

Beside her were another two figures, one older and one younger.

When Natalie's gaze shifted to their faces, her eyes widened in shock. "It's them!" she cried out instinctively.

The other two accompanying Mercede, Andre and his daughter Annie, were familiar faces to Natalie. She had previously met them at a wedding Stanley had brought her to, where they were introduced to Natalie as the groom's family members.

Why are they here now? Natalie was puzzled.

Shane had also recognized the Hills and was likewise slightly taken aback by their presence there. However, he was more practiced at concealing his emotions and wiped off the look of surprise on his face as quickly as it appeared.

Alerted by Natalie's cry, Mercede and the Hills turned unanimously in Shane and Natalie's direction.

When Mercede caught sight of Natalie, her dark eyes lit up. Disregarding the two behind her, Mercede extended her arms toward Natalie, exclaiming in delight, "My dear, you've finally come to visit! I've missed you so much!"

Natalie stood up and ran toward Mercede with equal enthusiasm. The two women embraced and air-kissed each other on both cheeks. "Ms. Mackenzie, I'm back! I've missed you too. Happy birthday!"

"Thank you, my dear," Mercede said earnestly, holding Natalie's hands tightly.

Obstructed by Mercede's back, the Hills had yet to catch a glimpse of Natalie. They were, however, immediately confounded by the sight of Shane sitting on the sofa. "Mr. Shane!" Andre hollered.

Andre's yell startled Natalie, who hastily disentangled herself and said, "Ms. Mackenzie, there's someone I want to introduce to you."

Shane paid no heed to the Hills. Affably, he stood up and walked over to Natalie's side.

When Mercede saw him, her eye lit up instantly, and her lips quivered slightly with emotion.

Natalie was too exuberant to detect any change in Mercede. Gesturing to Shane, she announced, "Ms. Mackenzie, this is my boyfriend. His name is..."

However, before Natalie could finish her sentence, Mercede had already taken a huge step forward and stood face to face with Shane.

Mercede's abrupt movement had simultaneously exposed Natalie to the Hill's curious stares, which immediately transformed into gapes.

"Dad, she..." Annie gasped.

Andre shook his head violently, indicating for Annie to hold her tongue.

Shifting her gaze from her father to Natalie, Annie's mouth hung open as if her question still dangled therein. After a while, however, she obediently remained silent.

Natalie had not noticed the Hills' strange behavior. She was watching nervously as Mercede circled Shane, surveying him closely.

Just as Natalie was about to defend him, Mercede had already come to a conclusion and was bent on pronouncing it. Undeterred by Shane's piercing gaze, Mercede gave his shoulder a good pat, saying, "He gets full marks for his physical appearance, that's for sure. Sir, may I ask if you have any interest in becoming a model? You can be my muse."

"Huh?" Shane looked momentarily flustered. Whatever judgment he was expecting Mercede to issue, that was not it.

Blushing, Natalie pulled Mercede toward her, whispering, "Ms. Mackenzie, what are you doing?"

"I was just asking..." Mercede protested playfully.

"Ms. Mackenzie, he doesn't want to. He's the chairman of the Thompson Group. How can he be your model? What would happen to the Thompson Group, then?" Natalie explained, shaking her head.

Shane looked at the two women bemusedly. "What's happening?"

Natalie massaged her temples and said, "Besides being an expert designer, Ms. Mackenzie is also very interested in scouting modeling talent. To a costume designer, a model is one of the most important aspects of presenting our work."

"I understand," Shane replied soberly.

Natalie quickly added, "So please don't blame Ms. Mackenzie if she was behaving oddly just now."

Shane broke into a grin. "Of course not."

"My dear, did you say that this man is your boyfriend?" Mercede continued. Although she was disappointed that a perfect modeling talent was going to waste, she was determined not to let that distract her.

"What? Boyfriend?" Just as Natalie was about to answer, Annie broke in agitatedly. She wrenched herself free from the hand that Andre had placed on her arm warningly and strode over to Natalie. Shaking with rage, Annie repeated, "Mr. Shane is your boyfriend?"