

Shane acknowledged with a grunt. "Come back quickly."

"Okay." Natalie smiled at him, then made her way out of the private room.

Annie, who was at another table, noticed Natalie's movements and followed suit.

Natalie sensed that someone was creeping up behind her. With a frown, she halted in her tracks, then turned around and commanded, "Come on out!"

Without a choice, Annie slid out from behind a corner.

Seeing that it was only Annie, Natalie was both relieved and annoyed.

"What's going on?" Natalie confronted Annie with narrowed eyes.

Gritting her teeth, Annie replied, "I just wanted to ask where Dr. Quinn is now."

"Why?" Natalie retorted.

Taking a deep breath, Annie confessed, "I wanted to see for myself who his current girlfriend is."

"So what if you get to see her?" Natalie probed. "Are you intending to break them up, then?"

Annie's eyes widened, unable to defend herself.

Natalie's face grew thunderous. "What's the use of doing all this? Stanley doesn't like you. Even if you break them up, it won't make him like you either. In fact, he'll despise you even more. Don't you see?"

"I know, but I can't help myself!" Annie cried as her eyes reddened, and she looked as if she was on the verge of tears. "I've liked Stanley since I first set my eyes on him, but he's never cared for me! I thought that he'd notice me someday as long as I stayed faithfully by his side, but..."

Annie choked back a sob. Thickly, she continued, "But he started dating you. I waited patiently all this while for the two of you to break up, and now he's in a relationship with someone else! If he can date so liberally, why doesn't he even want to consider me? I don't want to wait any longer! I have to do something!"

Deep in her heart, Annie knew that Stanley did not love her. However, she fervently believed that as long as he was willing to give her a chance, she would be able to melt his heart of stone.

Looking at the frenzied expression on Annie's face, Natalie sighed, feeling a rush of pity for the desolate woman standing before her.

"What's the use of that?" Natalie repeated.

"It's none of your business! Go on dating Mr. Shane for all I care. Don't interfere with Dr. Quinn's love life anymore. You're no longer his girlfriend," Annie retorted defiantly, eager to lay claim on Stanley now that Natalie was no longer his girlfriend.

Natalie gave her a wry smile. "Fine, I won't interfere. But I won't tell you where Stanley is either."

"Why not?" Annie howled in desperation.

"I don't want to," Natalie replied, shrugging her shoulders.

"You..." Annie was livid. She glared at Natalie menacingly but could do nothing beyond throwing a tantrum. "Fine. Don't tell me, then! I'll find out on my own. There's nothing the Hills' influence won't be able to grant me access to!"

Without waiting for Natalie to reply, Annie turned and stormed off in a fit.

Natalie gazed at Annie's retreating figure, then shrugged her shoulders once again before continuing on her way to the bathroom.

She returned to the private room ten minutes later.

As Natalie approached the table, Shane had already pulled out her seat in anticipation.

"What took you so long?" he asked urgently.

"I ran into Ms. Hill," Natalie answered nonchalantly.

Shane wrinkled his nose in distaste. "What did you talk about with her?"

"What else? She wanted to know about Stanley's whereabouts," Natalie replied crossly.

“Did you tell her?” Shane asked.

“I would never,” Natalie declared scornfully, cutting up a chunk of steak and placing it into her mouth. “I turned her away.”

“That’s good.” Sensing that Natalie was unwilling to dwell on the matter any further, Shane picked up his glass of wine and swirled it a little before taking a sip.

The dinner party ended otherwise uneventfully two hours later.

Natalie bade farewell to Mercede while wishing her many happy returns of the day, then left the hotel with Shane, Sharon, and Connor in tow.

Spent from the day, the two children fell fast asleep once they had gotten into the car.