**Follow The Leader**

It started the way it always did. Ala would call up Sheila, long after the hours when it would be appropriate. Sheila would walk to her phone in her old pajamas, quiet even though there was no one around to wake. She’d pick up the phone and before she could say anything, Ala would start.

“Darling, how are you?” she’d begin, and Sheila would open her mouth to respond. But, Ala would have already started bragging. “I’m great, doll. Michael and I are renewing our vows you know, Kimmy and John are both honors students, you know! But they are *my* grandkids you know.”

*Yes,* Sheila thought *I know*.

“Come down to the *The Last Feast* tomorrow okay? We’ll have dinner.”

And that was it. Ala expected Sheila to drop whatever plans she had, to attend a last minute dinner. Sheila had plans so she wouldn’t go. Not a chance.

The next evening Sheila stepped out of the bus. She’d dressed up in a simple blue dress. She’d combed her grey hairs out of her face and powdered her cheeks with the same salmon blush that Minnie had bought her for her birthday. She felt good.

Looking around the parking lot she spotted Minnie’s BMW; its glossy black paint gleaming in the early dusk. There was no sign of Ala’s showy Porsche though. She’d notice it if it was there because it was a yellow thing; it had a custom paint job of butterflies of all things on the trunk. Yet, that was how it was. Minnie and Ala had everything and Sheila had a senior discount on her bus fare.

Entering the restaurant, she felt herself pale. The place was showy but in that understated way. It screamed expensive. The man who led her through the restaurant, out to the “private patio, Madam” was dressed better than she was.

She shuffled behind him to the table, nowhere near as confident as she had been before. The table was the only one out in the patio. It was hidden in a little grove, illuminated by dim lanterns. And on the far end of it, Minnie herself was illuminated.

Just seeing Minnie made Sheila hunch over even further. Minnie had that presence that screamed; dominance. She was a bigger woman, almost regal with her narrow blue eyes and long nose. Nothing dainty in her face.

Her dress was a black sheet that swallowed her large figure. She looked completely unbothered by her tragic dress, but Sheila was embarrassed for her.

When Minnie saw Sheila, she made no movement to get up; instead Sheila scurried over and pressed her weathered lips to Minnie’s cheek. Only then did Minnie turn and greet her with a condescending pat on the head.

Patronized, Sheila ducked her head, feeling much less than her 70 years.

When Minnie swept her hand across the available seats, Sheila moved automatically to the one between Minnie and the chair across from her. It was routine. *And* Sheila thought, *the one way I had power over Ala and Minnie.* The two of them didn’t like each other; in fact, they could barely tolerate each other. They relied on Sheila to supervise their meetings. Otherwise, one of them would end up dead.

It’d been like that since they’d been roommates at boarding school; Minnie and Ala forced together and Sheila doing her best to pacify the both of them.

Sheila’s clearest memory was of herself cowering under her covers while Ala ripped Minnie’s favorite blouse just because she could and Minnie snarled. They had stuck together out of convenience not because they had had any real affection for each other.

Sitting across from Minnie was reminding Sheila of all those unpleasant years. Especially since Minnie didn’t speak to Sheila once while they waited for Ala. Instead Minnie scoured the menu with the same sort of attention that wolves had when stalking prey.

Sheila quietly scanned her own menu, but was unable to decide between the expensive scallops (which she’d be paying off for the next 3 months) or the cheaper salad (which her friends would loudly mock). Just as she was settled on the salad, she heard a squeal.

It was Ala who, at 72, still had a body with curves and boobs that were perky and didn’t sag. Ala who still dyed her hair blond and wore mascara. Ala, who was already tipsy.

Minnie looked at her with disgust; Sheila thought it was a miracle Ala didn’t burn up into a crisp from the heat of Minnie’s glare.

After thoroughly groping the waiter (who she had at least 40 years on), and placing a sloppy kiss upon his cheek, Ala stumbled over to them. Greeting Sheila, she oohed and ahhed over Sheila’s dress before casually remarking,

“That dress makes you look fat,” while pecking Sheila on the nose. Ala didn’t even try to approach Minnie whose glare suggested broken bones if Ala even dared to say hello.

The moment she sat down, Ala ordered a bottle of champagne, and though she shared it with her friends, it was very obvious that she’d filled her own glass with more.

*Still it was alright,* Sheila supposed. Ala kept giggling and guffawing and smacking her knee like she was in an old rodeo and Minnie’s lips were so pursed they’d faded into her skin, but that was better than usual. Nobody was yelling (Minnie) or throwing things (Ala) or crying (Sheila). So, Sheila concluded it was a good night.

When the waiter took their orders, Sheila ordered the scallops, making wide eyes at her friends as she did so, waiting to see if they would notice and recognize her decision.

Typically, they weren’t even looking at her. They were too busy smiling plastic smiles at each other (or at least Ala was, Minnie was just blinking at Ala coldly).

It was right as they were starting to eat their main courses, their *entrées*, when it happened. Ala had been laughing when she’d tossed a large chunk of steak into her mouth. She swallowed it before she’d begun to chew it. So naturally, Ala began to cough.

The problem was that it was a little cough that didn’t stop. Instead, the little coughs turned into splutters and hacks.

Sheila sat completely still, eyes wide. Beside Sheila, Minnie’s eyes relaxed from their glare to look almost amused.

It was when Ala threw back her chair and began to cry that Sheila suddenly felt real fear. Ala’s coughing had gotten quieter, but her face had turned a nasty purple as she frantically shook it from side to side.

Suddenly, Sheila jumped up from her own chair, and raising her voice, began to scream.

“Help! Somebody help us! She’s choking, oh please, she’s choking!”

But they were at a table out in the back and nobody could hear anything. Sheila rushed towards her friend, but just as Sheila was near enough to touch Ala (and do what Sheila did not yet know) a hand clamped down on her arm. It was Minnie.

“Fool! You’re causing a scene, it’s just Ala being a diva again.”

“No, I don’t think so Minnie! Look she’s still coughing!”

Minnie’s hand pressed down even tighter.

“Leave it alone.” It was the harshest whisper Sheila had ever heard but it along with her always-present fear of Minnie sent her scrambling back into her seat.

Ala was now on the ground. She wasn’t dead yet, her limbs were still scrabbling feebly at the ground and her eyes were still open. She was slowing down though.

Minnie stood at her head, with a terrible little smile on her face. She watched with a fascinated look on her face.

As Ala grew still; Sheila began gasping huge wheezing breaths, like she was choking too. She barely noticed when Minnie grabbed her again and began to tug her down out of the grove and into the restaurant.

The room swam as Sheila followed after Minnie right into the bathroom. Pinning Sheila to the wall, Minnie raised her finger.

“Right dear, we’ve got to clarify a few things.”

“What?” It came out far shakier than Sheila had intended.

Minnie gave her a look of such disgust that Sheila recoiled as if she’d been slapped.

“We weren’t outside when it happened. We were in here, powdering our noses. In fact, we should probably actually do that in case they check. Here use mine; it’s so much better than that ridiculous blush that you’re wearing right now.”

Minnie’s voice was so low and frightening that Sheila quickly grabbed the powder and began to mechanically powder her nose. Her hands shook as she did it.

Minnie stood to the side with a look of pure satisfaction on her unfocused eyes. Sheila inched away from her.

“Call an ambulance! There’s a lady outside and I think she’s dead!” The yell came from outside the bathroom door.

Minnie was in her element. She ran out into the restaurant and with her listen-to-me-because-I-am-important voice, began to demand questions.

“What in Hell’s name are you talking about? What’s happened?”

Coming out of the bathroom herself, Sheila scooted next to Sheila, already shaking.

The waiter who’d been yelling had been the one who had served them and when he looked at them all the colour drained out of his face.

“Oh, Madams, you’re friend… I just saw… Oh God… I’m so sorry.”

And Sheila fainted.

She came to on a stretcher, out in the parking lot. The first thing that she noticed was that her hand was trapped inside a much larger one. Opening her eyes she saw Minnie’s blue ones staring back at her. Sheila whimpered.

“Dearies! She’s awake, look!”

Minnie’s cry got the paramedics running. They stood next to Sheila and asked her many questions. She couldn’t remember them all but Minnie made sure to reassure the paramedics that *it was just part of being an old women and had nothing to do with a concussion or any nonsense like that.*

The paramedics disagreed, but while they wanted her to come with them to the hospital, they weren’t leaving just yet.

So Sheila sat with Minnie, who looked far happier than Sheila had ever seen her.

“That old bat finally got what she deserved.” Minnie kept murmuring, a small smile playing on her lips.

Sheila still shaking turned instead to look at the restaurant. *The Last Feast, how ironic,* she thought.

Sheila was so busy staring at the restaurant that she didn’t notice Minnie when she begun to talk. Bewildered Sheila turned to face her only to find herself further horrified by what she heard.

“Well dear, I suppose it’s just the two of us now. I’ll call you about going for lunch next week. We’ll arrange to go to the funeral together; God knows it’s expected of us to show.”

Staring at her with disbelief Sheila let her thoughts spill off her tongue.

“You killed her.”

“I did nothing of the sort. I didn’t even touch her.”

“You let her die!”

“Well it was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, I couldn’t pass it up.”

“You’re a monster!”

Here Minnie’s grin grew frosty.

“We did the exact same thing, you and I. You’re just as guilty as I am. You didn’t help her either.”

**WORD COUNT: 1880 WORDS**