped his arms around Natalie in return, patting her on the back. “Me too,” he replied softly.

With a satisfied smile on her face, Mercede stood up and slipped away in order to allow Natalie and Shane a moment of privacy in that intimate moment.

Shane's keen eyes instantly latched onto Mercede's movements, despite her discreetness. However, he gratefully watched her exit the room without alerting Natalie.

That night, approximately twenty guests turned up for Mercede's birthday dinner at a hotel, including the Hills. She had not sent out express invitations, but those present had gathered of their own accord. It was a simple and pleasant affair, with everyone in the private room making lighthearted chatter over the tinkling of cutlery.

Midway through the meal, Natalie put down her knife and turned to Shane. "I have to use the restroom. Help me look after Sharon and Connor."