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Chapter 162: He Smelled Like Her Perfume

Rochelle massaged her temples.

After giving it a bit of thought, she picked up the phone and decided to just give Jonathan a call.

Jonathan always answered her calls within seconds, but on that occasion, she was surprised to hear only a message from the service provider. 'The number you have dialed is unavailable.'

Rochelle sniggered angrily and smashed the phone forcefully on the table.

Jonathan would rather take two knives to his stomach for the sake of his close friends than answer his own wife's calls.

It appeared that Timothy really was close with Harmony!

...

Samantha had recently been cooped up at the villa to study and practice. On the other hand, Timothy had never come back since leaving that morning. Both he and Samantha were busy, so the two of them only exchanged a couple of words on WeTalk.

On that day, Samantha went to the television station for a promotional photoshoot. She also got the chance to meet some of the other contestants while she was at it.

After having breakfast in the morning, Old Madam Barker made a point to watch her as she put on the clothes that Timothy once bought for her before. The old lady ensured that Samantha dressed up well before letting her leave.

Samantha got in the car and could not contain her smile when she saw Old Madam Barker standing at the door to cheer her on with Aunt Julia.

As the car gradually drove off, Samantha took out her cell phone but saw no messages or calls from Timothy.

He had always paid attention to everything related to the competition, so he ought to know that she was going to start the competition process that day. Why was there no indication from him at all?

Was the workload too overwhelming for him?

About an hour later, the car stopped in front of the Lychee TV's headquarters. Samantha got out of the car and stood there as she raised her head to look at the humongous logo at the entrance.

That was the dream place for anyone who studied communications.

She loved watching anchors on television ever since she was a child. Whenever the news was on, she sat still on the sofa and watched intently. It was a career she had always longed to have.

At long last, she was finally taking steps to achieve her lifelong dream!

She had to admit that there were some waves of emotion in her heart.

After taking a deep breath, Samantha finally started walking. She ascended up the flight of stairs and finally entered Lychee TV's hallway.

The walls were filled with portraits of famous Lychee TV anchors. Each one of them were talented, ethical, and professional individuals—they were her precursors who deserved to be held in high esteem.

She glanced across them one after another until her gaze finally lingered for some time in front of one particular female anchor. Samantha could not hide her admiration and reverence.

Victoria Goldman was one of the A-list anchors in the country. She carried herself with dignity, possessed amazing talent, and had a strong sense of professionalism. Her achievements were impressive and she was well-loved amongst audiences, lending her a high degree of influence.

Samantha practically grew up watching Victoria's broadcasts and viewed her as an idol. During Samantha's study years, she frequently modeled herself after Victoria because she wanted to achieve great things and become just as excellent an anchor as Victoria.

A large part of Samantha's reason for wanting to join Lychee TV was because Victoria was there.

She knew that all established anchors would take newbie anchors under their wing, and their choice of an understudy would come from the batch of newcomers.

Samantha was certainly hoping to get that opportunity!

"Do you admire Ms. Goldman too?" A gentle voice sounded suddenly beside Samantha.

Samantha knew it was Harmony as soon as she heard the voice. After shifting her gaze from the photo to the woman, Samantha smiled and said, "Is she also your idol?"

Harmony's presence there came as no surprise because Samantha knew she had passed the interview after seeing her name on the list.

"Yes." Harmony tucked a lock of hair behind her ears to reveal the delicate features of her face. "Our interests and hobbies are quite similar. We both like the news and our idols are Ms. Goldman too."

Samantha opened her mouth to reply but caught a whiff of a very familiar scent.

She froze for a moment and inhaled once more to make sure that she did not identify the fragrance wrongly. It was only then that a look of surprise began to appear in her eyes.

The scent on Timothy's clothes was inexplicably familiar, but Samantha could not put her finger on it at the time. It turned out that she had once smelled it on Harmony.

Could the two of them have used a fragrance from the same line? That would be too much of a coincidence.

When she saw the slight tenseness in Samantha's eyebrows, Harmony seemed puzzled as she asked, "What's the matter, Samantha? Are you alright?"

Her words drew Samantha's consciousness back. She pursed her lips lightly and decided to go ahead with her question after a brief moment of hesitation. "I'm fine. It's just... Your perfume smells really good. It has a very unique scent to it. I'm curious what brand it is?"

"Really?" Harmony raised her wrist and caused the scent to float in the air again. She said softly, "This perfume is a formula I created. It's not from any big brands. You could say it's one of a kind. I can always make a batch for you if you like."

A one-of-a-kind perfume.

In other words, it was not a perfume that anyone could buy from the store.

Why then...did Samantha smell it on Timothy's clothes?

Although the expression on Samantha's face remained steadfast, there were already some waves of emotion in her heart.

She gently took a deep breath and calmed her emotions before replying with a smile, "You don't have to trouble yourself. I was just curious. I don't really wear perfume anyway."

Harmony did not insist and no longer continued that topic. She merely said, "It's almost time. Let's head up together."

“Sure.”

...

For the promotional photoshoot, each contestant had to take one portrait shot and finally all the contestants would take a group photo. During the shoot, Harmony walked to Samantha and stood beside her.

A click of the camera sealed that moment into a photograph.

The person in charge of the competition, Walter Schuck, clapped his hands and said to everyone, “The photoshoot has concluded! From now on, you’ll have to survive the competition. I’ll add all of you to a chat group on WeTalk and you can then add each other from there. Time to start familiarizing yourselves with your fellow contestants.”

Everyone replied in unison, “Alright, Mr. Schuck.”

The contestants then left.

Samantha had already gotten into a taxi when she heard a notification from her cell phone. She clicked on WeTalk and saw that Walter had added her into the chat group.

Everyone greeted each other in the group, and Samantha was about to send an emoji to say hello when she saw a little pink bunny icon in her contacts.

One of the contestants had probably added her on WeTalk, so she tapped her finger on the profile photo.

The message authentication stated Harmony’s name.

Harmony had already added her as a friend before even showing up in the group. Samantha cocked her eyebrow slightly and accepted the request.

A chat with Harmony popped up at once, indicating that they were friends on WeTalk.

The contestants then added her one after another, and Samantha accepted all the requests. Once she had accepted all of them, she clicked on each one and annotated their names to their WeTalk profile so as not to accidentally embarrass herself by forgetting who was who.

Harmony’s name was at the bottommost because she was the first to add her as a friend. Samantha added the person’s name to their profile, starting from the top. When she was finally about to add the annotation to Harmony’s profile, her black pupils shrank as soon as she saw Harmony’s WeTalk nickname.

That nickname was....

Chapter 163: Together with Harmony?

...one single word: Lily.

What could have been a normal nickname ended up jolting Samantha's memory of the flowers that Timothy received during his recuperation at the hospital.

Those flowers were lilies.

The perfume, those lilies, the time frame of her hospital visit, their countless chance encounters before; all of it might seem unrelated if one did not give it too much thought. However, all of it seemed to be related to Timothy when the dots were connected.

Samantha tightened her grip on the phone.

Could it all have been a coincidence, or was Timothy really involved in it?

She had known Timothy for so long, and although he was surrounded by a multitude of women, she was very familiar with each one of them and Harmony was not someone she ever saw.

Harmony's face was so beautiful that it would almost definitely leave a strong impression on Samantha.

Did Harmony meet Timothy before Samantha got acquainted with him, or did Harmony only appear during Samantha's two years abroad?

Harmony's name was never mentioned during Samantha's relationship with Timothy, but if Harmony showed up in the two years Samantha was abroad, then what was the explanation for Penelope? Penelope's character made it extremely unlikely that she would be clueless about Harmony.

Samantha did not realize that the car had already reached the villa entrance. When the driver saw Samantha sitting still and motionless there, he immediately reminded her, "We've reached your destination, Miss."

His remark pulled Samantha out of her thoughts. She looked up, glanced at the villa, and unconsciously remembered that Timothy had not been home for several days.

If he did have some sort of relationship with Harmony, could he have been with her all along instead of at work?

She was well aware that she should not overthink, but she really hoped that she could go the distance with Timothy due to all the struggles she went through just to finally start afresh with him.

The more idyllic the situation was, the more afraid she was that an accident might happen.

“Could you...” Samantha took a breath and continued, “...drive to the Barker Group please.”

Samantha’s thoughts and speculations continued unabated during the journey.

In about 40 or so minutes, the car arrived at the entrance of the Barker Group. Samantha paid the fare and got down.

She just wanted to go in and take a look to confirm things for herself.

As she started walking over, she suddenly remembered that her visit was very sudden. On the off chance everything really was just a coincidence, she would be facing a very embarrassing situation indeed.

She had to have an excuse for coming.

Her eyes scanned the surroundings and she spotted a cake shop on the side of the road. She immediately walked over there.

The cake was chosen at random, and once the server packed them up for her, she carried it out of the store and headed to the Barker Group.

Since Timothy had publicly announced his marriage to her, every single employee recognized her as the boss’s wife. She entered the company without being stopped and took the CEO’s elevator to the top floor.

The front desk had already given Ronald a heads-up by the time she went upstairs. He was already waiting for her when she walked out of the elevator.

“Mrs. Barker,” he greeted respectfully, “What brings you here?”

Samantha raised the cakes she bought and smiled as naturally as possible. “I’m here to bring him something for afternoon tea.”

“That’s very considerate of you, Mrs. Barker,” Ronald said while leading her to the office. “Mr. Barker is still in a meeting unfortunately, so you might have to wait for a bit.”

“Sure, it’s fine.”

Ronald brought Samantha to the CEO's office and directed her to the sofa while asking, "Would you like anything to drink?"

"A glass of warm water will do."

"Sure."

Ronald turned around and left the office.

Samantha put the cake on the coffee table and looked at the work desk.

There were many documents scattered on the desk. Some had been flipped through while others remained untouched. The computer was on and there was a data spreadsheet on the screen.

Her gaze then fell on the cup on the desk. There was only a little bit of coffee left in it, while the ashtray next to the cup had several cigarette butts.

It was rather obvious that Timothy had a huge workload.

Ronald knocked twice on the door before coming in and placing a cup of warm water in front of Samantha. "Here's your water."

"Thank you." Samantha held the cup to her mouth and took a sip.

She pretended to ask nonchalantly, "Has Timothy been really busy at work these days? Did he make sure to eat?"

"Mr. Barker has been working on a large transnational project recently. It's been close to the three days that he hasn't had any sleep," Ronald gave an honest answer, "but you can rest assured that he eats his meals now. After all, he's a married man now, not a bachelor. He has to think about his old lady and his beautiful wife!"

Samantha could not help but feel amused at his words.

Timothy really had been busy working in the company those few days, and none of what she imagined happened at all.

Samantha finally and resolutely set her heart at ease, although that did not preclude her from feeling a little worried about Timothy.

"As busy as he is, it's still important for him to get some rest. Could you remind him more often for me, Ronald?"

Ronald nodded. "I will, Mrs. Barker."

“Thank you for your trouble.”

Ronald was about to answer when there was another knock on the office door. The person, who looked to be a secretary, came in and said, “Mr. Crawford, the folks from Axlelland are requesting to hold a video conference in another ten minutes. Shall I accept the request?”

“Ah, yes, please do. I’ll notify Mr. Barker.”

Ronald answered, then looked awkwardly at Samantha. “Mrs. Barker, I don’t know how long Mr. Barker’s meeting will continue, so would—”

Samantha interrupted him right away and said, “I think it’s about time I leave. Everyone seems busy so I wouldn’t want to be a bother.”

She got up and walked out as soon as she said.

Ronald walked with her to the elevator entrance and turned back only after the elevator descended to the ground floor.

...

Samantha got in the taxi and raised her hand to give her head a little knock.

She had been overthinking, and she was fortunate not to have interrupted Timothy’s work.

Everything really was just a coincidence...

After breathing a sigh of relief, Samantha picked up the phone and put a note on Harmony’s WeTalk profile before putting the phone away and looking out the window.

...

Timothy’s meeting ended at eight o’clock in the evening and he finally returned to the office.

He glanced at the cake on the coffee table as soon as he stepped in, and a gleam of light flickered in his eyes before he asked, “Where did that come from?”

He raised his chin slightly to gesture at the cake.

Ronald, who was following behind him, looked over and replied, “Oh, I forgot to tell you that Mrs. Barker came over in the afternoon. She brought you this cake, saying that it was for your afternoon tea. She even told me to make sure that you eat your meals and have enough rest.”

'Samantha was here? Did my wife finally show concern for me?'

The corners of Timothy's lips curled up unconsciously and a gentle look of joy appeared in his expression. However, he glanced at the cake again and frowned slightly.

Ronald was confused by Timothy's expression and so asked, "Is something wrong, Mr. Barker?"

Chapter 164: Not to Be Messed With

Timothy glanced at Ronald. "I don't eat cake."

Although he was happy that Samantha showed concern for him, she ought to know that he did not like sweet food. Why would she bring cakes for him, then?

Was she that...inattentive?

Ronald quickly understood that Timothy hated that kind of food, although...Ronald did have a sweet tooth. He just so happened to feel peckish after such a long meeting.

Ronald gulped and mustered the courage to say, "Don't worry about it, Mr. Barker. Leave the cake that Mrs. Barker brought to me. I'll eat them all and make sure not to waste a single crumb!"

After he finished speaking, he waited eagerly for Timothy to reward him with the cake.

Timothy's lips twitched and asked instead, "You want to have some cake?"

Ronald nodded repeatedly while looking at the cake on the coffee table, but the next second, he heard his boss's merciless words. "Buy some yourself."

Ronald was speechless and felt uncared for. If Timothy did not let him eat the cake despite having a distaste for sweet food, then Ronald could only chalk it up to Timothy's terrifying possessiveness toward Samantha.

There was one time he even had to endure an intense glare from Timothy after looking at Samantha a little bit too long.

Timothy was someone that should ever be messed with!

"Mr. Barker, I'll head out then if there's nothing else."

"Mm."

Ronald walked out of the office and closed the door gently behind him.

...

Timothy walked to the sofa and sat down. He took out the cake from the bag. He looked at it for a moment and frowned, but he still picked up the small fork and cut out a small piece to eat.

The sweetness assaulted his taste buds and the disgust in his expression became even stronger.

He went to get himself a glass of water and drank from it before coming back. Alternating between cake and water, he finished the cake slowly but surely.

Once he had eaten the whole slice, he picked up his phone, typed out a text on WeTalk, and sent it.

...

At the villa, Samantha came out of the bath just in time to hear her phone ring.

She walked to the bed, picked up the phone, and immediately clicked on the WeTalk message Timothy sent.

[The cake was too sweet.]

He had eaten it.

Samantha knew that Timothy did not like sweet stuff, and she only bought the cake because her emotions had been a bit of a mess that day. She never actually expected him to eat it.

She could not tell him why she bought the cake in the first place, so she merely replied: [Grandma taught me how to make her signature sauerkraut fish. I'll make it for you sometime.]

She even sent him the photos she took during her first attempt at making the dish.

A few seconds later, he replied: [Sure. Looking forward to it.]

Samantha could not help but smile.

Timothy was so forthcoming that she almost felt embarrassed to have made such wild guesses before.

It was time for her to gather her thoughts and focus wholly on her competition.

She and Timothy were both working hard at their own endeavors!

Samantha sent one last message: [No matter how busy you are, you must remember to rest. I'll do my best and win the competition.]

...

Timothy smiled after reading her message. He was obviously very tired, but his sleepiness had all but disappeared when he was done chatting with her.

After putting down the phone, he walked over to the desk, sat down, and started flipping through the documents.

There was a knock on the office door sometime later.

Timothy looked up and had a puzzled look.

Ronald had informed him via WeTalk that he was going out for a meal, while the rest of the company's employees had already left work at that point. Who could possibly be knocking at such a time?

His long slender fingers tapped the tabletop and Samantha's figure appeared suddenly in his mind.

Could she have decided to send over some sauerkraut fish because she did not get a chance to see him earlier that afternoon?

Timothy's lips curled up slyly. He stood up, walked to the door, and opened it.

A woman stood outside the door with packed dinner in her hands.

Unfortunately, it was not Samantha's big round eyes that greeted the man when he looked up. It was a pair of pure yet impassioned eyes that were all the rage among men in recent times.

Harmony smiled slightly and greeted softly, "Tim."

...

Once the promotional photos were released, there was a bit of a stir on the internet.

Samantha, being Mrs. Barker, was famous in her own right, but rather than sit at home and live up to her status as a rich wife, she decided to participate in the competition. Did she really have what it takes or did she merely rely on being backed by the Barker Group? Netizens expressed their opinions in droves and many had differing takes on the situation.

The number of people who were optimistic about her chances paled in comparison to those who were not.

That was the first thing Samantha saw when she woke up the next day. She glanced through the myriad of comments from netizens but did not feel affected by any of it at all.

All that gossip would be the death of her if she was offended by each and every single one of them. The best way to refute all that was to give them a slap in the face by proving her abilities.

The only thing that mattered to her was that her loved ones were supporting her! That was more than enough!

The first round officially started that day.

At ten o'clock in the morning, Samantha—along with the other contestants—were led by Walter into Lychee TV's newsroom. Everyone started getting nervous as soon as they stepped in.

There were three judges for that round, all of whom were news anchors who had been with Lychee TV for more than ten years. After introducing them one by one and giving them some encouragement, Walter announced the rules of the first round of the competition.

“For this round, we're going to select the new anchors that have the most potential to be nurtured. As a result, the rules for this round are the most demanding. We'll first test your ability as an anchor to present breaking news. A piece of breaking news will be broadcast for everyone to watch, and you'll all have five minutes to figure out how you wish to present the news. Lots will be drawn to decide when it's your turn to present, and the three judges will then give you your final score. Only seven out of fifteen of you will go through.”

Everyone gasped as soon as Walter finished speaking.

Half the number of contestants will be eliminated in the first round, and the first test was a very difficult one indeed.

Although everyone knew that Lychee TV's tests have always been difficult, they did not expect it to be even harder than they imagined.

For the record, newcomers who joined the television station would have to practice for a long time before getting a chance to try their hand at presenting breaking news.

Walter was not surprised by everyone's reaction. After scanning the contestants, his gaze lingered on two of them and he said, "Raise your hand and ask if you have any questions. If not, we'll draw lots now!"

One of the contestants raised it quickly, "Mr. Schuck, I have a question!"

"Yes!"

"We're all going to watch the breaking news together, but because our turn is decided through lots, wouldn't the person who drew number one have less preparation time than those after her? The person who goes first only has five minutes to prepare. Isn't that unfair?"

Walter smiled. "Since you're the ones drawing lots, luck is also a part of your strength. There is nothing unfair about it!"

When he said that, the rest of the contestants could only obey him and leave it in God's hands to decide. The last thing they wanted was to get one of the early numbers!

A cardboard box was placed on the table and the 15 contestants stepped forward to take a lot.

Samantha took one and went back to her place. Harmony, who was behind her, similarly went back to her own spot and asked with a smile, "How's your luck, Sammy? What number do you think you'll get?"

Chapter 165: Snide Comments

Samantha did not seem to mind as much and said nonchalantly, "Any number is fine."

The contestants beside her started murmuring among themselves when they heard such a conceited comment from her. One of the already famous contestants, Jade Plunkett, said sarcastically. "Confident, are we? Hopefully, she can remain just as calm when she gets number one."

When Lychee TV's official Waybo account posted the promotional photos, it became a hot topic on the internet because Samantha was one of them. It was all due to her unique position of being Mrs. Barker. Busybody netizens centered their discussions around her compared to the stark disinterest shown toward other contestants.

Samantha had no professional experience and neither did she ever win any award. She would not have gotten such attention if it were not for her status as Mrs. Barker. With her limelight overshadowing other contestants, it was only natural for them to view her with discontent.

Jade's voice was neither too loud nor too soft. It was just the right volume to reach Samantha's ears.

She was unmoved though, and merely acted as if she had not heard it.

Internet discussions and netizens' comments were beyond her control. Her conscience was clear as long as she did her best.

Skill and ability were the deciding factors in the competition, not snide comments and mockery.

Samantha lowered his eyes, looked at the paper in her hand, and opened it to see a big, black, bold number—1.

One of the staff came over to record her number and it was then shown on the big screen.

Jade laughed immediately. "Would you look at that? Try to act tough and disaster strikes in an instant. Even God can't stand her anymore and decided to give her number one."

Another contestant agreed, "It won't be long before we can enjoy her performance. I wonder if she can keep up her reputation as Mrs. Barker."

A different contestant added, "That's right. Wouldn't it be better to just stay at home and enjoy her life as a rich wife? She should've participated in those easygoing variety shows if she really wanted to show off. I don't know what she's thinking when she joined this kind of competition that relies on ability and could easily expose her shortcomings."

One other contestant then said, "She might have real talent, you know. Maybe she just wants to show everyone just how good she is."

Everyone laughed as soon as those words were spoken.

Real talent? Who could possibly believe that?

Harmony did not participate in their discussion. She opened the note in her hand and saw the number 15 in bold.

The staff came to record her number and it was then shown on the big screen.

The contestants' attention finally shifted to her. When they saw her number, all of them could not help but express their envy.

"How lucky! She's the chosen one!"

“She has the most preparation time because the fifteenth is the last one to present. I’m so jealous!”

“All else aside, Harmony really is a beautiful woman. I may be a girl, but even I feel moved when I see her. It’s so unlike that other person. I mean, that person is beautiful too, but she probably spent a lot of money to do plastic surgery over her entire face. That’s probably why she could marry into the Barkers.”

Samantha listened to all their mockery but was unaffected by them in the least! In fact, she even felt like laughing! However, their comment that she had undergone plastic surgery struck a nerve.

Her body was entirely natural. She had never undergone any plastic surgery!

How could she get the money for such procedures when she was so poor that she could not even afford to eat!

She glanced at the contestant who spoke and thought to herself, ‘Hehe, now that’s what you call a face that has gone under the knife. She probably has such a horrible view of everyone because she’s horrible herself.’

Harmony was not at all smug just because she got number 15. She even leaned over to Samantha and offered, “I can exchange my number with you if you’d like, Sammy.”

Samantha was slightly taken aback because she never expected Harmony to say such a thing.

She had not even gotten the chance to answer when the other contestants started muttering again.

“Goodness! Am I hearing things? Harmony wants to swap numbers with Samantha? That’ll mean she’ll be the first to present. Is she just pleasing Mrs. Barker or does she really have what it takes?”

“It doesn’t look like she’s trying to curry favor or anything. Maybe she really does have the ability and wants to help Samantha while she’s at it? She’s too kind!”

Samantha quickly snapped back to her senses and replied with a smile, “No thanks.”

Harmony did not insist either. “All the best.”

She turned to the other contestants, “I’m fine with any number. Do any of you want to change?”

The contestant who had number two hurriedly yelled out, “Me, me, me! Swap numbers with me, Harmony! I really can’t present it if I’m second in line!”

Harmony smiled softly, "Okay then. I'll change with you. I'll take number two and you can take my number fifteen."

"Thank you, thank you! You're so kind!"

Contestant number two rushed over and hugged Harmony. After exchanging their numbers, she smiled at Harmony and said, "I'm very optimistic about your chances, Harmony. You'll definitely get first place!"

"Thanks."

Everyone's numbers were finally displayed on the big screen.

Samantha was first, Harmony was second, and Jade was third...

All of them then watched the breaking news together.

The big screen went black for a moment before lighting up again to play the breaking news.

Everyone's eyes were fixed on the big screen to scrutinize the events within. Each element was extracted and a press release was prepared.

Everyone jotted down notes while they watched. Samantha was the only one who never even wrote down anything during the entire course of the video.

Three minutes later, the video came to an end and the screen became black again.

The contestants groaned for a moment. They felt like they had not even gotten the chance to see anything and it was already over.

A contestant asked, "Could you play it again, Mr. Schuck?"

Walter had an impartial look. "No. That's it."

After a pause, he looked at the watch in his hand and said, "Alright, you have five minutes from now. Contestant number one will be the first to present, followed by number two and so on. Anyone who can't present anything must step down. Time is of the essence!"

The countdown began at the conclusion of his sentence.

The contestants did not dare to complain and immediately seized every moment they had to organize their sentences and write down a news report.

Samantha replayed the breaking news she had just watched, identified all the salient points, then spent some time structuring her sentences for the press release.

Five minutes passed in the blink of an eye and Walter said again, "Five minutes are up! Can we have contestant number one, Samantha Larsson, to present her news report?"

Samantha closed her eyes and clenched her hand slightly. She then opened her eyes and got up to walk toward the stage.

The contestants all stopped what they were doing and watched her as she went up. Everyone was ready to enjoy the show.

Five minutes was not nearly enough time for them to extract the pertinent information, let alone present the news! Samantha was only going to embarrass herself if she went up!

Samantha sat on the news stage and faced the camera. Her hands were still clenched because she was nervous.

Walter said, "Go!"

Samantha opened her lips but did not say a single word.

Chapter 166: Proving Everyone Wrong with Her Ability

Upon seeing the situation, Jade was the first one to start heckling. "Get off the stage if you can't do it. Don't waste our time!"

When she yelled out loud, the other contestants who were eager to see her getting embarrassed shouted along as well, "Yeah! Can you do it? If you can't, you should just come down from there!"

Walter turned to Samantha and asked, "Can you do it, Samantha?"

Samantha looked at Walter and replied, "Yes!"

"Pfft. Still trying to keep forcing her way through it eh!" Jade sneered.

Samantha treated Jade's words as if it was nothing more than a breeze brushing past her. Her expression changed dramatically and an extremely serious look appeared on her face. She then opened her mouth and delivered her report in a thumping manner.

Following her report, the scene somehow turned quiet. Everyone's derisive smiles disappeared gradually, only to be replaced by surprise and disbelief...

“This concludes the breaking news. Thank you for watching.”

As Samantha said her closing statement, the entire room went silent a few seconds before erupting in raucous applause.

All three judges applauded her.

The contestants exchanged glances at each other because none of them expected Samantha to present the entire report smoothly. She had done a stellar job delivering all the key moments without any hiccups whatsoever.

When the embarrassment that Jade had been expecting from Samantha did not come to fruition, she gritted her teeth in anger and snorted coldly while having a disdainful look. “It’s nothing special.”

Samantha happened to hear Jade’s words after returning to her seat, so she curled her lips and turned her head abruptly to look at Jade.

Rather than being angry, Samantha smiled and said, “I look forward to hearing your extraordinary and out-of-this-world performance.”

Jade did not seem the least bit embarrassed and raised her chin arrogantly. How could someone like her, who had previously won awards as a newbie anchor, lose to a little-known newcomer like Samantha?

Walter then said, “Contestant number two, Harmony Johnson.”

Harmony stood up proudly and took graceful steps onstage. She sat down, faced the camera, and smiled faintly.

She opened her lips and greeted everyone first. “Hello everyone, hello judges. I’m Harmony Johnson, contestant number two. I will now begin to give my report on the breaking news...”

Her reporting was very firm and confident, just as everyone expected. She spoke clearly, smiled decently, and was able to capture the elements from the news with pinpoint accuracy. The vocabulary she used was very professional and she concisely delivered the news.

It was impossible to find any flaws in her report.

Everyone applauded heartily when her report ended.

Walter then said, “May I now invite contestant number three, Jade Plunkett, to come on stage please.”

Jade tossed her hair back and taunted Samantha when walking past. She then stepped onto the stage and sat down.

Once the camera was aimed at her, she straightened her posture and spoke with a smile.

Her news report was quite smooth, and apart from a few small pauses, there were little to no major problems. Unfortunately, the script she prepared was too long-winded and contained a lot of unnecessary information. She failed to accurately convey the main content of the news, which made those who listened confused as to what her priorities actually were.

As a result, the three judges' expressions seemed more disappointed than pleased.

After all, Jade was supposed to be the most promising contestant among the 15, but her performance turned out to be less than subpar.

Jade's face sank when she saw the judges' expressions. By the time she returned to her seat, her face was so strained that it looked as if the whole world had offended her.

The contestants were all competitive individuals, so naturally there were those who could not stand Jade. They remarked disdainfully, "She was mocking Samantha so enthusiastically earlier that I thought she really had talent! But she couldn't even compare to them in the end, and her performance even fell really short of them! Now that's funny!"

"Yeah! I wouldn't have been able to face anyone if I was in her shoes. Might as well dig a hole and bury yourself in it!"

Jade glared viciously at them when she heard their conversation.

Samantha curled her lips and was not at all surprised by the result. Knowing thyself and knowing thy enemy was the first step in achieving success. She had done ample research on the background information of all the contestants in advance.

The sole exception was Harmony, who did not have any professional expertise or work experience. Most of the others have already gained some relevant experience, and Jade was the one who stood out in particular.

Samantha had watched the news reports Jade presented over the past few years. She made an emphatic debut and had personally covered a particular news that made her stand out. That was the same news that she received an award for, but her inability to keep herself grounded amidst the fame probably caused her to think too highly of herself. As time went by, her performance gradually became more and more substandard compared to her debut. In addition, her desire to win was just too strong

and she began straying off the path because she was too preoccupied with being competitive.

Jade caught sight of Samantha's little smirk and felt that it was directed at her. Anger began coursing throughout her entire body and a fierce glow appeared in her eyes.

It was all Samantha's fault, according to Jade. She believed that she would have made sufficient preparations and eliminated those little mistakes if it were not for Samantha's cryptic taunts. With a new score to settle even before she could get even for the first one, Jade vowed to add that to the tally and get back at Samantha one day!

The contestants subsequently reported one after another on the stage. Some made mistakes due to nervousness, some had mediocre performances due to a lack of preparation, while some were just average.

The contestants were all done after an hour.

Walter walked up to them and said, "The first round is now over. The judges will now calculate your scores, and the results of whether or not you make it to the next round will be announced in half an hour. You may take a break and have a drink at the cafe in the station. I'll see you all in another half an hour!"

The contestants walked out of the room in small groups.

Jade was the first to approach Harmony. She held Harmony's arm as if she was Harmony's close friend and said with a smile, "I think you'll get first in this round, Harmony. Your performance was the best!"

The contestant who exchanged lots with Harmony earlier leaned in and nodded in agreement. "Your performance just now was just amazing, Harmony! I'm in awe! You don't sound like you're new to this at all, and I'm confident you'll get first place!"

The contestant from earlier who did not take too kindly to Jade deliberately said the opposite, "Harmony did well, but I prefer Samantha's style. She could identify the points that everyone else overlooked and her language was not too rigid either. I think Samantha would get first!"

"This is a news report, not a singing performance! How could anyone compare to Harmony's expertly chosen language?" Jade retorted loudly. Although she was speaking to the contestant, her gaze was staring right at Samantha. "I just hope she doesn't fall short of her over-the-top ambitions!"

Samantha could not care less about bickering with someone who took cheap shots, but with provocation after provocation, she did not want to portray herself as a pushover that anyone could step on.

She looked up and smiled as she stared Jade in the eye. "Would you like to make a bet then?"

Jade snickered and said confidently, "Sure! If you get the first place, I'll bark three times like a dog at Lychee TV's entrance. If you don't, then you're the one who has to start barking!"

Chapter 167: Learn How to Bark

Samantha's expression remained the same and she answered without hesitation, "So be it."

An oddly smug look appeared in Jade's eyes. She happened to hear the three judges heaping praise on Harmony when she was on her way out, hence her deliberate provocation toward Samantha. However, she did not expect Samantha to agree so rashly.

If Samantha wanted to be popular, Jade was going to make sure that Samantha had a chance to gain a little bit of publicity. Samantha would only be able to come to her senses that way!

Jade felt even more smug when she imagined Samantha barking at Lychee TV's entrance a little later. The unhappiness in her heart had all but disappeared.

Jade took Harmony's arm and said with a smile, "Come on, Harmony. I'll treat you to some coffee."

Harmony glanced at Samantha anxiously but was dragged away by Jade and the others before she had time to say anything.

Samantha's lips twitched and she walked toward the cafe on her own.

Elsie Joplin, the contestant who had locked horns with Jade earlier, could not resist approaching Samantha after seeing her calmness. Curious, Elsie asked, "Samantha, are you really that confident about getting first place? Your performance was good, but Harmony's was just as good too. Your chances are fifty-fifty at most. If you lose, I can assure you that Jade's the kind of person who'll make sure that you embarrass yourself in public!"

Samantha glanced at her and said, "Thank you for letting me know."

She did not say anything else after that.

Elsie did not ask any further after realizing that she would not be able to get anything else from Samantha. However, she continued frankly and said, "I hope you win though. I'm dying to see that arrogant woman barking like a dog!"

Samantha did not continue the conversation because she did not like gossiping about someone behind their backs. Aside from that, she and Elsie were not that close with each other and did not have the kind of friendship that would allow them to chat freely.

She merely smiled without saying another word.

The contestants headed for the cafe and Samantha chose to sit at a random corner.

Harmony was sitting at another table with Jade and a few other people.

There was a sudden bustle of activity at the cafe entrance that drew everyone's attention. Someone important seemed to have arrived.

Everyone looked at that person as he walked straight toward Samantha.

Samantha did not notice it because she was scrolling through her phone, and it was not until she heard footsteps near her table that she finally looked up.

Standing before her was a man who was about 50 or 60 years of age. He had a chubby figure and an obvious beer belly, but he had an air of leadership to him.

Samantha had no idea who that man was.

He spoke first and asked, "You're Samantha Larsson, aren't you?"

Samantha nodded gently. "Yes, I am. And you are?"

"I'm the general manager of this TV station," the man introduced himself concisely.

The general manager of Lychee TV was the highest in the hierarchy.

Samantha was surprised at first, but she immediately stood up and greeted him. "Hello, Sir."

The general manager nodded. "Hello."

Samantha pursed her lips lightly and asked. "Is there a reason you're looking for me?"

"Could you come out for a moment please?"

Go out?

Was there an issue with the competition?

Seeing that the general manager had already turned around and walked out, Samantha felt it inappropriate to ask any further and could only follow behind the man.

She followed him out of the cafe and they took the elevator upstairs to his office.

The general manager walked to the sofa, sat down, then invited her to have a seat.
“Please, sit.”

Samantha sat down cautiously and finally asked, “If I may, can I ask what’s the matter? Does it have something to do with the competition?”

The general manager smiled at her question. “Don’t be nervous. I saw how well you did in the first round and I just wanted to meet you.”

Samantha’s anxiousness finally calmed down at last.

She thought that something serious had happened based on the way the man was carrying himself earlier.

The general manager continued, “There hasn’t been any fresh blood in the station for a long time now, and the current batch of contestants aren’t too bad. You, in particular, stood out to me even though you’re a newcomer. You’ve never undergone any professional training or have any work experience, right?”

It was natural for the general manager to have read through her background.

Samantha nodded and said truthfully, “I don’t have any of that, but when I was abroad, I did a lot of part-time jobs. Most of them were temporary assignments because they needed someone to report breaking news. I guess that’s sort of a kind of training too.”

“I see.” The general manager smiled with satisfaction. “I have high hopes for you, Samantha. Please do your best.”

“Thank you, Sir.”

...

Samantha took the elevator downstairs just as it was time for the results to be announced. A group of contestants also walked out of the cafe and walked toward the newsroom.

She happened to run into Jade on her way there, but Jade no longer gave her any contemptuous looks. Rather, she cocked her eyebrow and spoke as she was about to

be proven right anytime soon. "Remember not to go back on your word if you lose later. It's going to be unpleasant if everyone knows how much of a sore loser Mrs. Barker is!"

Samantha looked directly at Jade and spoke with an emphasis on each word, "You can say the same to yourself. Don't be a sore loser too!"

She then continued to walk forward and did not even bother to look at her again.

Jade gritted her teeth with anger and her eyes were slightly fierce. She wanted to thoroughly embarrass Samantha, so after a brief thought, she took out her cell phone and created a group on WeTalk. There, she added in a few of her close reporter friends and sent a message: [Mrs. Barker is going to learn how to bark at the entrance of Lychee TV. Come on over if you want to be the first to get the news!]

No one would care if 'Samantha' barked like a dog, but if it was 'Mrs. Barker' doing it, the news would make headlines in the gossip section and rake in millions of views!

Everyone returned to the newsroom.

Once Walter made sure that everyone was there, he said, "After a heated discussion between the three judges, the results of the first round have been released. Seven out of fifteen will make it through, so it is with great regret that the journey for eight contestants will end here. I will announce the list of people who have successfully passed this round."

"Harmony Johnson, Elsie Joplin, Jade Plunkett..." Another three names were mentioned after that.

Having reached the sixth name, there was only one final spot left for advancement.

Jade could no longer contain her laughter. Samantha had boasted so confidently about being first, but it looked as though she had no chance of even making it through!

She sneered mockingly at Samantha, "So what if you're Mrs. Barker? Everybody's on the same level when it comes to proving yourself with what you've got."

As soon as she made that remark, Walter finally said, "...and Samantha Larsson! Let's all congratulate these seven contestants!"

Everyone applauded.

The smile on Jade's face suddenly stiffened, but she curled her lips coldly and said, "Don't expect to get first place when you're the last to make it through!"

After the applause, Walter took out another list and said loudly, "Alright! Next up, I'm going to announce the rankings for those who have successfully made it through. In first place, we have..."

Chapter 168: Any Further Objections?

Everyone turned subconsciously to Harmony, who smiled as if she was preparing to accept her first-place results.

After a brief pause, Walter announced, "...Samantha Larsson!"

Silence ensued, followed by an uproar! Samantha performed well, but in terms of vocabulary, aura, and professionalism, Harmony was certainly much better than her. How could Samantha possibly surpass Harmony?

Jade was the first to object. She asked loudly, "Mr. Schuck, why is Samantha in first place? Harmony's flawless performance was obviously much better. I disagree with the result."

She then turned to the contestants whom she was friendly with and asked, "What do you think?"

They echoed in agreement. "She's right, Mr. Schuck. This competition is supposed to be fair, isn't it? We've all watched Harmony and Samantha's reporting, and Harmony is undoubtedly much better! Could this be some sort of bias due to Samantha's status?"

Those words immediately caused Walter's expression to sour.

No one who was in charge of a competition would ever want to be implicitly accused of unfair treatment. He shot Jade—the instigator—a cold look and shot back, "The results of this competition are entirely fair and just. Since there are some who doubt this, I'll reveal Samantha's score alongside Harmony's."

He handed their transcripts to the staff, who then projected them onto the screen.

Only one point separated Harmony from Samantha.

They both obtained full marks in their script, fluency, and various other criteria. The only difference between them was in their errors: Samantha made zero mistakes while Harmony made one.

That was why Harmony trailed Samantha by one point and only managed to get second place.

Everyone exchanged glances with each other and Harmony even frowned slightly, as if she was trying to remember where exactly she made a mistake.

Jade thought about it for a moment and could not figure out where Harmony went wrong. Everyone would have picked up on her mistake if there really was one, so that 'mistake' had to be an excuse. She asserted herself and asked, "Then I'd like to ask what was Harmony's mistake."

If he could not point out a convincing enough reason, she could still bring about a change in the competition results and let Harmony get first place!

Walter knew that she would ask that and was in no hurry to explain. "Samantha and Harmony both performed well, but the crucial components of a news broadcast are truthfulness and accuracy. Mistakes must not happen. One of the terms Harmony used was not very appropriate, and Samantha made no mistakes with that. She fully deserves first place!"

As he said that, Harmony's mistakes were displayed on the big screen for all to see.

None of the contestants could think of any reason to refute once they saw the term that Harmony used.

It had completely slipped everyone's attention because the word used was very unassuming. However, if the context of the usage was taken into account, the term did seem quite inappropriate indeed.

Samantha was not surprised by it at all. She had been paying close attention to everyone's reporting and was therefore able to notice Harmony's mistake.

Harmony had done a spectacular job and would have been able to get first place but for the mistake.

In a situation where there was nothing to separate the two of them in terms of their ability, the only deciding factor would be their respective mistakes. The three judges were all eminent individuals in the industry, so it was only natural that they could spot those errors.

That was why Samantha accepted Jade's bet—she was confident that Jade would lose!

Walter looked at the crowd and spoke rather sternly again, "Does anyone have any further objections?"

Even though Jade could not accept it, there was nothing else she could do to refute him, and everyone had fallen silent too.

“Alright. The first round’s ranking is as follows... First place: Samantha Larsson. Second place: Harmony Johnson...”

After reading through the names, he said, “That concludes today’s round. The results will be published on Waybo and you may all go home to prepare for the second round. I hope to see even better scores from all of you for round two!”

...

As soon as Samantha stepped out of Lychee TV’s entrance, a group of people surrounded her suddenly. She stopped walking and frowned.

Did something else happen?

Chapter 169: Insinuation

As soon as Samantha saw camera lenses and microphones pointed at her, she realized they were reporters and immediately raised her eyebrows slightly.

Could those reporters have been notified by Lychee TV to come over and interview the person who got first place in the first round of the competition?

That thought had just appeared in her mind when a reporter snapped pictures of her while asking, “Mrs. Barker, I heard that you lost a bet with one of the contestants. Are you now going to bark here at the entrance to Lychee TV station?”

Samantha’s lips twitched.

That turned out to be the reason...

Jade had notified those reporters in advance to come over. Their purpose was to get some pictures of her embarrassing antics and put them on the news.

She raised her eyes, looked at the reporter, then smiled and nodded. “There will be barking alright!”

The reporters’ eyes all lit up as soon as she said those words.

Samantha paused for a few seconds before slowly saying, “But I won’t be the one doing the barking. It’s Jade!”

The reporters were dumbfounded and started wondering what was going on.

Samantha saw, from the corner of her eye, that Jade had put on some sunglasses and was planning on slipping away quietly. She looked at her directly and raised her voice slightly, "Hello there, Ms. Plunkett! Time to honor the bet, don't you think?"

Everyone looked at Jade as her body stiffened all of a sudden.

Those contestants who had been friendly with her silently kept their distance for fear of embarrassing themselves.

Elsie enjoyed seeing such public spectacles, more so when Jade was about to look like a fool. Fearing that Jade would run away, Elsie immediately stepped forward and stood in front of her, mocking her loudly, "What's the matter, Jade? Are you going back on your bet just because you lost? I wonder who it was that made such a big hoo-ha about being a sore loser earlier? Are you a sore loser right now?"

Jade's eyes reddened and she gritted her teeth while staring at Elsie. Unfortunately, she had made the bet publicly in front of her fellow contestants, and there was no way for her to deny its existence nor refute her words!

The reporters have been waiting at the entrance for a while now and there were increasingly more people watching. Even if Jade did not want to lose her dignity that way, she knew in her heart that petty people like Samantha and Elsie would never let it go. The more she put off doing it, the more onlookers would start to gather, and it might even alarm the higher-ups in the station! Should that happen, they would not have a good impression of her anymore and she would end up getting more embarrassed!

Jade clenched her hands tightly as she spat out her words from between her teeth. "Who said I'm a sore loser? I always honor my bets!"

She closed her eyes, opened her mouth, then raised her head and let out three soft barks, "Woof, woof, woof!"

With that done, she glared at Samantha resentfully and asked coldly, "That should do it, right?"

Samantha did not respond as the taxi she called had just arrived. She walked to the side of the car, bent down slightly, then got in.

Elsie had already used her cell phone to take a video of Jade's barking. She smiled gleefully and said, "I didn't expect you to sound just like a real dog when you barked. You have quite the talent for acting! Why don't you consider changing careers and going into the entertainment industry? The next award-winning actress might be you!"

"You!" Jade reddened in anger. Had it not been for the people watching her, she would have come forward and ripped Elsie's mouth apart!

The reporters did not look too happy and were staring angrily at Jade. One of them said bluntly, "Well isn't this a waste of our time? I turned away a headline-grabbing photoshoot just for this charade of yours. Don't call me again for this sort of 'news' next time!"

The reporters each got into the car and left.

The other contestants left one by one, along with the onlookers. Jade was the only one who stood frozen on the spot. Her face turned ashen, and the more she thought about it, the angrier and more aggrieved she became. Her eyes turned red too.

Jade had never been humiliated like that ever since she became popular! No one had ever done that to her!

A tissue was then handed to her, followed by a soft voice. "Are you okay?"

Jade looked up tearfully at the woman in front of her.

There was a distressed and apologetic look in Harmony's big beautiful eyes. She helped Jade to wipe away those tears before Jade even took the tissue. Harmony then said, "I'm sorry that you were humiliated because of me."

Everyone felt ashamed of Jade and did not want to approach her at all, so it was a huge surprise that Harmony would come to comfort her.

She did not view Harmony kindly in the beginning because she viewed Harmony as a threat to her. After all, Harmony was an attractive, capable, and charismatic woman. It never crossed Jade's mind that Harmony would be such a good person.

The entire incident had nothing to do with Harmony, yet Harmony was kind enough to come forth and apologize to her.

Jade said anxiously, "Why are you apologizing to me? Samantha's the one who's at fault here. We're all fellow contestants, but she went through with embarrassing me in public! I'm telling you she won't stop at that!"

Harmony lamented softly, "I think we should just be the best version of ourselves, Jade. There's no need to go against Samantha. You know that her status is a bit special compared to us and the one who'll have to suffer in the end is you. Just do your best. It doesn't matter what the result is as long as you've given it your all and have a clear conscience."

Jade listened to those words and felt that something was not quite right. She frowned and distanced herself a little before a glow flashed across her eyes. "Are you saying that Samantha really did rely on her identity as Mrs. Barker to influence the score?"

There was a fleeting expression of panic in Harmony's eyes and she denied it at once. "That's not what I meant at all. What I'm trying to say is that we should all get along with each other and just focus on competing."

Jade wanted to say something but Harmony's car had already arrived. She spoke first and said, "Alright, don't get so hung up on it. I'm leaving now. See you next time."

The car drove off quickly after she got in.

Jade stood in the same place and watched as the car disappeared from sight. Her eyes narrowed little by little and she seemed to be in deep thought.

...

That night.

Samantha came out of the shower and sat in front of the dressing table. As she wiped her hair dry, she went through her unread messages on WeTalk.

Rochelle was one of the first to congratulate her on winning first place in the first round. She even gave her 5,200 bucks as a reward.

Best friends were forever!

There were also other congratulatory messages from her other friends.

Lychee TV's official account seemed to have announced the results of the first round on Waybo, which was why everyone knew about it.

Unfortunately, she did not see any messages from Timothy...

Samantha suppressed the little bit of disappointment in her heart. She moved her finger and clicked on Waybo where she saw more than 999 unread messages in her private message area.

At the same time, she has gained nearly one million fans already.

Did everyone send her their congratulations? Did her popularity soar just because she won the first round?

Samantha clicked on a random private message and her eyes widened when she saw the message.

Chapter 170: Requesting Her to Withdraw

That netizen was scolding Samantha rather than praising her.

She was berated for contempt of the competition's rules, for winning first place using the identity of Mrs. Barker, and for deliberately insulting her fellow contestants. Due to her allegedly bad character, she was asked to offer her apologies by withdrawing from the competition!

Samantha's mind went completely blank.

She clicked on another private message and saw the same situation. All of them were cursing at her and their words became even harsher.

As strong as her heart was, it was still disheartening to read insulting messages from so many people. She chose to turn off the private messages and kept them out of her sight.

However, she still had to figure out why she was scolded all of a sudden.

She won the first round that day by relying on sheer ability and would never tolerate those unreasonable allegations.

After all, public image was of paramount importance for her future as an anchor. The public would never accept a news anchor who was problematic.

Samantha did not even need to search for her news on Waybo. The moment she clicked into the trending searches, her name was already third on the list and was still gaining traction.

She clicked into it and duly tried figuring out what was going on.

The situation basically centered around the first round's results that Lychee TV's official account released an hour ago. She was announced as first.

Many netizens did not think she was actually capable of getting first place in the first round, and so the heated discussions sprung from their doubts. As the discussions were in full swing, another official account uploaded a post.

According to the post, there has been some shady goings-on in the competition and Samantha's first place result had been decided in advance. Her abilities were said to be slightly less compared to another contestant, but due to Samantha's unusual relationship with a certain senior figure in Lychee TV as well as her strong backing, the deserving contestant lost the first place and could only get second.

Jade, who questioned the first place result that Samantha got, ended up deliberately and publicly humiliated by Samantha. She was forced to bark in front of everyone at the entrance to Lychee TV's building.

There were also two videos on Waybo: one showed a certain senior figure—whose face was blurred with mosaic—going into the TV station's cafe to look for Samantha. It showed Samantha going into the office with him and they spent some time in there before they came out again.

Another video showed Jade being forced to bark at the entrance to the building.

Immediately afterward, a so-called insider appeared and commented: [I was drinking coffee at the cafe in Lychee TV and I did see the senior figure coming up to Samantha. I don't know what they said, but the two of them then went upstairs. The competition results came soon after and Samantha was in first place]

Another 'insider' commented: [I saw it too. They did it out in the open without bothering to avoid suspicion, as if they were afraid that no one would know about her strong background.]

Public opinion changed direction, shifting from discussions about Samantha's ability to her overbearing heavy-handedness as well as other topics relating to the unethical behavior.

Netizens were filled with indignation.

One of them commented: [I truly despise the kind of people who use power for personal gain. I used to sympathize with Samantha for having parents like that, but it seems apples never fall far from the tree. They're all the same. Don't let her become a news anchor or else she'll be a bad role model!]

The second one said: [Am I the only one who sympathizes with the contestant who had the ability but was forcibly relegated to second place? Her name is Harmony Johnson if I'm not mistaken. At the time when the official announcement was made, I thought she was the most beautiful contestant. She doesn't have that strong a backer, right? It's such a pity.]

A third commented: [Man I'm just upset, you know. Tell me, what use is there for us ordinary people to put in so much effort to study or learn? If an ordinary person participates in a competition that's open to all and has to put up with that kind of shady business, it just goes to show that we ordinary people will never be able to compare to those powerful people.]

The fourth comment was: [Rich people like Samantha can just rely on her husband without having to worry about food and clothing for as long as she lived. Why does she have to compete with ordinary people to make a living? It's just shameless. I firmly disagree with such people appearing in public. I want her to withdraw!]

The more Samantha read, the tighter her frown became.

It turned out to be the worst out of all possible scenarios...

Once her integrity was viewed to be problematic, people might not acknowledge it even if she had already cleared her name. That would all but ensure that she would never become a news anchor in the future.

Public boycott was truly terrifying.

She would never be able to realize her dream anymore.

Samantha's fingers paled slightly as she held the phone.

She could figure out who did it without having to rack her brains. It was a very ruthless move by Jade because that one act alone was enough to destroy Samantha.

Although Samantha could clear the air about the barking and release the entire competition sequence to clarify the results, the trickiest problem was dealing with the video of her and the general manager.

After all, there was no denying that the general manager looked for her and they went to his office together. Although the general manager only expressed his admiration of her and said some words of encouragement, there was no other person at the scene. Even if she came forward to explain or pleaded with the general manager to explain, it might still be difficult for everyone to believe her.

She had no way to prove her innocence if there was even the slightest unconvincing element.

Perhaps Lychee TV would pressure her to withdraw.

Samantha bit her lower lip as her mind scrambled to think of a solution. Her character was not one to give up, even when there was only a tiny glimmer of hope.

All of a sudden, a pair of long arms wrapped around her from behind, pulling her entire body into a familiar embrace. Startled, she turned around and saw Timothy's handsome face.

"When did you come back?" Samantha's voice was slightly hoarse.

"Two minutes ago. I already walked into the room but you didn't see me because you were so engrossed."

The man rested his chin on Samantha's shoulder while staring into the phone screen. He opened his lips slightly and said, "Stop looking at all that."

As he said that, he took the phone from her hand and threw it aside, saying lazily, "Isn't it better to look at me rather than all that stuff?"

After a pause of about half a second, he added, "At least I'm more pleasing to the eyes."

Samantha had to admit that her bad mood had lifted slightly after being amused by his 'confidence'. She turned around in his embrace, hugged him back, and rubbed her head against his chest a few times as if trying to comfort herself. She did not need to disguise it in front of him, and she muttered, "I really got first-place fair and square."

Timothy's big palm stroked her back gently and his voice was very soft. "That's for sure."

Samantha could not help but look up. Her black pupils stared at him and she asked, "But you didn't watch the competition, Timothy. Are you so sure that there isn't anything shady going on?"

"What if I really used my status as Mrs. Barker to get leverage?"

A smirk appeared on Timothy's lips as if he had just heard a joke. "If you really want to be unethical, you'd come to me. That 'senior figure' won't get a chance at all."

Timothy's long fingers lifted her delicate chin and his black eyes narrowed slightly. "Am I right?"

Chapter 171: Did She Misunderstand Her?

Although that question seemed rather plain, Samantha could tell that Timothy would deal with her if she so much as answered no.

He appeared to be somewhat jealous of that 'senior figure'.

A hint of sweetness appeared in Samantha's heart and she nodded vigorously as she modeled her answer after his firm character, "Yes. You're absolutely right!"

"How blind would I be if I didn't approach a handsome guy like you!"

Timothy was quite satisfied with her over-the-top praise of him and squeezed the tip of her nose affectionately with her fingertips.

Samantha thought for a while and decided to explain, "The general manager was looking for me because he felt that I had potential after seeing me in the competition. All he did was give me some encouragement, but his actions ended up being taken the wrong way."

“Is that so?” The man’s voice and expression were rather insipid, as if he was thinking about something.

Samantha nestled in Timothy’s arms for some time and felt her despondency healing little by little until her mood finally eased.

After all, she was someone who had experienced countless tribulations and her mental fortitude would not collapse that easily.

There would always be a solution to a difficulty. She just had to counter everything that was thrown at her.

She sat up from Timothy’s arms and said, “I’m a little thirsty. I’ll go down and get a glass of water.”

“I’ll go.” Timothy got up immediately and walked out.

Samantha curled her lips, got out of bed, then walked into the bathroom and turned on the faucet. She cupped some water in her hands and washed her face.

A few thoughts flashed in her mind all of a sudden.

When she walked out of the bathroom, Timothy had already returned with the glass of water, which he placed on the coffee table. In the meantime, he stood by the bed and spoke on the phone.

She trod lightly, picked up the water glass, and drank slowly.

The man’s voice was low and he spoke in a very succinct manner “Have the Barker Group’s legal team sue the accounts I just read to you.”

Samantha listened to the IDs he read out and felt that they were rather familiar. They seemed to be the netizens who had slandered her most enthusiastically in Waybo.

To be precise, they were cybertroopers rather than normal netizens.

An idea had actually popped up in her mind when she was washing her face. She wanted to send a legal notice to the account as a notice for them to stop spreading rumors. As long as the account deleted their posts and clarified everything else, the damage could be minimized. Timothy had the same thought as her, but his ruthlessness was a step above hers—he immediately sent his legal team to have some coffee with the owners of those accounts.

The Barker Group’s legal team was relentless whenever they sprang into action.

She had always relied on herself whenever she encountered any difficulty before, but there was finally someone who would rush to her and protect her.

Timothy finally became the man who would shelter her from harm's way.

There were ripples of emotion in Samantha's heart.

Timothy hung up after he was done giving out instructions. As soon as he turned around, he saw Samantha staring at him blankly, and so walked up to her and lowered her gaze at her. "Why are you looking at me like this?"

Samantha raised her head to reveal a brilliant sparkle in her black eyes. She then said with a beaming smile, "You know those TV series? You really look like a domineering CEO guarding his little wife!"

"Oh?" The man cocked his eyebrows slightly and responded with intrigue. "Then what else would the domineering CEO in those TV series do when they encounter such a situation?"

Samantha did not think much of Timothy's surprising curiosity. She blurted out immediately, "The domineering CEOs will usually hold the female lead and comfort her at a time like this!"

As soon as she said that, Timothy's long arms had already wrapped around her slender waist and pulled her close to him. Their bodies were very close to each other and he lowered his head. With his breaths spreading all over her face, he lowered his voice and asked, "Like this?"

Samantha finally had a sudden moment of realization. Timothy was never curious in the first place; he clearly wanted to feel her up!

She glared at him.

Timothy pretended not to see it. He leaned his lips toward her ears and murmured in a muffled voice, "What comes after the hug?"

Samantha answered angrily, "Nothing!"

"Liar."

Timothy opened his mouth and bit her ear lightly, sending sparks all over Samantha's body and turning her ears red.

"Since you're not telling me anything, I can only...learn by trial and error."

"Tim— Mmghhhg"

Samantha's lips were blocked by the man's kiss before she could call out his name. It was light at first, then became more passionate as she succumbed under his control.

She eventually closed her eyes and hugged him back.

All her troubles seemed to have disappeared and it was as if they were the only people left in the world.

After some time, Timothy lifted Samantha up in a bridal carry and placed her on the big bed...

...

The next day, Samantha's back was sore when she got up.

Timothy was no longer in the bed. She stared angrily at the side where he slept and felt like giving him a couple of kicks after recalling his unbridled acts the previous night.

The blame fell on her though. She just had to mention the domineering CEO she saw on television for no good reason. It sparked his superiority complex and he insisted on comparing himself against that domineering CEO.

She was the one who ended up having it rough.

Samantha went to the bathroom and took a hot bath in the tub. As she soaked herself in the water, she picked up her tab and prepared to check the situation on Waybo again.

To her surprise, she saw the sudden change in direction of public opinion as soon as she logged on to Waybo!

She found it to be a little unexpected, so she held her tab firmly and swiped her finger to scroll down and understand the situation.

The Barker Group's lawyers had, over the past night, uncovered the true identities of the several cybertroopers and immediately proceeded legal action against them.

Early that morning, the cybertroopers immediately conceded and deleted the previous defamatory comments from Waybo. They declared themselves to be cybertroopers who did everything in exchange for money.

In order to prove her innocence, the official account of Lychee TV posted a video of the entire first round. They urged all netizens not to believe in lies and asserted that their competition was absolutely fair because the contestants relied on their own abilities.

Walter, the person in charge of the competition, reposted it with the caption: [Everyone is invited to watch the video.]

That was a means of showing his integrity and expressing his clear conscience.

Samantha had, since last night, guessed that such a thing would happen. None of that surprised her, but what came as a shock was a post from Harmony.

[Samantha really is capable and I hope everyone ignores the rumors. The competition is still ongoing and we'll all do our best!]

Although it was just a few words that basically admitted she only got second place, the netizens who sided with her due to the perceived injustice were resoundingly rebutted.

Harmony's post vindicated Samantha but was detrimental for herself. Being the smart woman that she was, it was impossible for her not to understand it.

Samantha clicked into Harmony's Waybo and saw scolding everywhere. They asked her if she had changed her tune because she was paid to do so, accused her of bowing down to someone more powerful, and said that she was a weakling who did not know how to fight for herself. Some said that they wanted to be her fan but decided not to after what happened.

After reading all that, Samantha could not help but purse her lips as a convoluted look appeared in her eyes.

If Samantha was to be honest, she was somewhat wary of Harmony after having doubts about the latter in the past.. Samantha then began to wonder if she had misunderstood Harmony.