

Chapter 18: Nicole's Past

"You only had one thing to do: make Evan Thompson marry you." An older man spoke coldly to his daughter in a private home. "Now, we could not even get out of the city. If Evan ever finds out, we will lose everything. Have you forgotten what the Thompsons did to us back then? This was your chance to redeem yourself!"

Glancing at her father, Nicole replied, "I – I'm sorry, dad. I – I was careless. I failed."

The man shook his head, saying, "You waited many years for nothing." Her father was not screaming, but his tone was glacial enough to send shivers down her spine. "We are done with Evan. It's getting too dangerous – "

"But, dad" Nicole tried to retort, but his father seethingly approached her, thrusting his hand back. He was this close to hitting her, but he halted mid-way. He said, "I went along with your plan, thinking you could do it, but in the end... you are still no match for Shantelle Scott!"

Her father turned around and marched to another room. He came back quickly and threw an envelope containing old documents, saying, "I'll go out and buy hair color. For now, we will have to make use of that old ID. Let's hope the police won't suspect us with you, holding on to a mere high school ID and an old birth certificate!"

"Forget Nicole Lively! You are back to being Melody Campbell!" Her father said before pacing out of her room and down the stairs of their old home.

Alone in her room, Nicole wept, thinking about her situation. After many years of planning, stalking, and studying Evan from afar, she still failed. After changing herself completely, to become someone Evan would appreciate, she still could not win his love.

Everything was going according to plan when Evan brought her back to Rose Hills, but alas, his father forced him to marry Shantelle! Then, even after she successfully made Evan divorce Shantelle, she was still no match for her!?

Evan did not have to say it, but Nicole saw how he left her at the club to be with Shantelle. He defended their marital home and kept her clothes in their closet. He did not even realize it, but until now, Evan still wore his wedding ring!

“This is all Shantelle’s fault! Shantelle! I hate you! You ruined everything – everything! Nine years have passed, and you are still the same person who ruined my life!” She barked, thinking about the past. “I really hate you, Shantelle! I hate you so much!” *
FLASHBACK: 9 YEARS AGO *

A girl with amber-colored eyes saw Evan and his friends coming her way. A smirk formed on her face as she held her books tightly against her chest.

When Evan walked past her, she purposely let all her books fall to the floor. Evan was the first one to pick up the pieces. His friends soon followed.

“Here, be careful next time, Melody,” Evan said. “You are always very careless with your things. “Thank you, Evan,” said the girl. Her name was Melody Campbell, a junior at the same school as Evan and a neighbor of Wendell Franco.

“You are welcome,” Evan plainly replied before walking away with his friends. That day, Melody wore the latest fashion trend. She had her hair done at the salon. They were silky smooth and smelled of lavender. Like always, when she created opportunities for Evan to aid her, he helped, but she got nothing more than what was required. 2

“Um. Evan. Evan?” She called and chased after the group of friends.” There is a small gathering at my house tonight. Just a few girlfriends of mine and maybe.” She smiled brightly and suggested, “Maybe, your friends? There is free beer?”

“You are not eighteen yet,” Evan said. “Oh, but it’s my house. So, it should be okay,” the girl said. Evan frowned. He answered, “I don’t know -“

“Sounds like fun,” Keith said. “We could go for an hour or two.” “Yeah. I don’t have to drive myself back home,” Wendell remarked, and Sean laughed.

Before Evan could answer, Shantelle rushed in their direction. The girl already knew Shantelle Scott. She was the daughter of a cardio surgeon, Doctor William Scott, and her rival in Evan’s attention.

“Evan! Evan! Dad has a meeting at the hospital. As usual, mom will be with him to help. Dad asked if you could take me home, but I want to go to the beach. It’s plankton season!” Shantelle squeaked in excitement.

“Wait. Wait. Shanty, didn’t uncle William say you should go home?” Evan asked. It was as if no one was around them. His full attention was on Shantelle. A laugh escaped Shantelle’s lips before she revealed, “But it’s plankton season!”

"I don't know." Evan frowned at the idea. "Come on, Evan! Don't you want to see the ocean wonder of bioluminescence? The sea sparkling in neon blue?" Shantelle encouraged, her eyes gleaming as she described.

Evan laughed, and his eyes sparkled altogether. It made him look handsome, but that smile was only meant for Shantelle. He shook his head and said, "Shanty, what am I going to do with you?"

"Say yes, and let's see nature's wonders!" Shantelle beamed as she insisted on her plan. "You and your biology," Evan complained. He sighed and said, "Fine. Planktons, here we come.

"But, what about the party?" Melody sought. Her earlier smile faded after Shantelle came into the picture. Shantelle easily convinced Evan to take her to whatever it was she was talking about. 'Planton? Phantom? Plakons? Whatever!'

"Um, the boys can go," Evan said, referring to his friends. "Well, if you are not going, then we aren't," Sean revealed. Even Melody's next-door neighbor declined.

As Evan walked away with Shanty, Melody's blood boiled. A mere thirteen- year-old defeated her! For a year, she had been trying to catch Evan's attention. She observed how Evan was always helpful, so she faked many encounters with him.

One time, Melody tripped on purpose, knowing Evan was behind her. He aided her up, but then, he just left. Shanty came rushing to him, and Melody was ignored.

On another occasion, she saw Evan in the library. She pretended to be interested in books and was about to approach him when she realized the same young girl was with him. They were studying together.

Last month, she pretended to faint from sickness in front of Evan. He helped her to the clinic. However, after that, Evan was yet again rushing to where this little Shanty was!

Melody brewed hate for Shantelle, that on their subsequent encounter, she made sure her message was clear.

One afternoon, Melody saw Shantelle talking with her friends outside the school gates. She rolled her eyes as she moved closer to Shantelle. She smirked at the thought of Shantelle sprawled on the ground. Thus, with her right hand, she pushed Shanty onto the road. Melody laughed and said, "Oops! sorry.

The screeching of the school bus stopping in front of Shantelle shocked Melody and everyone around her. She did not realize it then as her back faced the arriving vehicle. Melody had just pushed Shantelle to the road where a bus was moving in the same direction!

The worst part was how Evan was apparently nearby. He carried Shantelle in his arms and held a murderous look in his eyes. "Melody! How dare you? You are going to get punished for what you did to Shanty!"

Melody was expelled the next day. Evan's parents, who held the most power in the city, ensured it. Not only that, Erick Thompson announced a business ban against her family, and they were forced out of Rose Hills. Her family lost many business opportunities while she struggled to enter a new school.

To Melody, her life turned into shambles, all because of Shantelle Scott. She hated Shantelle so much that she made it a mission to take what was hers, especially Evan Thompson.

After a series of plastic surgery, trying to look like Shantelle, she became Nicole Lively. She used part of her family's wealth to get her a new name instead of going by Melody Campbell. * END OF FLASHBACK *

Chapter 19: Melody? Or Nicole!

Melody's hair was back to its rich dark brown color. She had carelessly cut her hair and wore sunglasses despite leaving in the middle of the night. She wore a jacket and a hoodie over her head.

From that night onwards, she was no longer Nicole Lively. She was back to being Melody Campbell.

She settled at the back of their car while her father, Thomas Campbell, drove to the exit of the private community.

This was their chance to escape. "At least this time, with your hair changed back, they won't look into you closely," her father suggested.

True enough, when they arrived at the nearest checkpoint, presented with Melody's old school ID, a mere birth certificate, the police did not look into the car closely. They simply asked Melody to roll down the car window, and seeing her dark-colored hair; the police returned to his post.

“I think they bought it,” Melody said nervously. The officer who took their identification was speaking through a radio transceiver from a distance. After some time, the same officer approached their vehicle and returned their ID. He asked, “Why does Melody not have a valid ID?”

“We lost it when we arrived,” Thomas Campbell replied. “We are going to get her new ones.” “I see,” the police officer replied. “And where are you headed to at this night?”

“Um.. we are driving early to the next state,” Thomas replied. “We are meeting some friends there.” Next, the police officer’s radio called him in. He had to step aside and exchange with whoever was commanding him. “Yes, sir. Got it.”

When he returned to Thomas and Melody, the police said, “You may now... leave.” He smiled, but to Thomas, the way the officer smiled appeared to have a meaning behind it.

Still, Thomas was relieved. He hurriedly drove off to the main road. “We got out. There may still be another checkpoint, but getting through the first meant Evan has not identified us.”

“Oh, my god. We are going to get out, dad!” Melody was equally relieved that she was teary-eyed. “Wendell did not suspect us at all, and Evan, he – he was never able to connect me to my real identity!”

Melody still could not believe it. With Evan’s power, she thought Evan would have already learned! She exhaled, saying, “Luck is on our side.”

After making it a kilometer away from their neighborhood, Melody thought about Evan again. She inwardly said, ‘ I’ll come back for you, Evan. When I do, I’ll be prettier, and I won’t make the same mistakes again.’

The two of them drove for half an hour more, making their way to the middle of the city, when they encountered another inspection. This time, they were more confident. Yet again, they surrendered their identification. The officer in front of them smiled courteously.

They noticed two private vehicles arrived a few yards behind them, but since they were only private cars, they assumed they had been pulled over for inspection too. Seeing how the officer in front of them was so collected, Thomas and Melody suspected nothing.

The father and daughter exchanged approving nods. Out of nowhere, the police declared, "Mr. Campbell, someone is here to see you. Can you and your daughter please step out of the car?"

"Excuse me?" Thomas asked. "Is there something wrong?" Melody had her eyes widened. She turned to look out the back window and saw figures stepping out of the vehicles. However, it was so dark she could not decipher who they were.

"Please, step out of the car, sir," the officer insisted, leaving Melody and Thomas with no choice. Soon the two were outside, leaning against their car. Thomas kept asking the officer what the problem was, while Melody did her best to hide her face.

"Good evening, Mister Campbell." Eventually, they heard a man's ice-cold tone calling out to them. The voice came from Evan Thompson, and he was pacing towards them with his friends, Wendell and Sean. 6

When Evan stood before them, Melody quickly looked down. She repeatedly gulped air down her throat. Whereas, Thomas spoke to Evan defensively.

It was already midnight. The air was cold, but with the sudden arrival of Evan Thompson, Melody and Thomas felt the temperature drop to near zero degrees. Melody's knees were shaking, and Thomas could not contain the drumming of his heart.

"Evan, what is the meaning of this? Were you not satisfied that your family nearly ruined us over a simple fit of teenage argument?" Thomas reacted defensively.

"A fit of teenage argument?" Evan asked. "Really? Pushing Shanty onto the road was just a fit of teenage argument? Shanty did not even fight back. Something! Is seriously wrong with your daughter? Have you considered having her head checked?"

Thomas gulped. He answered, "Stop holding grudges of the past! That was a long time ago, and Shantelle was not hurt! We don't want any trouble. We want to leave – Melody and I."

"Melody?!" Evan said the name with complete sarcasm. "Melody. Melody. Melody!"

Evan glowered significantly and moved closer to Melody. He left only a few inches away, his frame towering over her. He was breathing loudly, almost like he was purring in anger.

Behind him, Wendell was shaking his head, and Sean was narrowing his eyes at the woman. "Or should I say... Nicole Lively!" Evan announced, his voice strengthening.

“Do you honestly think I would not connect the dots, Melody?” Behind Evan, Wendell said. “I knew you looked familiar. Even with your face changed. Your eyes remained the same!”

“What?” After hearing Wendell, Melody unwittingly looked up. “I-I don’t know what you are talking about! Who is this Nicole Lively?”

It was earlier that evening that Wendell came to Evan’s office. He discussed his inkling about his neighbor. Shortly after, Evan’s private investigator returned with the news! They confirmed that Nicole Lively was Melody Campbell!

After learning the truth, they set the plan in motion. With the help of the authorities, they allowed the father and daughter to believe they had gotten away, but Evan just wanted them to have a taste of freedom, knowing it would leave them more frustrated. Regardless of their route, the police already had the entire city surrounded!

“Nicole Lively, you are under arrest for perverting the course of justice by claiming to have been raped. You will also be charged for fraud, for falsely misleading Mister Thompson about your identity,” another police officer said behind Evan.

“You are mistaken “Melody tried to deny it, but the police kept speaking. “And Mister Campbell? You are also under arrest for conspiring with your daughter,” the police added.

“No-no. This can’t be.” Thomas was shocked. He never expected to be pinned down together with his daughter.

“You don’t need to deny it, Nicole or fucking Melody!” Evan barked. “We already know how you changed your name and face. I had you investigated!”

“No! No, that’s not true!” Melody said back. “What nonsense are you spouting about, Evan?!” Thomas countered.

Throughout the entire arrest, the father and daughter denied the accusations. They fought back, physically and verbally, to the point where the officers had to force them into a police car. Ultimately, Melody and Thomas Campbell were brought to the police station for questioning.

“Mister Thompson’s private investigator traced your previous apartment in Lockwood. The landlady gave up the storage room you had rented for the right price. So now we have this,” the man said. Inside the interrogation room, the police sat in front of Melody and opened an envelope containing the pieces of evidence.

There were several pictures of Evan, taken from his later years in college until he was taking his master's degree. Some photos showed Evan relaxing during his free time.

"You hired a private investigator yourself. Isn't that right? You stalked Mister Thompson for years. You knew where he ate breakfast, lunch, dinner, where he bought his coffee, and where he spent most of his time studying – at the library," the officer pointed out.

Another document showed how she changed her name. "You paid off a judge in Lockwood to allow your name change, and then you planned your meeting with Mister Thompson."

"Of course, this was after you had a series of surgery to look like Miss Shantelle Scott," the police added. "You were so jealous of Miss Scott that you tried to look like her. Isn't that right, Miss Campbell?"

"I am not jealous of Shantelle! I don't know what you are" When the police slammed another set of photos on the table, Melody jumped in her seat.

The following photos were of Shantelle. Each one had a big red "X" mark on them. It was clear to the officer that whoever drew the marks on the pictures had deep-rooted anger toward Shantelle.

Next, the police showed Melody a video of the teenagers' statements and the recording from the hotel. The police took a pen and paper. He pushed it toward Melody and suggested, "We can go all night and day at this. You can keep denying it, or you can admit to everything. Either way, the pieces of evidence against you are solid."@

"The choice is yours, Miss Campbell, the easy or the hard way?" The police added. There was a long silence as Melody gawked at the documents and photos. After nearly five minutes, she turned to look at the one-way glass mirror. She knew exactly who was behind that mirror.

"Evan!" She howled in tears, her palms pressed against the glass. "Evan, forgive me. I won't do it again. I promise! I'll leave Rose Hills!"

Water flooded her cheeks as she described, "Don't forget, I listened to you. I was that person you leaned on. I was your friend too. You must have cared for me at some point."

Melody pleaded, but nothing changed after hours of standing behind the glass mirror. She kneeled and begged, but nothing happened. The officer behind her remained unchanged. The police said, "Mister Thompson left the station two hours ago. Your

begging is pointless. Besides, it's out of his hands. The prosecutor is determined to file a case against you. You will definitely be locked behind bars.”

Chapter 20: Evan Hoped

Days passed. With the help of Wendell's father, Evan had Melody, and her father locked up. Although Thomas Campbell's charges were less severe, and he was bound to be set free, he did not escape Evan's wrath.

Thomas' unpaid property taxes surfaced, and the local government issued a memo to seize his mansion in Rose Hills. His illicit transactions with politicians in Rose Hills and in Lockwood were spread through the internet, and the truth about his failing business came to light.

Like what his father did in the past, Evan also announced a business ban against the Campbells. No one wanted to be associated with Thomas Campbell, and no private lawyer represented him. He was left to choose a public defender, who wasn't that keen to support him as well.

Evan had never been angered in the same manner all his life that he made sure Thomas and Melody Campbell would learn to fear him. He used up all his influence, and he did not hold back.

However, despite receiving justice, despite going all out on Melody's punishment, Evan's heart was not at ease. He was angry at Melody, but he was more... mad at himself.

For days, he had been staying at his office, barely sleeping, and simply putting all his effort into his work and following up with the authorities. He hoped that by tiring himself, the heavens would forgive him for his oversight.

He had not spoken to his parents, and he avoided his friends. His Assistant, James, was also sensitive enough never to mention Nicole Lively or Melody Campbell in the office.

One afternoon, Wendell came to see Evan. Evan had dark circles around his eyes. He had not shaved his face for days and appeared troubled.

“What's wrong with you, Evan? Nicole slash Melody is already behind bars,” Wendell asked. “Why are you killing yourself with work?”

Evan continued signing the contract in front of him. When he was done, he sucked in a breath. He shut his eyes and finally revealed what was bothering him. “Wendell, I don’t know what else to do. I don’t know what to say to my parents.”

His mouth parted as he gawked in no particular direction. He felt a lump in his throat, which was very difficult to gulp down. Eventually, he resumed, “I

– I don’t know how to apologize to Shanty. Her family should be back from vacation, but I don’t have a face to show her. It was Nicole who provoked her the whole time.

“I brought that woman back to this town! I caused my parents and I to quarrel!” He groaned and added, “If Nicole Lively did not happen, my father would not have forced me into marrying Shantelle, and maybe things would have been different.” 6

“Evan, please. Shanty loves you. She always has. Speak to her about it, and she’ll forgive you. Besides, it wasn’t directly your fault,” Wendell suggested. “As for your parents, you have every reason to be upset after taking away your will to choose.”

“Although.” Wendell frowned and reluctantly described, “Uncle Erick did choose well for you. Shanty is great.”

Evan repeatedly took deep breaths, doubtful. Thus, Wendell asked, “What I’d like to know is what you want from Shanty, Evan? Do you want her forgiveness because Nicole turned her into that insecure person you talked about? Or do you want more from her? Without Nicole – I mean, Melody, can you see distinctly now? How do feel you about Shanty?”

Observing how his friend had no definite answer. Wendell suggested, ‘ Don’t you have to go to Russia? Use that time to think through and plan for what you want. When you return, and your head has cleared, speak to Shanty. She’ll never turn you away. Shanty is Shanty.’

Evan gasped. The Scotts should have already returned from their vacation a few days ago, but he did not dare to see Shantelle.

To admit that he brought an insane woman into their lives was not something he could easily swallow. He was ashamed. Even if he never cheated on Shantelle during their marriage, Nicole Lively was the reason for her paranoia, hence their periodic fighting during the last few months of their marriage. While Evan had long desired his freedom, their constant arguing had pressed him to ask for a divorce once and for all.

'What do I want from Shanty?' Evan could not put a finger to it. He once told Shantelle how he wanted her out of his life. When it finally happened, however, it never made him contented.

Shantelle's absence and utter silence left an uncomfortable feeling deep inside him, one that he had not deciphered. Evan shifted his gaze to his friend and confirmed, "You are right. I need time to think this through."

In the afternoon, Evan prepared to leave for Russia. He returned to the villa late at night and packed his bags. The next day, he was ready to go when Mrs. Shaw rushed to the driveway, giving him a gift box.

"Sir, this arrived yesterday for you," Mrs. Shaw said with a smile.

"What is it?" Evan asked. "It's a gift." Mrs. Shaw pursed her lips before showing the box with a blue ribbon. "It's from Shanty."

Evan froze. 'A gift from Shanty?' For seconds, he stilled. Suddenly, Evan saw hope. Perhaps, what was broken could still be fixed. The Scotts were a family friend. Their ties did not have to end due to their unfortunate divorce.

A smile became painted on Evan's face when he accepted the gift and hopped into the car. As Howard drove him to the airport, warmth filled his heart. He was constantly studying the gift box, his head full of Shantelle's smiling face. Under his breath, he muttered, " She gave me a gift."

Because his flight would leave in an hour, he could not see Shantelle that day, but he would see her upon his return – on Shantelle's birthday.

Minutes into the road, he opened the gift and breathed in at the sight of the jadeite prosperity ring. He saw a note that said: [Evan. This is my belated gift for your promotion. I wish you prosperity in life. Shanty.]

Evan was elated, but after reading Shantelle's note, he felt heaviness in his chest that he could not fathom. His eyes felt watery. Evan had to sniff it back, overwhelmed by what was happening to him.

Despite everything that had happened between them, Shantelle still thought of him. Guilt washed over him. He gripped the ring tightly in his fist before attempting to put it on.

As he did, his eyes widened when he realized he still wore his wedding ring! It had been part of his daily wear for two years, and he could not bear to remove it. For a second, he gawked at his wedding ring, thinking, 'Was it really that hard to remove? Why didn't I take this off?'

Evan laughed slightly. He doubted his reasons. Finally, after putting on the prosperity ring, he said under his breath, "Thank you, Shanty. I'll see you when I return."