

CHAPTER 11

Find The Killer

It was only then that Henrick remembered Shandie was still on the floor, twitching non-stop.

He ordered the housekeepers to carry Shandie downstairs while he prepared to take Arielle along to the hospital.

“Dear! Please take me with you!” Cindy pleaded, tears flowing uncontrollably. “Shannie is my... She’s one that I watched growing up. I can’t possibly stay at home!”

Despite how pitiful and terrified Cindy looked, Henrick steeled his heart against her. “No! I want you to reflect on yourself! Can someone take Mrs. Southall back to her room? No one is to let her out without my orders!”

One of the housekeepers immediately nodded and dragged a crying Cindy away while Arielle accompanied Henrick into the ambulance.

“Dad, why don’t we let Aunt Cindy come along? I can see how close she is to Shandie. Leaving her at home will only worry her sick,” Arielle softly pleaded.

Alas, Henrick refused to yield.

He turned his gaze toward Arielle and sighed deeply. “You silly child. Life overseas must have been tough, hasn’t it?”

“Not at all. Life was good,” Arielle replied and meant every word of it.

She had had a wonderful life abroad, and it couldn’t have been any better.

However, Henrick thought his daughter was merely putting on a brave front and sighed again. “You’re too naive. How will you survive here in Jadeborough? I’ll have to slowly teach you the ways so you won’t feel out of place.”

“Thank you, Dad!”

“We’re family. You don’t have to thank me...”

Before long, the ambulance had arrived at the hospital.

Shandie was immediately wheeled into the emergency room because her heart had stopped beating.

Worried and anxious, Henrick and Arielle paced outside the emergency room as they waited.

Of course, Henrick was the more worried of the two. Both Arielle and Shandie were his biological daughters and were crucial to the future of his career. Now that something had happened to Shandie, Henrick was naturally scared to death.

After what felt like an eternity, the emergency room doors finally opened.

As soon as the doctor walked out, Henrick hurriedly went up to him. “Doctor, how’s my daughter?”

"The patient may be out of danger but will still need to be monitored for a few more days. This snake venom is especially deadly. If you hadn't sent her here in time, no one would have been able to save her! But, I have to ask, how did she get bitten? This snake shouldn't have appeared in Jadeborough."

Henrick frowned in confusion as he asked, "What do you mean by that? We live in a manor on top of the hill. It's common for snakes to crawl in, isn't it?"

The doctor shook his head gravely. "This snake species belongs in the South, so you won't be able to find any in the wild here. It had to have come from there. I think this is something you might want to look into."

Henrick's face fell, finally understanding what the doctor meant. "Are you saying that this could have been an intentional hit?"

"That's very possible."

Henrick clenched his fists so hard that his fingernails bit into his palms. "Who? Who the hell wants to harm my daughter?"

His gaze instinctively fell on Arielle as a glint of suspicion flashed across his face.

Arielle didn't seem to have noticed her father's doubts and fumed with anger. "How dare they! Whoever brought the snake into our manor is pure evil! Dad, you have to get to the bottom of this. We can't let them get away with murder!"

Hearing those words from Arielle cleared whatever suspicion Henrick had of her.

He was sure that a girl who had only just arrived in Jadeborough couldn't have carried out such a plan. Besides, if Arielle had ulterior motives, she wouldn't have risked her life to fight the snake. I shouldn't have suspected her!

"Let's go home first, Arielle. I have to investigate this properly and find out who the culprit is!"

"You're right, Dad, we have to investigate it thoroughly! The snake bit Shandie today, but what if it bit you tomorrow? Please get it checked out as soon as possible and bring the perpetrator to justice!" Arielle said with a stern voice.

Henrick couldn't agree more. Once I find out who brought the snake in, I'm not going to let them off easy!

After ordering a couple of housekeepers to stay and look after Shandie, Henrick and Arielle left the hospital for the manor, ready to get to the bottom of the matter.

Back at the manor, Cindy was busy checking her phone while being confined to her room. As soon as she got the message that Shandie was safe and sound, she heaved a sigh of relief.

However, that relief didn't last long. After being told that the release of the snake had been an attempt on Shandie's life, Cindy seethed with rage.

Just then, one of the housekeepers whispered outside the room, "Mrs. Southall, Mr. Southall is home!"

Cindy had had enough of being confined to her room. She desperately wanted to get out, but Henrick had locked the door and kept the key.

After pacing about in the room, she decided to throw caution to the wind and broke the door lock with an ornamental stone.

Henrick and Arielle had only just stepped into the house when they saw Cindy running down the stairs.

“Dear! It must be Arielle! That b*tch wants to get rid of Shannie, so she brought a snake back from the South! She’s the only one who had come from there. It has to be her! We have to seek justice for Shannie!”

Arielle backed away with a pained expression on her face. “Aunt Cindy, because of your suspicions toward me, I had to risk my life to prove my innocence. I did all that to save Shandie, and yet, you still accuse me? Now you’re even claiming that I brought the snake back?”

Cindy pointed angrily at Arielle and continued shouting, “It has to be you! I know it is! Stop pretending to be pitiful! Henrick, please, lock her up and begin the interrogation!”

“Enough!” Henrick bellowed. “You’ve already accused her once, can’t you stop? I will get to the bottom of this and give you an answer! Now, get the hell back into your room and stay there! Can someone take her back to her room? And this time, make sure she doesn’t escape again!”

Once again, the housekeepers nodded and forcefully led Cindy away.

“Dear, you have to trust me! You have to investigate thoroughly...”

As Arielle watched Cindy get dragged away, kicking and screaming, she was even more sure that Cindy had nothing to do with the cobra incident.

After all, if Cindy had a part in this nefarious plan, she wouldn’t have implored Henrick to investigate thoroughly.

Perfect. Shandie’s going to have to pay for her stupidity and viciousness!

Arielle turned to Henrick and said solemnly, “Dad, I noticed there are many surveillance cameras here, so you should check out the footage. You should also send people to places where snakes can be bought and ask if any seller has sold any recently.”

Henrick listened intently and nodded in agreement. “Alfred, I want you to get started on it immediately. Also, I need you to check all the rooms in the manor, make sure there aren’t any more snakes.”

Even though it was in the wee hours of the night, Henrick was raring to go. After the cobra scare, his priority was to make sure there wouldn’t be any other surprises.

After a while, the housekeeper in charge of the surveillance cameras came running back with his report. “Mr. Southall, we’ve checked the footage. Last night at around eleven, the only person who had left the manor was Ms. Shandie’s nanny, Janet.”

“Janet?” Henrick’s eyes narrowed quizzically. “Bring her here immediately to be questioned!”

CHAPTER 12

You Reap What You Sow

Soon, Janet had been brought over to Henrick forcefully.

As soon as she saw Henrick, Janet started shouting in panic, "Mr. Southall, I'm innocent! I went out only because my useless son got into trouble again! I have nothing to do with the cobra incident! Please, I've always been loyal to the Southalls!"

Janet's pleas fell on deaf ears as Henrick ordered for her to be tied up.

Without any hesitation, the housekeepers did as instructed.

Still ignoring Janet's cries, Henrick walked around the hall and found a leather belt left behind by a guest.

"Whip her!" he ordered as he handed the belt to the housekeeper.

Despite his initial hesitation, the housekeeper eventually carried out Henrick's orders.

Snap! With just one whip, Janet's skin instantly split open. The pain was so unbearable she started screaming and writhing on the floor.

Arielle watched silently by the side, her gaze cold and unfeeling.

It looks like the person who had snuck onto my balcony to release the snake is this old hag.

Arielle was furious and felt no pity toward Janet. It's only fair that she pays the price for this.

After ten lashings, Janet was drenched in a cold sweat, unable to make a sound anymore.

Despite the pain she was in, she still refused to tell the truth. She'd be charged with murder if she did, and she couldn't let that happen.

The housekeeper who had been whipping Janet couldn't tolerate any more and spoke up. "Mr. Southall, we can't hit her anymore. At her age, if we keep this up, she's not going to be able to take it."

Henrick understood the concern, and likewise, he didn't want any mishaps before he got to the bottom of the matter.

Before he could give the order to stop hitting Janet, another housekeeper returned from his investigation.

"Mr. Southall, I've asked around the markets in the southern district. One of the sellers said he sold someone a venomous snake at midnight."

Janet froze when she heard that, and the subtle change in her demeanor didn't go unnoticed by the eagle-eyed Arielle. "Was it Janet who bought the snake?" Arielle asked.

The housekeeper shook his head. "I didn't ask, but I did bring the seller here. He'd also be able to confirm if the snake did come from him."

"Very good," Henrick replied. "Bring the man in!"

Soon, the snake seller walked in cautiously and greeted Henrick.

After getting someone to bring the severed snake over, Henrick asked, "Is this the snake you sold?"

It only took one glance before the seller nodded. "Yes, sir, this is the one. Some of the scales on its tail had come off during the transaction. That's why I recognized it immediately."

Henrick scoffed and walked over to Janet, who hadn't dared to look up since the mention of the snake seller. He brought her to the seller and once again asked, "Did this old lady buy the snake from you?"

The snake seller had no idea what was going on, only that he shouldn't lie to a man like Henrick. He took one good look at Janet and nodded. "Yes, that's her. She said she wanted to try making some exotic snake wine, so I recommended her the most venomous snake I have."

With a witness and evidence, the truth was finally out.

Henrick pushed Janet away angrily and asked coldly, "So? What do you have to say for yourself now?"

Janet sat on the floor shaking like a leaf. And yet, she remained silent.

"Janet, look what this has come to," Arielle chimed in. "It's time to come clean about everything. Before the police get here, tell us why you want to harm Shandie! You watched her grow up, and yet you want to see her dead? Don't you think that's too cruel of you?"

"No, I didn't. Why would I want to harm Ms. Shandie? She's like a daughter to me!"

"Then who exactly did you want to harm? Is it my father?" Arielle continued. "Did someone else put you up to this to frame me? Or are you going to say I was the one who got you to buy the snake?"

Janet was taken aback by that last sentence.

She had wanted to insist that Arielle was the mastermind behind all this. However, now that Arielle had brought it up herself, it'd be foolish to accuse her.

Just as Janet was hesitating about telling the truth, Arielle turned to her father and said, "Dad, call the police. Someone as vicious as her deserves to spend the rest of her life behind bars!"

Janet immediately looked up at Arielle and pleaded, "No! Please don't! Both my sons still need me."

"Then tell us the truth. If you do, Dad might still let you off on account of your long service."

Janet had given up completely. She knew what she had to do.

If she told the truth, there was still a possibility that she could get away with it. If she didn't, she'd be serving jail time for Shandie.

No matter what Cindy and Shandie had done for her, Janet wasn't going to sacrifice that much for them.

"I'll tell you everything..." Janet cried out. "It was Ms. Shandie who instructed me to do it! She ordered me to buy the snake and release it into Ms. Arielle's room. But I don't know how the snake ended up being in Ms. Shandie's room..."

Arielle immediately piped up, "My room is very near Shannie's, so the snake could have crawled over from the balcony. I just never expected Shannie to hate me this much. I thought she had always treated me well..."

Arielle's voice trailed off as she stared into the distance in shock and disbelief.

"You old scumbag! And that little b*tch! You reap what you sow!" Henrick hollered.

He let out a deep sigh and took a few deep breaths to calm himself down. "Bring Cindy down. Let her see for herself how her good daughter had turned out!"

Henrick had spent so much money and effort on Shandie, only to have her turn out to be so cold and vicious. What have I done to deserve this?

"Dad, don't get too mad," Arielle comforted. "I showed up so suddenly that Shandie probably couldn't accept it. But I believe she will accept me in time..."

"You're still speaking up for her even after all this? Your kindness is going to be your downfall! If things had gone her way, you'd have been the one bitten by the snake!"

Arielle shook her head sadly. "Everyone makes mistakes. Shandie is still young. There's much for her to learn..."

Before Arielle could go on, Cindy had been brought down from her room.

After Janet recounted the entire incident again, Cindy's face instantly paled.

How could I have given birth to such a foolish daughter?

Cindy had reminded Shandie over and over again how the time wasn't right to strike at Arielle. Not only did her words fall on deaf ears, but Shandie had even gone to extremes behind her back.

"I'm sorry, dear. I've failed to teach our daughter. When she comes back, I'll give her a good lecture! Arielle, I'm so sorry. I've let you down and even accused you. But, please, forgive your sister. I'll get her to be a good sister to you."

Seeing how Cindy had taken the initiative to apologize to Arielle, Henrick calmed down a little.

"Fine. I don't want to air our dirty laundry in public, so this matter ends here," Henrick said before looking at Janet. "As for this old hag, she has to go. Get someone to send her to the farm, and make sure she doesn't come into contact with anyone!"

With that, Janet was taken away, never to step into the Southall residence again.

Before long, Henrick received a call from the hospital.

"Mr. Southall, Ms. Shandie has woken up, but she doesn't want to stay in the hospital. She wants to come home as soon as possible."

"She can do whatever she wants!" Henrick replied harshly.

I still can't believe Shandie can be so vicious. If she has the gall to harm Arielle now, she might do the same to me in the future! How did my daughter turn out to be such a monster?

Shandie had signed the discharge papers at the hospital and couldn't wait to return to the Southalls.

Even though her initial plan had gone awry, she was going to use it to her advantage by telling Henrick the snake had been placed in her room by Arielle.

She was going to tell everyone that Arielle wanted her dead!

CHAPTER 13

To Be A Decent Human Being

This little b*tch is so evil. Dad's definitely going to get rid of her. I'll be the one and only Ms. Southall.

"Drive faster! I want to get home immediately!" Shandie urged the driver.

Soon, they arrived at the Southall residence.

The moment she stepped out of the car, she noticed that the lights in the mansion were turned on. It was as though no one was asleep.

Everyone must be worried about me. That's why everyone's still awake.

I'm still the precious princess of the Southalls.

With those thoughts in mind, Shandie gleefully headed toward the door.

She could imagine the way Henrick and Cindy would ask about her wellbeing once she stepped into the house.

When that happened, she would then point out to them that Arielle was most likely the one to get the snake to hurt her. That way, Arielle would have to pack her things and leave immediately.

Wait. Arielle didn't even bring anything with her. She can just leave immediately!

The more she thought about it, the more excited she became, and the quicker she walked.

Just the mere thought of Arielle getting chased away made her giddy. At that moment, she had almost forgotten about the aches and discomfort she felt after getting poisoned and injured.

"Mom!"

Finally, Shandie entered the living room.

The lights in the living room were all turned on, and the housekeepers were all silently standing in there. The atmosphere of the room was tense as if something bad had happened.

That was not the scene she had imagined.

"Mom, what happened?" Shandie asked Cindy, who was silent like the others.

Cindy then walked toward her, anger burning bright in her eyes.

However, she could not find it in herself to berate Shandie after seeing her daughter's deathlike pallor. Instead, she asked, "What happened? Why are you in such a rush to leave the hospital?"

Right then, Shandie recalled what she had wanted to tell them. Ignoring the odd tension, she uttered, "Mom, I'm fine. I'm back because I have something important to tell Dad."

A foreboding sense crept into Cindy's heart, and she swiftly stopped her. "Let's talk the next morning. It's been an eventful day. We'll talk when you recover."

"No, Mom, I have to tell him now!"

Who knows if I'll get another opportunity to get rid of Arielle like this next time?

I can't wait anymore!

Shandie felt that her mother was too hesitant. At a time like this, she should be decisive.

Thus, she pushed away Cindy and headed toward Henrick.

"Dad, I have something to tell you."

As she spoke, she glanced at Arielle with arrogant, gloating eyes.

Spotting the look in Shandie's eyes, Arielle cocked her head, her interest piqued.

"What is it?" Henrick questioned with a glacial expression.

If Shandie admits to her mistake, I might forgive her this time.

Yet...

Shandie said, "Dad, Arielle was the one to let that venomous snake into my room! She doesn't like me, so she's trying to kill me. She's a wicked woman. Dad, you mustn't keep her around!"

Henrick froze. He had not expected Shandie to blame Arielle for it despite being the culprit.

How did I raise such a vicious and stupid daughter?

Hearing his silence, Shandie thought it was because he was reluctant to get rid of Arielle. Thus, she added, "Dad, you can't give in now. She failed to kill me this time, so she'll definitely try it again. If she has the guts to hurt me, she'll have the courage to hurt you too!"

At that, Henrick narrowed his eyes.

Then, unable to hold himself back anymore, he raised his hand and slapped Shandie.

Slap!

The loud sound reverberated in the living room.

It was much harder than the one Cindy had dealt with Shandie. Almost immediately, Shandie spat a mouthful of blood out.

Along with her blood was a white tooth.

Henrick's slap had made her lose a tooth.

At that moment, Shandie was dumbfounded.

What... is going on?

Shouldn't Dad be slapping Arielle? Why is he hitting me?

Shandie covered her cheek in disbelief.

Just as she was about to ask why Henrick had hit her, Cindy ran over and grabbed Shandie. "Don't say anything. Let's go up first."

"No! Why do I have to go upstairs?"

Shandie was frustrated.

Breaking free from Cindy's grasp, she spun around and questioned, "Dad, why are you hitting me? The one who's in the wrong is clearly Arielle. Why are you standing on her side and hit me, the victim?"

"Victim? Is that who you think you are?" Rage boiling, the rest of Henrick's words died in his throat; he could only pant in anger.

"Am I not? I was hospitalized. The doctor even said that if I were to be there a few minutes later, I wouldn't be breathing right now!" Recalling it now still sent shudders down her spine.

Arielle's lips curled, but the smile soon dropped. Taking a step forward, she muttered, "Shandie, why are you still refusing to speak the truth even at a time like this? Must you anger our father and give him a heart attack?"

Shandie furrowed her brows in disdain. "When did you have the right to speak in this house?"

At that, Arielle lifted a brow. "Shandie, it seems like you have no idea everyone knows how depraved you are."

A tinge of guilt seeping into her heart, Shandie clenched her fists and stammered, "W-What do you mean?"

Arielle smiled. "You really don't know anything, do you? Janet has told us everything. You've asked her to buy a venomous snake to murder me, but the snake slithered into your room from the balcony. Shandie, it's time to lay on the bed you make."

Upon hearing that, Shandie's eyes widened almost comically.

Janet... betrayed me?

Abruptly, she recalled the odd tension in the air and the way Cindy kept trying to stop her from talking when she entered the house.

So they all know the truth now?

No wonder. No wonder there was a taunting look in Arielle's eyes.

No wonder Dad slapped me.

Shandie panicked. She tugged Cindy's sleeve and mumbled, "Mom..."

At the end of the day, Shandie was still Cindy's daughter, and she could not help but feel upset about the situation. Pulling the younger woman into her arms, she whispered, "Stay quiet and follow me upstairs."

Shandie finally heeded her words. She no longer made a sound as she followed her mother up the stairs.

“Stand right there!” Henrick demanded. “From now on, you’re grounded. You’re not allowed to leave your room for a month. I’ll be hiring a teacher from an etiquette school to teach you how to be a decent human being.”

Shandie took a step back in shock.

Henrick Southall was the one to decide everything in the family. Without his love and trust, Shandie might be the one to be kicked out of the family.

With that thought in mind, the colors drained from Shandie’s already pale face.

It was then she regretted doing what she did, but there was no point crying over spilled milk.

CHAPTER 14

Arielle watched Cindy bring Shandie upstairs with unsympathetic eyes. In fact, there was a solemn look in them.

It seems like the slap from Cindy is worth it.

However, this will be the last time Cindy will be allowed to hit me.

Once Shandie was gone, Henrick walked toward Arielle and said, “Sannie. I remember you used to be called Sannie, right?”

Arielle nodded. Her nickname had sounded like Shandie’s name, so she did not like it much anymore.

“What about this, Sannie?”

Henrick sighed before pursing his lips. Then, he said, “I’ve spoiled Shandie. It’s partially my fault that she has done such a horrible thing. We should’ve called the cops, but she’s still your younger sister, and we’re a family. Moreover, you’re fine, and she has reaped what she sowed. Let’s forget about this, all right? However, I’ll still punish her and compensate you. Is that okay?”

Arielle balled her hands into fists under the sleeves of her pajamas.

What do you mean by “you’re fine?”

If I was really bitten by the snake, Shandie would have made sure no one knows about it.

By the time the sun rises, my body would have gone cold. Yet, you’re asking me to pretend as if nothing has happened? You’re only grounding her for a month?

At that very moment, Arielle knew what kind of person Henrick was.

As long as it was nothing threatening to him, he would not easily abandon Shandie.

After all, the more daughters he had, the more chances for him to cling to a wealthier family.

Henrick was a man who would do anything to get what he wanted.

Arielle could not wrap her head around why her mother had fallen in love with someone like him.

Arielle was thoroughly disappointed. It did not matter to her that Henrick was her biological father anymore.

However, she showed none of that on her face. Instead, she plastered a sweet smile on her face and nodded. "I can't decide, so, Dad, I'll just heed your words. Shandie's still young, so I won't blame her for anything. I'll pretend nothing happened, and I'll still be a good sister to her. I just hope Shandie won't mind too."

"Don't worry. I'll ask her to forget about this as well. No one will mention this anymore. I'm sure the two of you will be able to get along fine."

"Of course." Arielle smiled, her dimples emerging on both sides of her face.

Anyone who looked at her would assume that she was innocent and sensible.

Henrick sighed in relief, feeling glad about the situation.

Not only was this daughter of his pretty and forgiving, but she was also obedient.

She's much more obedient than I thought she would be. That's good. She'll be easy to control.

"It's getting late. I'm sure you must have been shocked today too. Rest earlier. Tell me what you need, and I'll do my best to fulfill your requests." Henrick was in a good mood. For once, the miser was not stingy, for he handed Arielle another card.

"There's one million in this. In total, you'll have two million, including the other million I've given to you earlier. You can spend it on anything you like. Once you've spent it all, you can come and ask for more. You shouldn't live as you used to in the village. You've got to act like the daughter of the Southalls. I'll ask Alfred to bring you to shop for clothes tomorrow."

"Thank you, Dad! You're the best!"

Ego stroked, the upset from Shandie's incident dissipated from Henrick's mind. He then hummed a tune as he went upstairs.

The moment Arielle returned to her room, the sweet smile on her face disappeared.

Even if Shandie's stupid, she has Cindy watching out for her. On the other hand, I have no one.

I only have myself.

Balling her fists, Arielle slumped onto the bed, staring at the ceiling with lifeless eyes.

Maybe there's nothing bad with being alone.

Moreover, it's not that I'm alone. Dad and Mom overseas are very nice to me. And my brother, too. He's dependent on me.

He must miss me a lot while I'm gone.

To make sure they were not involved in the mess, Arielle had to temporarily cut ties with them.

Yet, when she thought about her brother, the corners of her lips curled upward.

Right then, her phone rang.

When she picked up the call, she realized it was from a friend from Moranta.

“Sannie, how are you?” the other person on the line had an accent.

“I’m quite fine, Vance. To be honest, I’m back at my old family home in the country. Although I’ve encountered some minor matters, it’s been resolved now. Why are you calling, by the way?”

Arielle was speaking in fluent Ustranasian, as if she was born and raised overseas.

Sounding a little embarrassed, the other person continued, “You know I’ve been working on an island project, but the ending part of the project costs a lot, and I’m having issues with the funds. I was wondering if you could lend me some money, or perhaps invest into my project.”

Arielle answered, “I’m quite interested in your island project. What about this? How much do you need? I’d be happy to join you.”

“That’s great. We’d be even better with you joining us. I’ll be needing a billion. Are you all right with that?”

“No problem,” came Arielle’s swift response.

Upon ending the call, Arielle contacted her overseas personal financial advisor.

She then used her computer to transfer a billion into Vance’s account before asking her lawyer to sign the contract for the investment.

When she was done, she then glanced at the two cards Henrick had given to her and barked out a laugh. The next thing she did was delete the history of the transactions on the computer.

On the other end.

After Cindy brought Shandie back to her room, she finally cursed at her out loud.

“You idiot! How many times have I told you not to do anything rash before figuring out Arielle completely? Why won’t you ever listen to me?”

As tears streamed down Shandie’s face, she sobbed out, “I-I didn’t think things would turn out this way. But, Mom, you have to believe in me. Arielle must have been the one to let the snake bite me! I’ve clearly asked Janet to let the snake into her room.”

“I know!” Cindy gritted out.

At the harsh tone, Shandie froze. Then, she muttered, confused, “Why aren’t you helping me explain the situation if you know the truth? Arielle’s a wicked person.”

Cindy sighed. “I’ve taught you so many things, but until now, you haven’t been able to read the room. Your father clearly trusts her now. Moreover, you were the one to put the snake into her room first. How are you going to explain that? Nothing you say will help you; you’ll only make your father even angrier.”

“Then what do I do? I can’t be slandered in this way! Have you seen how the housekeepers look at me? Everyone in the manor thinks I deserved this.”

At that, Cindy was silent for a moment. "It seems like Arielle is much more complex and difficult to figure out than I thought. I'll try my best to find out her history. Before that, you'll have to get along with her. Even if it's tough, you have to do it well. Pretend to admit to your mistakes and live in harmony with her for now. That way, your father will be happy. You know he hates family conflicts and disobedient people."

"But... I've been grounded. I can't go out."

"Silly girl, have you forgotten about how you're going to get your certificate in a week's time? Be patient for a week. Once you become a star at the ceremony, everyone will forget about this matter."

"All right. I'll work hard with practicing this week. I'll definitely stun everyone at the ceremony."

"I'm glad you can think this way."

In a blink of an eye, five days went by.

CHAPTER 15

Neither Shandie nor Cindy did anything. Likewise, Cindy no longer begged Henrick to shorten Shandie's punishment. Cindy even took increasingly good care of Arielle, which Henrick approved.

That incident with the venomous snake was explicitly banned. No one was allowed to utter a single word about it. Hence, the manor's inhabitants resumed their following days as if nothing happened.

Likewise, Henrick returned to his and Cindy's bedroom after five days of sleeping in the study.

By the sixth day, Henrick headed out with a bounce in his step; even Cindy had a glowing and cheery expression. It wasn't hard to guess what happened the night before.

Things became so amiable that Cindy offered an entire drumstick to Arielle during dinnertime.

At this, a delighted smile crept onto Arielle's face. She responded in a sweet tone, "Thank you, Aunt Cindy."

"Call me Mom from now on." Cindy beamed back as she continued, "I'll look after you as my own child. Just like Shannie. She's not my biological daughter, but I've always cared for her like she is. So, don't hesitate to ask me if you ever need anything."

Arielle scoffed inwardly. Not your biological daughter? I don't believe it one bit.

Shandie is only a couple of months younger than me, which means that Henrick had an affair with Cindy during my mother's pregnancy.

Henrick obviously won't allow this scandal to leak.

Cindy must be up to something. Why else would she suddenly suggest that I call her "Mom"?

Still, she's got some nerve asking me to call her that.

I only have two mothers: my biological mom and my adoptive mother. No one else is worthy of that title.

Skeptical, Arielle looked at Henrick for help. "Dad. I-it's too soon. I'm not used to calling her that..."

She flashed a pair of puppy-dog eyes at him. Her eyes rounded and became slightly moist as she put on a pitiful act.

If this were an award show, Arielle believed that she would have won the title of Most Convincing Actress.

True enough, Henrick's features softened after glancing over at her.

No man could resist Arielle's puppy dog eyes, not even her own dad.

Henrick cleared his throat and consoled, "That's quite alright. Take it slow and go at your own pace. There's no need to rush into calling her Mom."

"Thanks, Dad." Arielle then cast an apologetic look whilst saying, "And I'm really sorry, Aunt Cindy. I'm sure I'll eventually ease into your new title."

Anger welled in Cindy's chest. This wretched brat! How dare she refuse to call me Mom!

Even so, Cindy was better at tamping down her emotions compared to Shandie, so she feigned a kind smile. "I understand that this must be difficult for you. Please don't apologize. I should be sorry for pressuring you. Don't worry, dear, take all the time you need to adjust. After all, we've got the rest of our lives as a family for you to do so."

"Thanks, Aunt Cindy."

"It's nothing, child."

The two played out a harmonious pretense as if they were happily getting along at the dining table.

Henrick's spirits instantly improved; the exhaustion he felt from work faded away at the sight of this merry atmosphere.

As the saying goes, a family in harmony will prosper in everything; I'm content as long as they don't pull any more stunts against one another.

Just as Henrick thought so, Cindy parted her lips to speak. "There's something I have to tell you, dear. It's about Shannie."

The mention of Shandie's name ruined Henrick's mood. He slammed his spoon onto the table and thundered, "Let me guess, you're trying to put in a good word for that brat? Considering how grave her actions were, I've been more than merciful by grounding her for only a month. So forget it! Don't bother defending her."

Arielle threw a suspicious glance at the woman. How uncharacteristic of her to blurt out. She's normally good at gauging situations before speaking. Surely she knows that this isn't the best time to defend Shandie?

What exactly is Cindy playing at?

At that moment, Cindy's face scrunched up in distress. "I'm not pleading on behalf of her, dear. It's about something else. I'm just not sure if I should tell you..."

Henrick's frown lifted slightly at this. Regardless, he still growled at a dangerously low pitch, "What's the matter?"

Cindy sighed dramatically, then pulled out a sheet of paper from her pocket. She stated, "I just received a notice letter today. Remember the Crown Coffee Academy's competition? Well, Shannie won it. She's the champion."

"What!" Henrick exclaimed.

He obviously knew about the competition. Its winner would obtain a brand ambassadorship contract with Soir Coffee—the internationally renowned coffee franchise.

Henrick was overjoyed. He snatched the letter from Cindy and went through its contents thoroughly. When he noticed that Vinson would be an honorary guest, greed flitted across his eyes.

He clutched the letter with trembling hands whilst his voice quaked with excitement. "That's great news. Well, why didn't you tell me earlier? The award ceremony is tomorrow afternoon!"

At once, Cindy's shoulders slumped exaggeratedly in dejection. She explained, "It's because of that rash mistake that Shannie made. When I told her about the ceremony earlier today, she wasn't keen on attending. She wanted to stay home and reflect on her actions."

"That's absurd!" Henrick protested.

This is a once-in-a-lifetime chance to mingle with influential figures! How can she not go?

Has she lost her mind?

When he finally broke out of his thoughts, he happened to meet Arielle's innocent gaze. It was as though she saw right through to his calculative schemes.

Flustered, he cleared his throat and said, "Shandie seems like she's realized her mistakes and is taking responsibility for her actions now. So I don't think we have to ground her any longer. What do you think, Sannie?"

Arielle sneered internally. That's my biological dad for you. Truly a loving dad, isn't he?

Nevertheless, Arielle wasn't one to reveal her true feelings. She flashed a gentle smile and spoke in a considerate manner, "Dad, I meant to tell you a while ago; it will do no good to ground her for as long as a month. We should let her off early. Besides, she's not a kid anymore. She'll know how to discern right from wrong after making a mistake once. Plus, you can always enforce stricter punishments if she regresses to the making the same mistakes."

Cindy, who sat opposite them, gnawed so hard on her lips that she almost drew blood.

Arielle, that brat! When she puts it that way, it means Henrick will never let Shandie off the hook if she messes up again!

It was just as Cindy predicted. Henrick's brows knitted taut as he declared, "That's right, there won't be a next time. Cindy! Pass the message to her: she'll be disowned from this manor if she pulls another stunt again!"

Anger sizzled in Cindy's chest, yet she had to play along. "I'll relay it to her, don't worry. She knows that she's done wrong. Sannie, thank you so much for forgiving her."

Arielle looked at her with a smug smile. "We're all family, after all. And compromise is a crucial part of being a family, even if Shandie wanted to kill me."

Cindy's smile tensed. She couldn't handle Arielle's not-so-subtle jabs any longer. Shooting onto her feet, she then announced, "I'll go pack my things for the journey to Norham tomorrow."

With that, she paced over to the stairs but quickly stopped halfway. Then she extended a friendly offer, "Tomorrow's a weekend, dear. You won't be going to the office. Why don't you and Sannie come along?"

Henrick immediately nodded as he thought about Arielle and Vinson's relationship. "Absolutely! Could you pack Sannie's things as well? And get her some new clothes for the trip to Norham, if you can."

"Yes, dear." Cindy finally let out a victorious smile.

Hmph! Just wait and see, Arielle. My daughter will become the star of the award ceremony. Then, you'll be left standing in her shadow.

CHAPTER 16

Once Cindy left, Henrick's gaze darted over to Arielle. "Sannie. Tell me the truth, how did you meet Vinson? Are you two close?"

Henrick wanted to ask this long ago. However, he worried that Arielle would think he was using her as a stepping stone. Hence, he refrained from asking up till now.

At this rate, it seems like she's too naive to question my motives.

I may as well cut to the chase and ask whatever / want to know. This silly girl will tell me anyway.

As expected, Arielle answered him without a sliver of hesitation. "I don't actually know him that well. I encountered him by chance when my ship sank at sea. He was injured at the time, so I treated his wounds with whatever herbs I could find. It was later when his subordinates came for him that I got rescued and brought back here."

What he didn't know was that Arielle had summarized the story. She omitted the details where they undressed and huddled up for warmth, as well as the truth that she saved Vinson's life.

Hearing her story, Henrick felt both disappointed yet pleased.

He was disappointed because he had hoped for some emotional entanglement between Arielle and Vinson, but there were none.

At the same time, he was buzzing with joy that Arielle had aided the Vinson Nightshire. Because it meant Vinson owed Arielle's family a favor for her kindness.

Imagine that. A favor from the Nightshires! That experience alone is worth its weight in gold!

"Wonderful! That's great, Sannie! As expected of my daughter!" Henrick chortled.

He stared endearingly at her as if he was looking at the world's rarest gem.

Arielle put on an innocent and unknowing expression. She flashed a quick appreciative smile at this compliment, then resumed with her dinner.

The next day had arrived at the speed of light. All four of them departed Jadeborough and headed towards Norham.

For the journey, Arielle and Shandie sat beside one another in the backseat.

Shandie wore the Crown Coffee Academy's yellow team uniform. A soft and glamorous makeup was applied on her face, befitting her

aristocratic status.

In comparison, Cindy had prepared minimalistic clothing for Arielle. She also hadn't hired

anyone to do Arielle's makeup. Thus, Arielle was completely bare-faced and had her hair up in a simple bun; she looked like an ordinary high school student.

Even without any form of embellishment, Arielle was irresistible to the eye. Her presence glowed with angelic purity, almost like a blooming orchid whose beauty was so rare that people could only appreciate from afar.

She was the definition of true beauty. Not the kind that was sought after by many men, but a true beauty that made men reflect on whether they were worthy of being by her side.

Shandie initially felt like the brightest star in the sky, knowing that her makeup was worth six figures. Yet, that confidence plummeted after seeing Arielle's simplistic beauty. Shandie now felt like a miserable side character while Arielle was the lead of the show.

Outshined, Shandie clenched her fists so hard that her claw-like nails nearly cut into her palms.

Ahem! Cindy cleared her throat from the front passenger seat.

At this, Shandie broke from her daze and refocused on the present.

So what if Arielle is pretty? She's nothing but a pretty face that men keep around like toys. I'm

the real deal with both the body and looks, the kind of woman that men want to make their wives.

Shandie suppressed her anger. She cracked a stiff smile and said, "Arielle, I haven't had the chance to apologize. So now that we're both here, I just wanted to say I'm sorry. I shouldn't have thrown that childish tantrum and put you in jeopardy. Please forgive me."

Arielle knew that Cindy must have scripted this whole apology, and Shandie was merely acting accordingly.

Childish tantrum?

Humph. What kind of child harbors murderous intentions during a tantrum?

Regardless, Arielle cast a gentle gaze as she held Shandie's hand. Then she soothed in a honeyed voice, "It's alright, Shandie. There's no need to dwell on the past or apologize anymore. We're family, after all."

Caught in Arielle's tight grip, Shandie bit down her repulse. She desperately wanted to fling Arielle's vermin-like hand away but couldn't.

Hence, she resisted and continued to smile stiffly

Meanwhile, Henrick smiled contentedly at his daughters' reconciliation from the driver's seat.

They went on their merry way to the airport. When they arrived, Henrick led his family through the check-in process and to the departure halls. Arielle trailed behind them throughout this

According to the regulations, first-class passengers were given priority to board the plane before others.

So the Southalls had to wait in line as Henrick had bought economy-class tickets for the flight from Jadeborough to Norham.

When it was finally their turn to board the flight, Henrick suddenly halted and looked in the other direction. He exclaimed, "Mr. Nightshire?"

Shandie hadn't expected to see Vinson at the airport either. Now that it had happened, Shandie batted her lashes and cleared her throat shyly to attract Vinson's attention.

Vinson's assistant was reporting the progress of their recent project. Now that Henrick had rudely interrupted, Vinson shot a glare in Henrick's direction.

Seeing how Henrick and Shandie threw themselves at him, Vinson's glare turned murderously cold yet confused at the same time. He growled, "Do I know you?"

Henrick brushed his nose awkwardly at this. He was startled that Vinson didn't recognize him.

Shandie, on the other hand, clenched her jaw in irritation.

We've already met plenty of times. How can Vinson not know who I am? Is he really that forgetful?

In reality, Vinson had an excellent memory. He was simply selective about whom and what he felt was worthy of remembering.

Thus, he wouldn't waste even a drop of his time or mental effort on people whom he deemed unimportant

As for Arielle, she had noticed Vinson as well but didn't intend to greet him.

We're just passing by. There's no need to engage in pointless conversation.

Henrick frowned at how Arielle was letting this golden opportunity slip. Nevertheless, he quickly introduced himself, "I'm Henrick Southall. Surely you remember me, Mr. Nightshire? You attended my daughter's birthday party a few days ago."

Vinson tried to recall. However, he had attended four birthday parties this week, so he couldn't quite figure out who this man named Henrick was.

Sensing the confusion on Vinson's face, Henrick briskly shoved Shandie aside while

yanking Arielle forward. He then reminded, "Seems like you have forgotten about me, Mr. Nightshire. But perhaps you remember my daughter?"

Arielle was now visible to Vinson. He hadn't seen her earlier, no thanks to Cindy, who questionably stood in front of Arielle and blocked her

Vinson's eyes roamed over Arielle's appearance. Unlike the other three, who wore fancier clothing, Arielle seemed like a regular student. It was as if they were from different class groups.

Vinson raised a brow, curious to see Arielle's reactions. He feigned confusion as he asked, "Apologies, I'm not very good with remembering faces. May I ask who you are, miss?"

Arielle blinked. Did he forget who I am?

Despite her initial shock, Arielle wasn't at all sad that he didn't recall her.

She responded placidly, "That's normal. You must see too many faces every day to remember mine. We won't be in your way now. Dad, let's go."

Now that she had excused their family, Henrick couldn't prolong the conversation with Vinson. Without a choice, Henrick begrudgingly complied with Arielle's request.

What rubbish was that? How can my eldest daughter be so inept at seducing men? How stupid can she be?

Henrick grew more frustrated at the thought of this. It was evident in the way he quickly stormed over to the boarding gate.

Cindy and Shandie were pleased with how things turned out. They stood straighter with delight as they watched Henrick leave.

What perfect timing for Arielle to ruin things. I doubt Henrick will continue to spoil her rotten after this

Thinking this, Cindy paced in Henrick's direction

Shandie and Arielle quickly followed suit. At that moment, Shandie's mood soared sky-high. It wasn't long before a mischievous thought flitted through her mind.

Walking alongside Arielle, Shandie mocked in a quiet voice, "Oh dear. I assumed that something special was going on between you and Mr. Nightshire, but I guess not. I can't believe that he didn't even recognize you. Well, don't be sad. It's normal for busy men like Mr. Nightshire to forget a country bumpkin like you."

Shandie made sure to emphasize the words: country bumpkin. She stared excitedly at Arielle, hoping to see her face blow up with

anger.

Nothing would please her more than to see Arielle red-faced with helpless frustration

CHAPTER 17

Yet, Arielle remained emotionless as if she weren't the least bothered.

And that was the truth; she truly couldn't care less about being forgotten by Vinson.

She knew that the Southalls wanted connections with the Nightshires because of their elite social status. Despite this, that prestige wasn't what she wanted or needed.

So, it didn't matter whether Vinson remembered her at all.

Shandie scoffed when Arielle didn't react to her.

Liar! Keep acting like you don't care then, Arielle./ bet that deep down, you're crying like a big baby who's hurt about the whole thing.

Serves you right!

Vinson would never be interested in a plain country bumpkin like you!

Little did the four Southalls know, Vinson's eyes had burned holes in the back of Arielle's head for quite some time.

He stayed that way until Arielle boarded her flight. Only then did he let out an intrigued chuckle.

Beside him, the assistant's eyes nearly bulged out of their sockets.

What's going on?

Mr. Nightshire never laugh. He's usually unsmiling, and some would even say intimidatingly distant. I can't believe he's chuckling to himself now.

Also, this isn't sneering laughter. No. It's more genuine, like an amused laugh that comes from deep within one's chest.

It's been ages since I last saw Mr. Nightshire laugh like this.

While the assistant was deep in thought, Vinson's voice suddenly sounded. He asked, "Did you notice a difference between her and the others?"

There were three women in that family. Which is he referring to?

The assistant had worked alongside Vinson for several years now, so he knew better than to ask Vinson outright. He pondered for a while before recalling that Arielle had dressed differently from the others.

Then he answered hesitantly, "Indeed. The other three have donned well-known designer brands while that young lady's clothes... Well, they seem like some randomly bought clothes from an unknown stall."

Even with such a sharp observation, Vinson still

shook his head.

The assistant instantly stiffened in shock. Did / guess wrongly? Was Mr. Nightshire not referring to that lady?

Just as the assistant felt flustered, Vinson's voice spoke up once again. "I'm not talking about her clothes."

The assistant heaved a sign of relief since he had at least guessed correctly

Still, he frowned in confusion. "If it's not the clothes, then what is it?"

Within seconds, Vinson's facial expression returned to its usual indifference. "It's nothing. Let's resume."

Then the assistant dropped the topic altogether. He didn't dare to probe any further, so he continued with his report.

On the plane, the four Southalls sat in the same row. Henrick had been in a foul mood ever since Arielle's stunt. Because of this, he ordered Arielle to carry out several mindless tasks throughout the flight. She was told to move their luggage to the overhead cabin, then tidy their coats and put them into the luggage, followed by taking out their chargers and so

on...

Everyone else on the plane assumed that she

was merely their housekeeper.

Arielle wasn't bothered with doing all those tasks. All she did was comply with Henrick's request without any complaints.

Eventually, Henrick couldn't hold it in anymore. He boomed icily, "Enough! Get over here."

Once Arielle sat down next to Henrick, he interrogated with a sharp tone, "I thought you said that you helped Mr. Nightshire. So why didn't he remember you at all?"

Arielle shook her head candidly. "I only did him a small favor then, so it's normal that he doesn't remember me."

"Then you should have..." Henrick faltered as he looked at Arielle. I guess having a naive daughter isn't always a beneficial thing.

If only it were Shandie who knew Vinson... she would have immediately caught on to my intentions and tried to get closer to him.

Henrick then huffed begrudgingly, "Forget it. We'll talk about this later. There's still much you have to learn."

"Okay," Arielle nodded obediently. With eyes rounded and lips parted, she feigned a child-like innocence as if she didn't know what she had done wrong.

Chapter 17

Right then, the flight attendant approached them. "Good day, Mr. Southhall. According to your flight mileage, we're able to give you a free upgrade to first-class."

Henrick deliberately chose economy-class seats not only out of stinginess but also because he knew that they could get a free upgrade.

Pleased, Henrick beamed as he bounced onto his feet. "Thank you. Please lead the way."

Shandie and Cindy stood as well.

The flight attendant soon noticed Arielle, who was the last to stand. Then he immediately explained, "My apologies, sir. You only have enough mileage for three free upgrades. Here, have a look."

“Three?” Henrick’s temples started to ache. Then who will go with us to first–class? Shandie or Arielle?

Seeing that Henrick was conflicted, Cindy chimed in, “I’m sure you’ve realized that Arielle isn’t very quick-witted. She won’t be of much help at all. Plus, we’re heading to Shandie’s awards ceremony. So why don’t we give the seat to Shandie this once, hmm?”

Henrick’s face turned grim before he finally agreed.

He promptly turned to Arielle and explained in a matter-of–fact tone, “I can’t help that there are only three seats. We’ll still see each other once the plane lands. Ergo, it’s not all that different.”

Arielle stared intensely at Henrick.

Disappointment shrouded in her chest, but she couldn’t show it on her face. She refused to let Cindy and Shandie feel triumphant.

Thus, Arielle pressed her lips into a tight smile and said, “It’s fine.”

“Sorry about this,” Henrick uttered while averting her gaze. He then pranced away with Cindy and Shandie for the first–class cabin.

Shandie intentionally slowed her steps. Once their parents were a good distance away, she taunted in a low voice, “It seems like Dad loves me more. You’ll have to work harder to catch up now! I’ll be off to the first–class cabin, so you rest up here in economy–class, hmm? There’s actually not much difference between the two cabins, save for the bigger seats and better service in mine. But hey, don’t let that get to you.”

Arielle gritted her teeth at how Shandie was gloating around like some proud peacock.

Face twisting into a mocking smile, Arielle motioned towards the first–class cabin. She then provoked, “You’d better hurry over. Dad

might change his mind and let me go with them if you keep dilly–dallying.”

Shandie panicked upon seeing Arielle’s maliciously gleaming eyes.

Then she grabbed her bag and shot straight for first–class, fearing that Arielle would somehow end up in the superior cabin instead.

Soon after, all three Southalls plopped down comfortably in their first–class seats. Shandie had even ordered a glass of the cabin’s complimentary red wine.

In economy–class.

Arielle could finally shut her eyes to rest now that Henrick and the others were gone.

Her chest sank with sorrow at that moment. She was human, after all; she felt sadness like every other person on this planet. However, she was terrified of revealing her emotions and vulnerabilities as anyone could use them against her. So she concealed everything, hiding away under the guise of an unbothered girl.

Fake it till you make it, she reminded herself.

Just as she got comfortable in her newfound peace, a voice suddenly sounded beside her.

“Excuse me... Are you here by yourself, miss?”

“May I sit next to you?”

A man had politely asked Arielle that question. He watched her with a set of wide eyes as his throat bobbed, gulping anxiously.

Arielle met his gaze with an icy expression. She turned him down, “Sorry, my family will be back soon. These are their seats.”

The man didn’t need to be told twice. He turned to leave while letting out a wistful sigh. Who am I kidding? I’m out of her league. There’s no way! can get a gorgeous girl like her.

Although, I wonder what kind of man will be able to reel in such a great catch...

Not long after the man left, someone else approached Arielle. “Excuse me, miss...”

Arielle’s head flung upward with a pinched expression. Just as she took in the person’s face, her mouth fell open.

Isn’t that person who was reporting stuff to Vinson at the airport?

The man proceeded to introduce himself, “I’m Mr. Nightshire’s assistant. He would like to invite you over to his private jet. I’ve already taken the liberty to clarify things with the attendants on your current flight, so please come with me.”

Arielle hesitated for a moment, then promptly nodded when she thought about the man who approached her earlier.

There were many people on this flight, and she wasn’t keen on being interrupted again.

“Alright,” said Arielle.

“Follow me then. This way, please.” The man gestured towards ahead.

They needed to pass through the first-class cabin to exit the aircraft.

As they walked by, Shandie immediately took notice.

CHAPTER 18

Henrick. “I’ll meet you guys at the airport.”

With that, Arielle held her head high like royalty and disregarded Shandie completely. She followed closely behind the man as they exited the airplane.

Shandie’s and Cindy’s faces twisted with jealousy at the luxurious private jet that parked beside them

Shortly after, Arielle boarded the jet. The first thing she saw was Vinson, whose head was lowered to focus on reading a contract.

The assistant spoke up, “Mr. Nightshire. I’ve brought Ms. Moore over.”

Vinson hummed a simple Mm–hmm in reply without even looking up.

Arielle felt uneasy. Not knowing how to respond or what to do, she tensed with her feet planted on the ground

Thankfully, the assistant came to her rescue. He advised, “Mr. Nightshire is currently busy. You may make yourself comfortable in the cabin that’s inside.”

“Okay.” Arielle nodded. She then cautiously walked past Vinson and entered the cabin.

Once inside, Arielle’s jaw dropped in shock. She exclaimed, “Rain?”

The blonde man lifted his gaze and gawked, equally as surprised. “San? I never thought I’d see you here. Have you returned to this country?”

“Mm–hmm, I just got back some time ago.”

Rain cheerily patted at the seat beside his, beckoning her over. “Come sit with me.”

Arielle obliged. Once she sat down, questions about her current life came out of Rain’s mouth with burgeoning excitement. He also invited, “I’m heading to Norham for the academy’s award ceremony. If there’s nothing on your schedule, would you like to attend as well since you are one of our academy’s founders?”

Rain was the principal of the Crown Coffee Academy and a world–renowned coffee sommelier.

Back then, Arielle and Rain were the ones who came up with as well as established the Crown Coffee Academy

They wanted to create a place where coffee enthusiasts could expand their knowledge on coffee–making

What they never expected was for the academy to develop into a well–known spot for socialites Hence, Rain created a restriction whereby only ten students may receive the expert level barista certificate. This way, only the elite,

talented, and worthy coffee connoisseurs could receive these certificates.

Arielle’s lips curled into a devious smile when she heard that Rain was on his way to Shandie’s award ceremony. She stated, “What a coincidence. I’m heading there myself...”

Rain beamed at once. “That’s wonderful! The students will be ecstatic to meet the academy’s founders. They’ll be over the moon!”

“No.” Arielle shook her head and requested, “I was hoping that you’ll keep my identity confidential.”

Rain’s vibrant smile fell glum in an instant. He then inquired, “Why?”

“I have some personal reasons.”

“Alright then, I’ll be more than pleased as long as you attend the event.”

Arielle flashed a faint smile but didn’t say anymore

Two hours of flight later, the jet gradually made its descent into Norham airport.

Vinson had already left by the time Arielle disembarked from the jet.

Unbothered, she exchanged goodbyes with Rain and went to look for the other three

Southalls

That's strange. Didn't we agree to meet up after getting off our flights? So why aren't Henrick and the others here at the arrival hall as promised?

Arielle held her ground in silence. She knew that Henrick wouldn't abandon her because she was still of value to him. So she waited.

Right then and there, a bodyguard dressed in a coal-black suit strode towards Arielle's direction. Beside him was a man that she would recognize anywhere—Vinson.

Despite standing next to a tall bodyguard, Vinson still towered with his superior stature.

Some passersby curiously paid attention to Vinson. Their faces either turned a bashful shade of red or gawked as they vividly babbled about Vinson's appearance.

"That guy's incredibly handsome! Do you think he's a celebrity?"

"No way. If he is, then he should have blown up all over the internet by now. Even those influencers can't compare to his good looks."

Compared to the eagerly buzzing crowd, Arielle's skewed frown was an underwhelming reaction

She glanced briefly at him before focusing on

her phone and dialing Henrick's number.

The call went through, yet Henrick had instantly rejected. Arielle knew that this must have been Shandie's doing.

Although Cindy is a wicked woman, she wouldn't be so stupid to use such sloppy tactics against me.

It seems like Shandie is trying to get on my nerves by keeping me in the dark about their whereabouts. Game on, then. I'll patiently wait here for them.

Noticing a lounge nearby, Arielle headed over for some refreshments.

What she hadn't realized was that she walked right into the lion's den; just as she entered, the lounge door flung shut behind her.

Arielle instinctively turned around but was shoved to the wall by a towering man. His powerfully built body pressed against hers, trapping her.

CHAPTER 19

Immediately, Arielle prepared to lash out. However, her movements came to a screeching halt when she caught sight of the man's face.

"Mr. Nightshire? Y-you..." She stared at him and blinked in utter disbelief.

Vinson interjected before Arielle could finish speaking. "Why did you pretend not to recognize me?"

Arielle looked at Vinson with a gaze full of puzzlement. On the other hand, Vinson's stare resembled the look of a ferocious and enraged lion.

Is he angry because I didn't greet him when I walked past him earlier? Doesn't that mean he recognized me? Then why did he act like we were strangers in the airport? He even ignored me when we were on the plane!

"You were the one who ignored me first! Besides, how would I dare disturb such a busy man like you?" Arielle replied in bafflement.

What on earth is he thinking? He clearly recognized me. Yet, he pretended like he didn't. He should have continued the act. Why is he cornering and berating me for doing the same thing?

Arielle tried to push Vinson away to put some distance between them. "No matter what... you should let me go first. People will

misunderstand if they see us like this."

Arielle's words seemed to go in one ear and out the other. Vinson's gaze remained fixated intently on hers.

He found that her bright eyes were like pools of clear water. At the same time, her gaze was as deep as the bottomless ocean.

There wasn't a trace of fear nor flattery present in her brilliant gaze. The only thing Vinson saw was suspicion. She treated him like he was an ordinary person.

An ordinary person... How long has it been since someone treated me this way?

"Are you angry because I couldn't recognize you at the airport?"

"I did not get angry," Arielle said and jutted out her bottom lip. Why would I get mad?

Vinson fell silent after he heard her answer.

He could not express the complicated feelings within his heart.

After a brief moment of contemplation, Vinson released her from his grasps and stepped back all of a sudden. "Why did you come to Norham? Are you following me because I haven't given you an answer?"

"Following you? I'm not as free as you think; certainly don't have the time to be following you. Besides, what answer do I need from you?" Arielle replied with a confused look.

All of a sudden, she recalled the last words Vinson had said during the birthday dinner.

Her eyes widened as round as saucers as she crossed her arms in front of her chest. "Are you still thinking about the joke I made the other day?"

"As I said, the truth is hidden within your joke. You don't have to worry; I'm still thinking about it."

“Haha!” Arielle burst out in laughter as she tilted her head. “I wish I could peer inside that head of yours to find out if your brain is made out of cotton!”

“That is something I should say to you instead,” Vinson replied impassively.

“What on earth are you talking about...” Right at that moment, Arielle’s phone began to ring.

The moment she answered the call, Henrick’s voice echoed through the phone. “Arielle, where did you go? Why did you keep your sister waiting for so long?”

Waiting? I haven’t even seen Shandie’s shadow.

Immediately, Arielle acted as if she had been wronged. “This was the first time I took the plane... I must admit that I was totally clueless. Dad, I’m sorry. Where are you? I’ll try to look for you,” Arielle murmured softly.

“Look for the airport staff. We are at the information desk.”

“Alright, I’ll head over right now!” The moment Arielle ended the call, her image of a prim and proper woman vanished into thin air.

“My Dad is looking for me. I’ll take my leave first. Also, let me repeat myself. I was joking the other day! You can forget about it!” Arielle called out as she waved her phone in Vinson’s direction.

With that, Arielle turned on her heel to leave

She only managed to take two steps before Vinson’s suspicious tone echoed behind her. “What is your relationship with your family?”

His question left her confused. “We are just family,” Arielle whirled around to face him again.

“Yet, I think that they don’t see you like family,” Vinson replied in a monotonous voice.

“Why do you say that?”

“My assistant told me that you were the only

one who did not sit in the first-class cabin when we boarded the plane.”

“Oh, that’s what you are referring to; I have a complicated relationship with my family. Ten years ago, I went missing. Now that we are reunited, these trivial issues don’t matter to me anymore.” Arielle grinned as she said this.

Vinson opened his mouth as if to say something. A look of hesitancy painted his face. In the end, he handed her a gold business card. “Call me if you need anything. You can also bring this card to the Nightshire Group if you want to meet me.”

“It’s alright...” Arielle raised her hands to decline him. Yet, Vinson merely shoved the card into her palm before he left the lounge.

Arielle glanced at the gold card in her hand. Emblazoned on the card were the words Nightshire Group.

Is he trying to... show off?

Arielle owned a company located overseas. Although it wasn't as renowned as Nightshire Group, her company was quite famous too.

Just as she made a move to discard the card, she changed her mind and kept it instead,

Vinson is correct, what if I need his help? This card will be useful. After all, Jadeborough is a place I'm unfamiliar with.

Arielle placed the card in her pocket as she changed her mind and walked out of the lounge.

When she finally arrived at the information desk, Henrick looked like he was on the verge of exploding in anger. It was clear that he was impatient after waiting for her.

"There will be dire consequences if you delay your sister's ceremony!" Henrick scowled.

In contrast, Cindy spoke in a very demure and gentle tone. "It's still early. She won't delay the ceremony. I was just scared that Arielle would have gotten lost in this foreign place. Arielle, look at your sister, she was so worried that she burst into tears when she couldn't find you at the exit."

Arielle turned to look at Shandie. True to Cindy's words, Shandie's eyes were red and swollen. There were even glistening tears around the corners of her eyes. "Arielle, it's alright... I'm just glad that you are safe." Shandie sniffled as she said this.

When Arielle shifted her gaze downwards, Arielle caught sight of several red gashes across Shandie's thigh underneath her skirt.

In order to make Hendrick scold Arielle, Shandie had resorted to such extreme tricks and schemes.

When Shandie noticed Arielle's gaze, she quickly used her hand to cover her thigh.

Immediately, Arielle looked away under the pretense that she hadn't noticed anything. She did not provide an excuse to Henrick. Instead, she apologized profusely. "Dad, I'm so sorry that I made everyone worry. I'll make sure to sit next to everyone so that this incident won't happen again." Arielle's face was pale as she murmured apologetically.

Upon hearing Arielle's statement, Henrick finally remembered that they had booked first-class seats on the plane. On the other hand, Arielle sat in the economy class.

Henrick coughed awkwardly, it seemed like he couldn't find it in himself to remain mad at her anymore. "It's fine. Let's go. We'll be late if we don't set off now."

"Alright." Arielle nodded her head obediently. She even reached out to help Cindy with her luggage.

In the blink of an eye, Henrick's anger dissipated.

Yet, this experience seemed to show that his eldest daughter was someone compliant and weak-willed.

Perhaps / should shift all of my attention to Shandie instead

In a flash, Shandie garnered his love and attention again. Henrick went out of his way to book the hotel located closest to the ceremony. He even reserved a suite just for Shandie.

In the room, Shandie was utterly delighted. "Mom, isn't my plan brilliant?" She beamed and asked Cindy.

"I told you not to make any move behind my back!" Cindy did not seem to share Shandie's joy. Instead, a deep frown graced her forehead.

Seeing Cindy's anger, Shandie tugged on her arm in a coy manner. "Mom, don't be angry anymore... Wasn't the final result satisfactory?"

Cindy suddenly remembered that Henrick had arranged for Arielle to stay at the cheapest room in the hotel. Immediately, her mood brightened. "You rascal. The next time you try to do anything, you should let me know first," Cindy chastised Shandie and flicked her nose mischievously

"Relax, Arielle isn't as strong as you claim to be. I bet she's throwing an enormous tantrum right now!"

On the other hand, Cindy was deep in thought.

Anyone who fell into Shandie's schemes would

have lashed out or defended themselves. Yet, Arielle did not. She merely admitted her mistake and tried to improve her flaws.

This means that Arielle is someone who can endure hardships and stay calm despite being blamed. She would be extremely dangerous if she decides to lash out.

"Darling, listen to me. I've thought about it. You should just receive your trophy obediently. Don't try to say anything else. We should try our best to understand her. There will be plenty of chances to deal with her in the future," Cindy said solemnly.

"Alright, Mom." Shandie nodded her head in agreement. Despite her actions, she didn't seem to share the same thoughts as Cindy.

CHAPTER 20

Inside Arielle's room.

Arielle felt neither unhappy nor unsettled in any way as she surveyed the modestly decorated interior of the hotel room.

Never mind that she had temporarily fallen out of favor with Henrick, her very presence had already thrown this family into disarray, and amidst the ensuing chaos, she reckoned that she would surely find the truth which she sought!

The ceremony would begin in half-an-hour.

Before leaving the room behind, Arielle went before the mirror to straighten out her disheveled hair.

The girl staring back at her in the reflection looked unbelievably fetching, coltish and acquiescent, but only she herself knew this to be a mere facade.

A wolf masquerading in sheep skin bit faster, more incisively and viciously, and left no chances for its enemies.

The venue for the ceremony was extravagantly luxurious, with the aroma of coffee from the sampling stations of the various sponsoring roasters saturating the air inside.

Shandie picked up a cuppa the moment she entered and took a whiff from it before tilting

her head toward Henrick. “This is pretty good, smells full-bodied. And judging from its form, reckon that it should be from... Corleon.”

The sponsor at the side approached appreciatively when he incidentally overheard her. “You’ve a good eye, Miss. Our beans are indeed sourced from Corleon.”

The man’s effusive praise for Shandie made Henrick’s heart swell with joy as he looked proudly at her.

While Shandie was basking in her moment of glory, she lifted her head to see that sponsor looking absolutely mesmerized by Arielle.

Shandie had no doubt that the man would start drooling were he to carry on ogling, and that irked her to no end.

Although Shandie was a little over twenty just as Arielle was, the former still came across as a young lass who had yet to shake off her own girlishness.

In a few more years, there would be no telling whether Shandie herself would even be fit enough to be a complementary leaf to the ravishing rose that Arielle could become.

The very thought of that had Shandie gnashing her teeth and wishing for Arielle to disappear.

She thought that a country girl like Arielle

should not show up and mess up her life like this!

Shandie took two steps to her left to block off the man’s line of sight, and harbored deviousness in her eyes when she picked up a cup of coffee in the same motion.

She shoved the beverage into Arielle’s hands and said, “Have a taste of their coffee too, Arielle. I thought it’s rather decent.”

Before Arielle could respond, Shandie pressed a hand to her own mouth as if she had hit upon a realization. “I forgot that you’ve always stayed in the countryside... so you must not have taken coffee before, haven’t you?”

The sparkle vanished from the sponsor’s eyes behind her. He was looking for an ambassador for his company and had thought Arielle’s outwardly appearance fit the bill.

It did not occur to him that she was from the countryside and had not even drank coffee before.

As lovely as the girl was, he deemed her unsuitable, or even undesirable, as a brand ambassador since such an appointment would likely be received negatively by netizens.

Arielle paid little heed toward Shandie’s comments and only wished to taste it for herself.

The result of her sampling drew a frown from her. “Too bitter.”

As fragrant as the coffee smelled, it was too acrid to the taste buds and apart from the bitterness, there was little complexity to the aftertaste – The quality was not all that Shandie made it out to be.

Shandie snatched the cup back from Arielle, adamant in the view that it was Arielle who did not understand coffee.

What does a country bumpkin like her know about coffee?

Arielle's response was exactly as Shandie anticipated, and that greatly pleased her. The latter then turned to the sponsor apologetically. "I'm sorry, mister. It's not that your coffee isn't good, but my sister here doesn't know how to appreciate it."

The man became more certain than ever that Arielle, who did not understand his product at all, should not be up for consideration.

Once again, he regarded Shandie smilingly. "That's okay, since not everyone is a coffee lover. In that case, I'll be taking my leave. Good day, ladies."

The sponsor nodded at Shandie before turning away

Henrick was thoughtful as he watched the man depart, believing his younger daughter to be far more capable than his elder girl.

Afraid that Henrick might be upset, Cindy purposefully chided, "Really, Shannie. Why did you have to let your sister drink coffee in front of so many people?"

Shandie's appeared quite indignant. "It just slipped my mind..."

Henrick waved it off. "The girl had always been forgetful, but Arielle, how could you tell the sponsor in his face that his coffee was bitter? You've really embarrassed me back there!"

With her head bowed, Arielle lowered her gaze apologetically. "I'm sorry, Dad. Don't be mad..."

"Bah, forget it!" Henrick looked away in annoyance before he regarded Shandie. "It's almost time, so you should go prepare yourself backstage. Dad and Mom would be waiting out there for you to receive your prize."

"Okay, Dad." Shandie smiled pleasantly and waved to Cindy before she took her pass backstage, while Arielle followed Henrick and Cindy to the gallery.

Whether by accident or intent, Arielle found herself left far behind by a Henrick who looked like he was trying to keep his distance from something repugnant, acting as if they did not arrive together.

Well, that was her dad. A good father who would happily toss her aside once she no longer proved useful!

Arielle's eyes darkened in wistfulness, albeit for a second, but she kept her own emotions in check and continued walking pliantly behind Henrick.

The ceremony commenced shortly after they were seated.

The number of visitors on the day was more than usual, primarily because of the presence of Vinson Nightshire as one of the guest-of-honors this year.

Many had fought tooth and nail to secure a slot at the event just for the opportunity to get close to him.

Finally, the guests emerged after the introduction by the host; starting with one of the founders of Crown Coffee Academy, followed by a renowned barista in the industry, and then Rain Evans, who Arielle ran into earlier on the plane.

Last but not least, the host welcomed in the final guest. "Please put your hands together for the CEO of Nightshire Group, Vinson Nightshire!"

The rapturous reception at the mention of his name ignited went far to illustrate that more than half of the crowd were here for him.

Those mounted video cameras were promptly directed toward the door leading backstage. At the end of the ceremony, the technicians would edit the footage and post it onto Crown Coffee Academy's official blog.

The documentation of the ceremony each year would receive extra attention largely because of Vinson's expected appearance.

When Vinson strolled unhurriedly to the front of the stage to greet the audience, he suddenly caught sight of a familiar face.

Is that... Arielle?

His gaze lingered upon her for awhile before pulling away. He then extended a bow to the people gathered in the seats. "Hello everyone, I'm Vinson Nightshire."

The applause from the audience grew ever more fervent.

Seeing the positive response from the audience, the host called after him while he was about to take his place amongst the other guests. "Look at the crowd, Mr. Nightshire. Why don't you share a few more words with us?"

Vinson considered turning down the invitation,

but could not help but agree when his thoughts came to that someone seated in the gallery.

He cleared his throat and unprecedentedly added, "It's an honor to be able to attend the awards ceremony at the invitation of Crown Coffee Academy. Today, I shall be announcing the brand ambassador for Soir Coffee after the prize-giving."

These words which were amplified by the sound system reached the ears of Shandie backstage and sent her heart racing. Her eyes lighted up as though she would be accelerating to the highest point in her life within the next second.

Becoming an ambassador for Soir Coffee meant that she would be able to meet with Vinson in-person quite often, and that could only help her secure a role in Sam's new film and catapult her into the upper echelons of society—pure icing on the cake.

The very notion of that made Shandie grip her fists tightly. Being the champion meant that the role of brand ambassador was surely hers for the taking!

Meanwhile, at the front of the stage.

The host warmed up the crowd and saw Vinson to his seat before inviting the presiding judge Rain onstage.

Rain was all smiles and glanced ambiguously in Arielle's direction before he turned to regard the audience. "Thank you, everyone, for taking time away from your busy schedules to attend the awards ceremony..."

After some opening statements, he went on straight to the matter at hand. "Now, we shall announce the results of this round of competition, starting with the second runner up..."

With the second and third placed prizes handed out, Rain took a pause before he declared, "Congratulations to our champion, Shandie outhall!"

Backstage, Shandie held her breath before she elatedly walked onstage amidst thunderous applause.

A blushing Shandie then received the winner's trophy from Rain.

Made of pure gold, the trophy was quite hefty inside her hands, but she felt like she was riding on cloud nine

"Thanks, everyone. Thank you, Mr. Evans. And I'd also like to extend my gratitude to my parents for their continued support. I'll promise to keep working hard!" Shandie was almost choking up with emotions,

At that moment, Rain said, "Now, let's invite Mr.

Nightshire onstage to announce his choice for brand ambassador."

Watching Vinson step up only made Shandie even more antsy, so much so that she nearly forgot to hand the microphone over to him in the process.

Vinson began when he took over, "I'm going to keep this brief and get right to the announcement"

Eagerness as well as nerves consumed Shandie. Looking inside her open palm, she found that there was already a veneer of sweat on it.

Here it comes. Here it comes!

The pivotal moment of her life!

Without even glimpsing at Shandie, Vinson's eyes hovered over Arielle for a second before he said, "And the brand ambassador is... Arielle. Ms. Areille Moore."