

The CEO's Ex-Wife Is A Famous Doctor Chapter 21 - 30

Chapter 21: Missing Shanty

“Evan, tomorrow, we can strike another deal,” Mr. Romanov suggested. “It’s good that you decided to visit. At least you can see how serious I am being a client in the many years to come.”

Mr. Romanov had taken Evan for a tour, driving from one showroom to another. “I expect over a hundred shipments to happen next year, so we can agree on a fair price where we both will be happy.”

Evan laughed. He replied, “Yes, that we should do.”

They were talking while walking around Mr. Romanov’s enormous car showroom when a woman with dark brown hair approached them. She was tall, slender, and had an elegant face, with chocolate brown eyes.

“Ah, Alina,” Mr. Romanov called, “Come meet Mr. Thompson.” “Mr. Thompson, since you have already divorced, it would be good to meet other women then,” Mr. Romanov said. “Alina is one of our primary models for the -“

“I’m not interested in seeing anyone, Mr. Romanov,” Evan quickly interrupted. “Oh, come on.” Mr. Romanov pointed at the girl, saying, “Isn’t she gorgeous?”

Evan glanced at the girl and saw her smiling his way. He studied her clothes and disapproved of how revealing it was. He returned his attention to Mr. Romanov, saying, “I prefer a conservative one.”

It had been a few days since Evan was in Russia. The trip was primarily for business, but he also used the time to think things through, especially about Shantelle.

Now and then, Mr. Romanov would introduce him to a woman, whether an employee or an acquaintance, but he found himself comparing them to Shantelle.

“I don’t find her attractive at all.” “I prefer on who can cook. My ex-wife used to prepare my meals.” “I see, you are interested in fashion?”

“My ex-wife is interested in biology.” No matter how attractive or achieved the women seemed, Evan could not bring himself to like any of them. It was as if they could not compare to his ex- wife!

On another occasion, Mr. Romanov invited Evan to dinner with his family. He met his son, who, after dinner, required help with his homework.

Evan and Mr. Romanov were drinking coffee when the boy walked in. “Dad, Mom, doesn’t know this, and I was sick. last week, so I missed the lesson. It’s biology!” “What about your nanny?” Mr. Romanov said. “I have a guest, son.”

“She doesn’t know this,” Valentin complained. Mr. Romanov tried to help his son, but having missed school for a long time, all he could say was, “Try... the internet.

Evan laughed from across the table. He offered, “Let me try. What’s your homework about?” “Biological molecules,” said the young man. “Ah, proteins, carbohydrates, lipids, and nucleic acids,” Evan suggested. “Let me see how I can help.”

Minutes went by, and Evan shared his knowledge about biological molecules. “Proteins repair and build your body’s tissues, allow metabolic reactions, and coordinate bodily functions. Which is why getting protein into your diet is very important.”

As Valentin took notes, Mr. Romanov nodded approvingly. After the boy was done, he smiled and thanked Evan. Then, he left to put his homework altogether. “Thank I you, Evan. I did not know you were very keen on biology,” Mr. Romanov remarked.

“It was my wife – I mean, my ex-wife.” Evan paused. Then, he added, “She always incorporated biology into our daily life. She was stern with my diet and reminded me of how each body molecule works. Every day was a new lesson learned with her.” “She – um. She would have pursued medicine if we did not marry early,” Evan added.

Evan remembered when Shantelle would talk about photosynthesis as she directed where the plants around the garden should go. Back then, he felt it was unnecessary, but their villa wound up having a good amount of floral blooms that neighbors were always jealous.

“She must be quite a woman,” Mr. Romanov revealed. “No wonder you are still so hung up on your ex-wife. Too bad you are already divorced.”

Evan leaned back. He said inwardly, ‘ Me? Hung-up on Shanty?’ He had to admit that part of him wanted to see her, and he definitely did not like how she cut all communications with him. ‘I guess... I miss her?’

‘I miss her,’ he repeated in his head. He recognized he had never been this way with any other woman, even with Nicole, whom he thought he liked in the past. He felt sorry for Nicole, but other than that, he never missed her or longed for her. Evan rarely dated

in his college years. When he went out with a girl, it was only for a simple dinner. He never asked for a second date.

Following this realization, Evan was more determined to see Shantelle upon his return. He wanted to understand what he was going through.

After ending his dinner with Mr. Romanov, Evan called his assistant back in Rose Hills. When James answered, he directed, "James, send a bouquet or roses to Shanty at the Scotts 'address." He gulped before adding, "Ask the florist to add an 'I'm Sorry' card."

Silence stretched for seconds before James answered, "Oh, Sir. That's good to hear. I thought Miss Shanty was lovely. I'll do that first thing in the morning."

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The next day, Evan had an entire day of meeting with Mister Romanov and his executives, but when he was done, he immediately called his assistant.

On the other line, James said, "Sir, the flower shop said there was no Shantelle Scott at the address I gave him. I'll deliver –"

"It's fine. You don't have to. You have a lot on your plate with me being gone. They probably went to the wrong house. Ask them to send it again. I'll be preparing for my flight tomorrow." Evan said. "Call the Sarah Kate boutique and have the gown I ordered for Shanty delivered."

"Yes, Sir," James confirmed. "Announce to the company that I'll take a week's leave upon my return. Book me and Shanty a package to Paris. I want the best hotel, first-class tickets, and excursions to the Louvre Museum and the Eiffel Tower," Evan added.

"Yes, Sir. That's well noted," James replied with enthusiasm, for he wholeheartedly supported his boss' change of heart. Another day came, but Evan received bad news.

"The flower shop insisted that there was no Shantelle Scott at the house, Sir. Maybe I should deliver this myself," James reported.

"What?" Evan was on his way to the airport when James called. "It's fine. Ask for a new bouquet by tomorrow. I'll personally go to the Scotts and give Shantelle the flowers. Have it sent to the villa. It's about time that I speak to Shantelle," Evan instructed. "And the gown?"

“Sarah Kate will deliver the gown today, Sir,” James confirmed. “And the tickets to Paris have already been booked, including your 5-star accommodation in the city.”

“Good,” Evan answered. “Send me the booking details, and I’ll print them when I get home.” Evan knew he was thinking ahead.

There was always that possibility that Shantelle would reject the trip to Paris, but he did not care. He had to try. Buying the tickets and reserving the rooms was his way of showing Shantelle his sincerity to spend time with her.

Soon, Evan boarded the aircraft. He settled in his seat in the first-class cabin and took a nap. Just before shutting his eyes, he thought only of Shantelle. He wanted to dream of her.

****FLASHBACK ****

“Evan, let me help you,” Shantelle said as she walked before him. Evan was shaving his face in front of their bathroom mirror when Shantelle insisted she give it a try.

“I am not a child, Shanty,” Evan complained, but Shantelle only giggled and took the shave. Evan and Shantelle were already married for six months. They were harmonious with each other, though; they had not yet been intimate. After their wedding, they left for their honeymoon in the Caribbean but never made love.

To Evan, the first six months of their marriage felt like getting to know each other all over again. Having been gone for so long, he barely knew what went on with Shantelle’s life.

“Evan, this is not about being an adult. This is me, your wife, being affectionate,” Shantelle said. Her face flushed from her admittance.

While Shantelle shaved the beard on his face, she smiled. Her eyes gleamed at her actions. Meanwhile, Evan could not help but study her closely.

Evan silently admitted how Shantelle was magnificent. She had that innocent look on her face when she smiled. It was for the first time that Evan forgot everything. He forgot his anger toward his father and overlooked that Shantelle had worked with his father to marry him.

“There, done,” Shantelle said. Her blue-colored eyes were glued to his. They both stilled, just doing nothing but looking at each other for seconds.

Evan did not show it, but secretly, he admired her beauty and spirit. Evan held Shantelle's waist, and for the first time since their marriage, he leaned and kiss her lips. Heat spread through his body. For the first time, they made love that night.

Evan had never reacted to any woman that same way. Despite that fact, he hid his every emotion. At that time, Evan would never admit to being affected by Shantelle, not when he was pushed into their marriage.

* END OF FLASHBACK***

"Ladies and gentlemen, Blue Airways welcomes you to Rose Hills. The local time is nine in the evening." Evan awoke to the announcement. He groaned as he relaxed back in his seat. He was dismayed as he said, "It was a dream. It was... only a dream."

He wished it wasn't a dream, and that Shantelle was right before him.

'Shanty,' he said. 'I miss you.' It was late in the evening when Evan arrived, but tomorrow, he would unquestionably drop everything to see Shantelle.

Chapter 22: The Scotts Moved

Evan was dressed in his best suit. He applied the perfume Shantelle always encouraged him to use. His hairstylist came to the villa and had his hair trimmed early in the morning. 'Shantelle would have already received her gown yesterday. I hope she liked it,' He thought in his head.

After Evan's haircut, he checked himself in the living room's mirror. When satisfied with his appearance, he dismissed the hairstylist. He grabbed the printed itinerary of the trip to Paris from his room and went down the stairs, ready to leave.

In the living room, he saw that the flowers had already arrived. Evan seized the bouquet and paced to the door when someone rang the doorbell at the villa's gates.

To Evan's surprise, his assistant, James, made an unexpected visit. He walked out of a car with a huge box in his arms, making Evan frown. It was in the driveway when Evan asked, James? What are you doing here?"

"Sir, I could not reach you last night, and I assumed you were resting, so I did not bother to call the landline. Sarah Kate boutique sent the gown to your office instead. They said." James frowned before informing, "They said Miss Shanty no longer lived in that address." Evan was stunned. He gulped and frowned. Soon, he asked, "What – what do you mean?"

"I don't know, Sir, but it was what the store manager told me. Whoever was in the house said that Miss Shanty had already moved," James said before bowing his head.

Silence fell upon them, but after a few seconds, Evan cleared his throat. "There there must be some mistake. That's their familial home. Doctor Scott loved that house so much. It was his father's home. He had just recently renovated it. They they must have delivered it to the wrong house."

While Evan said this, his heart was uneasy. First, it was the flowers, and now, the gown. 'Could the Scotts have moved? Impossible. Shanty would never leave without saying goodbye.'

Suddenly, the image of Shantelle leaving the villa flashed into his head. It was two months ago when he last saw her. He remembered how her last words gave him that feeling of emptiness. Back then, she said, "Goodbye, Evan."

He felt the sudden throbbing of his heart that he tried to convince himself. "I'll go there now. I'm sure it's just a mistake."

"Yes, Sir. I am sure," James reluctantly echoed Evan's words. "Do you want me to go with you, Mister Thompson?"

"No, go to the company. I need you there. Howard will drive me," Evan replied. "Put the gown in the car." "Everything, okay, Mister Thompson?" Howard, the Thompson family driver, asked.

For the last fifteen minutes, Evan took deep breaths and repeatedly bounced his left leg, all while Howard drove in the direction of the Scotts' residence.

"Everything is fine, Howard. I appreciate your concern. I am just a little nervous," Evan suggested. "Do you mind hurrying up?"

"Certainly, sir," Howard confirmed. He understood. This was the first time Evan would see the Scotts after the divorce. Howard assumed Evan was worried about what Doctor Scott and his wife had to say to him.

It did not take long for Evan to turn up at the mansion. It was Howard who rang the gate's doorbell for Evan. Howard said, "Mister Evan Thompson is here to see Miss Shantelle Scott."

"Um, okay. I guess I better speak to Mister Thompson." Whoever it was on the other line simply allowed the gates to open, and Howard drove in.

Evan was unfamiliar with the voice. He wondered, 'Was it a new maid?' Maybe. He certainly hoped it was the case, for he could not fathom the restlessness of his heart. Something was wrong, and he sensed it.

When Howard parked by the mansion driveway, a middle-aged woman with black hair walked out of the house. Just as Evan exited the car with the flowers in his hand, the lady said, "Mister Thompson, it's good to see the face behind the name.

The lady extended her hand and said, My name is Kristine Jones. My husband and I are the new owners of this estate. Judging from your recent deliveries, you were not informed that... the Scotts have moved."

Evan froze in his stance. He could feel his grip around the flowers loosening by the second. He clarified, "Excuse me?"

"Mister Thompson, I allowed you into the property to inform you that the Scotts have moved. About two months ago, we bought this estate from Doctor Scott. We just recently moved since we were still preparing for the relocation ourselves," Kristine repeated.

"The Scotts moved.'

'The Scotts moved.'

'The Scotts moved.'

The words played in his head over and over again. In each second that passed, he felt his heart becoming heavier.

Evan's breathing sped. His chest was heaving seriously when he asked, "To – to where? Which community in Rose Hills?"

The lady gave Evan a polite smile and replied, "I'm afraid Doctor Scott did not inform us, Mister Thompson, but from what I know... they were moving out of town permanently. He clearly said they were leaving Rose Hills for good."

Yet again, the image of Shantelle saying goodbye played in his head. He recounted how she said those words, 'Goodbye, Evan.' He recalled how Shantelle cried that night at the villa. "I'm going to miss you, Evan."

Seeing the reaction of Evan, Kristine offered, "I'm sorry, Mister Thompson, if this is bad news, but I can show you our deed of sale if you like -"

“Shanty!” Evan dropped the flowers on the ground and began to call her name. “Shanty! Shanty, please come out and speak to me. I’m sorry, Shanty!”

He barged into the house and looked around. The new homeowner had to follow behind him, saying, “Mister Thompson? They are long gone. Please, this is our property now.”

Despite the lady’s objection, Evan kept calling Shantelle’s name, “Shanty, please! Shanty!” He called again and again. Evan went as far as checking Shantelle’s room on the third level of the mansion, but he saw an empty room. There was not a hint of Shantelle left in it.

Kristine had to go to the study and bring the purchase contract to the property. After showing it to Evan, he finally conceded. She said, “Is this proof enough? I don’t fully know your history with the Scotts, but I knew his daughter was your ex-wife.”

“I understand that you are looking for her, and clearly, there were unresolved matters about your marriage. So, Mister Thompson, I will overlook your intruding into our home, but I hope this is the last time you come here without our permission,” the new homeowner added. “Again, the Scotts have already moved.”

“I – I’m sorry. It won’t happen again,” Evan faintly said before leaving the house. As he entered his car, he instructed, “Howard! To the St. Dominique Hospital! To Doctor Scott’s clinic!”

Chapter 23: Never Coming Back

Two buttons on Evan’s shirt were undone. He had difficulty breathing and had to open part of his shirt. He could not believe his eyes. A new doctor was now occupying doctor Scott’s clinic!

“This can’t be happening.” Evan raked his fingers through his hair and looked around. Seeing several secretaries walk by and others entertaining patients, he asked, “Does anybody know where Doctor Scott moved? Anybody?”

“Anybody?!” He asked again. Then, his gaze fell on the secretary across Doctor’s Scott’s previous clinic. He walked inside the room and asked the woman, “You! Do you know where Doctor Scott moved? What about his secretary? Do you know how I can reach her?”

“I’m sorry, Mister Thompson, but Eana did not say where they were moving,” the woman said. “Eana was still here last week, finalizing documents for Doctor Scott, but I believe she also left town.”

Eana was Doctor's Scott's long-time secretary. Evan was convinced she would know everything. He asked, "Do you have her number? Please. I need to call her."

Evan got Eana's number, and he quickly made the phone call. He called three times until Eana ultimately answered. Evan said, "Eana, this is Evan Tho -"!

The next thing he heard was a busy tone. When he tried calling again, his call went to voicemail. It was clear to him that Eana had blocked his number too. From where he was, he tried calling William and Eleanor Scott, but it was the same. All his calls would only route to voicemail.

Desperate to find answers, Evan went to the hospital's administration building. From there, he spoke to the hospital head. "Doctor Jacob, did Doctor Scott resign?"

"Yes, he gave only one month's notice. It was a struggle on our part, but he was very adamant about moving," Doctor Jacob responded.

"Do you know where they had relocated?" Evan sought. Doctor Jacob sighed. He responded, No, Mister Thompson, but even if we knew, that information is private – "

"Don't you know me? I am Evan Thompson!" Evan raised his voice, making the doctor shake his head.

"I know you very well, Mister Thompson. I know your family's power and influence in this city, but you forget I am also a professional doctor. I know what is wrong and right. I know I cannot freely give you information about Doctor Scott!" Doctor Jacob said.

"Although we honestly do not know. Doctor Scott said he needed to take his daughter out of Rose Hills." Doctor Jacob shrugged and concluded, "So, he left="

"But what about his patients?" Evan asked calmly this time, knowing that he could not threaten Doctor Jacob.

"From what I know, some were referred to a new doctor. I don't have the full knowledge," Doctor Jacob replied. "I'm sorry, Mister Thompson, but that's all the information I can give you. Doctor Scott and his family have left the city."

The rain poured over Evan as he left the hospital with nothing. He could not think straight. Just when he had admitted how he missed Shantelle, he learned she had already left the city!

"Mister Thompson! Mister Thompson! Get in the car, Sir!" He heard Howard call his name from behind, but it took seconds to come back to his senses.

Eventually, Evan turned on his heel and lazily entered the car. While inside, his eyes landed on the box containing the white gown he had bought for her birthday.

Will he ever see Shantelle in this dress? Will he ever see her again? Was this for real? Many questions played in his head as Howard drove away. Evan said in his head, 'Shanty, did you want to leave me?' 25

The Shantelle that Evan knew would never leave him. The Shantelle that he knew would do anything for him. How did she find the courage to leave Rose Hills?

Evan still could not accept it. "Sir? Can I take you to the villa?" Howard asked. "You need to change. You are completely drenched – "

"No," Evan answered. "Take me to UC MED University." There was one last hope, and that was where Shantelle completed her degree. Doctor Scott was one of the founders of the school. Evan was convinced that. Doctor Scott would never give up on his shares. If he did, selling them in just a few months would be close to impossible.

Half an hour passed, and Evan arrived at the university. He went straight to the dean's office to get answers. Upon arriving, he met with professor Arya Dewan.

He wasted no time and asked where Doctor Scott had relocated. However, to his dismay, the professor gave him the same answer. "I'm sorry, Mister Thompson, but we don't know. Doctor Scott did not tell anyone where he was relocating. Even if we knew, we would not share this information with you -"

"But, his shares. Surely, he still has his shares," Evan pointed out. Professor Dewan was frowning in her chair. Not only did Evan soak her sofa seat with his wet clothes, but the information he sought was something she honestly thought the man would know.

The professor sucked in a breath and revealed, "Mister Thompspon, Doctor Scott easily sold his shares. Your father bought all of his shares."

'What?' Evan was beyond shocked. His parents bought Doctor Scott's shares at the university. It only meant one thing; his parents knew Shantelle was leaving. They knew they were moving out of the city, yet they never told him! TO From the university, Evan asked

Howard to bring him to the old Thompson mansion. His heart was filled with bitterness, knowing his parents knew all along. He thought, ' How long have they known?'

The entire drive, Evan was trying to hold back his emotions. He was angry. He was sad, and he was in pain. Oddly, his heart was aching from the news. He was upset that his parents did not tell him, and he was mad at himself for he knew this was all his fault.

“Evan, what have you done? What have you done?” He asked himself as he threw his head back.

It did not take long for Evan to arrive at his parent’s home. He briskly walked inside and found his parents having tea on the patio. Evan was catching his breath when he asked, “Did you know?”

“What is it, son?” His father, Erick Thompson asked. “Did you know the Scotts were leaving? Is that why you bought Doctor Scott’s shares at the university?” Evan sought. “Why? Tell me why, father?!”

“Why?” Erick asked back. “It was the least I could do. I felt guilty because of the divorce. Since they did not want the alimony, I could at least make it easier for William to leave.”

“But.” Evan moved closer as he inquired, “But why did you not tell me she was leaving?!” Clara, Evan’s mother, gazed at her husband. Seeing him silent, she directed his gaze to Evan and asked, “Why does it matter, Evan? You and Shanty are already divorced.”

It was as though Clara was reminded of the last day Shantelle came to bid goodbye. She was teary-eyed, and her voice broke in and out as she described, “They cut ties with us, Evan – over thirty years of friendship gone to waste. William decided it was best to cut all relations with us. He concluded it was best to take Shantelle away from here to forget everything.”

“Evan, it was no secret how Shantelle was brokenhearted with the divorce. You knew she loved you very much,” Erick explained. “William will do anything to make Shantelle heal, and that can only happen if she forgets you. Forgetting you means forgetting about Rose Hills. William said... they were never coming back.”

Suddenly, Evan found it hard to breathe. He felt wetness in the corner of his eyes, one he never knew he was capable of having.

“What’s wrong, Evan? Isn’t it better?” Erick asked. “Isn’t this what you always wanted? Shanty has finally left you alone.”

Chapter 24: Shanty’s Birthday

Earlier that day, Shantelle was lazily preparing for school. She wasn't feeling well, but school was school. Every day is vital for medical school.

After showering and changing into a pair of faded jeans and a white top, she made her way to the dining area to have breakfast. "Surprise! Happy birthday, Shanty!" Both her parents greeted.

Shantelle smiled from ear to ear, seeing her mother, Eleanor, had prepared balloons and a bouquet for her special day. Her father held up her favorite cake, saying, "Happy birthday to my beautiful daughter, Shanty."

Recently, her breakfast usually involved toast and fruit, but she supposed that day could be an excuse to indulge, since her mother had her favorite dishes on the table. The new maids they hired also cheered her on. "Good morning, Shanty! Happy Birthday!"

"Maybe I should." Looking at the mouthwatering food, she suggested, skip school today!"

"Hahaha!" Her father laughed. He said, "No skipping school. One of your professors is my subordinate at the hospital. I don't want him asking about your whereabouts, and he shouldn't be giving you any special treatment, either."

Shantelle laughed and said, "Fine." After her father put the cake on the table, she embraced him and her mother. "Thank you. To the best parents in the world that love me so. Thank you."

After having breakfast, Doctor Scott informed her they would have dinner at the best restaurant in town to celebrate her birthday formally. He said, "I invited Eana's family and Keith."

Her father referred to his secretary. Eana and her family relocated with them. Her father entrusted Eana with all of his patient's personal information.

Shantelle's mother, Eleanor, was her father's constant aide. She was a surgical nurse at St. Dominique Hospital in Rose Hills, and that was how they met. She acted as his sole assistant in the past, not just in surgeries, but also during clinic hours and meetings.

However, over time, Doctor William's patients grew in number. Now, Eana was the one who made patient appointments and managed her father's clinic. On the other hand, Eleanor screened and scheduled her father's surgeries. Sometimes, she took part in helping the surgery itself.

“We don’t have many friends yet here in town to share your special day,” Eleanor said. “But we have each other.”

“Thank you, mom. And, of course, I’d love Eana’s family to be there, and I don’t mind Keith’s presence. He already promised not to talk about Evan,” Shantelle replied.

She checked the time and, realizing it was getting late, stood up and said, “I better go. “Sorry, dear. The driver I hired will start next week. Bear with taking a taxi in the meantime,” her father said before walking her out to the driveway.

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At four in the afternoon, Shantelle was exhausted. She walked out of the school with an upset stomach. She groaned, “I should not have eaten so much at breakfast.”

“Shanty, over here!” She turned to find Keith, leaning on the side of his car, his hand waving at her. He was holding a bouquet in his hand. He said, “We can go together for your special dinner.”

Since Shantelle moved to Warlington, this was the third time Keith fetched her from medical school. In between, he did not bother her nor call her,

despite knowing her number. She met him on two other occasions at the hospital. They talked, and he flirted, but then again, it was Keith. It wasn’t a secret to Shantelle how Keith was a ladies’ man in Rose Hills. After a short chat, he would always rush to whatever he was doing, building his network of doctors within Warlington. @

“Happy birthday, Shanty,” he said with a smile. “Thank you for the flowers,” Shantelle said, accepting the bouquet.

As she entered Keith’s car, she could feel the jealous eyes of the ladies outside the school. She could not blame them. Keith was gorgeous. He knew how to dress well. He was rich and had a well-toned body.

Shantelle buckled her seatbelts just

before Keith turned on the engine. Then she shifted to him and said, “You should stop at this. You are going to give the girls at school the wrong ideas.. You will miss out on all the potential prospects here in Warlington.”

Keith laughed. He shook his head and replied, “I’m not interested in them, and... they are not at all wrong.”

Shantelle simply shook her head at his remark, not wanting to dwell on it. Keith was handsome and charismatic, but he was also Evan's friend. She did not want to go there with him. Moreover, Shantelle did not know if she could ever like someone again.

Ten minutes on the road, Shantelle was feeling extremely uncomfortable. She was taking deep breaths and kept gulping down whatever was threatening to come out of her throat!

Eventually, she knew she could no longer hold it in. She instructed, "Park at the side of the road. Park at the side of the road. Now!"

Keith's car stopped by the entrance of a park. Shantelle rushed outside and found a tree, where she threw the entire contents of her stomach. When Keith made his way to her, he soothed her back, asking, "Are you okay? Are you fine?"

It took a few minutes for Shantelle to feel better. Keith had to buy warm water from the coffee shop across the street since Shantelle did not feel like drinking beverages.

Keith observed how Shantelle was drinking the water slowly, too slowly. She sometimes acted to heave even with drinking only water. He suddenly felt uneasy. He hated the possibility, but he saw the signs and had to ask, Shanty... are you... pregnant?"

At his probing, Shantelle froze and looked distantly. Soon fear washed over her, and she stood up, looking at her surroundings. When her eyes landed on a pharmacy, she excused herself. "I need to buy something."

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An hour passed, Keith and Shantelle were sitting on a park bench, their faces white as a ghost. Shantelle had taken a pregnancy test, and it came back positive. She used not only one, but five pregnancy test kits.

Tears flowed down Shantelle's face as she hugged herself with her arms. Then, out of nowhere, Keith walked to the nearest tree and punched it with his fist.

"Fuck! Fuck!" He kicked the truck with his feet and did so again and again. Most of the time, he said no words, but he grunted and groaned. He was so angry that he did not care how he had cut his knuckles. He only stopped being frantic when he noticed the stares of people passing by. When Keith returned to the park bench with Shantelle, he rested his elbows against his knees; his hands held his face. He said, "I don't mean to scare you." He wanted to explain himself, but no words came out of his mouth. "It's just that... this wasn't what I wanted for you, Shanty."

His words took Shantelle aback. It was awfully caring for someone who wasn't really that close to her. Sure, she had known Keith since they were young, but they were never that tight. Silence fell upon them, but soon, Shantelle asked, "What – what do I do now, Keith?"

It took some time, but eventually, Keith answered, "Do the right thing, Shanty. "Keith was taking deep breaths. He avoided her gaze for some time, but when he peered back at her, he reminded, "My mother left my father and me for another man when I was eight years old. I've always thought it was unfair to me."

"Do what's right, Shanty," he faintly said. "I will be here to support you and your family, no matter what.' "

Shantelle silently understood what he meant. She remained in her seat, just thinking and crying. After ten minutes, she asked, "Please... please don't tell Evan."

The last time Shantelle saw Evan, she perfectly remembered how he asked her about taking contraceptives. He did not want a child with her. So, he did not have to know.

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Chapter 25: One Day

"Oh, my goodness! Not again!" Mrs. Shaw exclaimed, seeing Evan being guided by Wendell into the villa's entrance at four in the morning.

She tried to aid Wendell, but Wendell said, "It's okay, Mrs. Shaw, I can manage. Please help me open the door to his room."

More than a week had passed since Evan learned that Shantelle had left the city. After confronting his parents, he locked himself inside his room. Evan did not bother to eat until lunch the next day. He spoke to no one, not his parents, friends, or the villa's caretakers. Evan only returned to work after three days of isolating himself.

In the succeeding days, he spent it at the office, working until midnight. Occasionally, he went to the club with his friends Wendell and Sean. Wendell often drove Evan home since he was usually drunk.

Tonight was no exception. Wendell rang the villa's gates, delivering Evan in a drunken state. Same as the last that he was intoxicated, Evan was talking like Shantelle had never left.

"Mrs. Shaw, where is the Misses? Tell her to make my favorite dish." a "Why is she not home yet? It's already late. Mrs. Shaw, call the Scotts and have Howard pick up Shanty."

"Wendell, call Shanty." "Yes, Evan. I will. Take a nap first, okay, buddy!" Wendell could only ride on Evan's gibberish, knowing he was not himself. Generally, the next day, Evan would be back to being silent.

Wendell carefully laid Evan on the bed. He turned to Mrs. Shaw and said, "He is fine, Mrs. Shaw." "Oh, my goodness," Mrs. Shaw asked. "How long will he be like this?"

"I don't know, Mrs. Shaw, but it's different with Evan because he knows he is at fault," Wendell said. He returned to studying his friend, saying, "Only time will tell."

*

"Mr. Thompson?" In the morning, Mrs. Shaw knocked on Evan's room for the tenth time. It was already past nine, and his assistant had been calling the landline since seven.

It wasn't like Mrs. Shaw to enter the room without permission, but at the same time, she was worried for Evan's sake.

"Sir, Mister Thompson?" Mrs. Shaw called again while opening the door halfway. To her surprise, there was no one on the bed. "Sir Thompson? Mister Thomson? James has called about an important contract."

There was no answer. She knocked on the bathroom door, but there was no response either. When she opened the bathroom, no one was there.

“Where is Mister Thompson?” Mrs. Shaw was confident the man had not left the villa since four in the morning. He was not capable of walking a straight line, much more, have the readiness to leave the house.

Mrs. Shaw was about to leave the room when she heard a thud inside the walk-in closet. She frowned and decided to investigate it.

After switching the lights to the enormous room, she found Evan sleeping on Shantelle’s side of the closet! He was still in his clothes from last night, curled like a ball on the part where Shantelle’s long dresses were kept.

She walked over to Evan with a painful expression. Instantly, Mrs. Shaw fell to her knees, crying. She wound up waking Evan.

“Oh, my. Mister Thompson, I’m sorry you and the Misses had to part. If only you had realized how you loved her then, this would not have happened to both of you,” she said, stuttering in her words. “All those times when you were together – “Her howls became lower as she said, “All those opportunities lost.”

The words that Mrs. Shaw said stung Evan’s heart. He wasn’t completely sober yet, but he understood her words. Indeed, there were so many opportunities. They were married for two years, and even after their divorce, Evan remembered how he felt empty but never acted on those feelings.

He silently reflected, ‘Did I love her? Did I love Shanty?’ Perhaps, because Evan would not have been so miserable these past few days if it were not the case. He had acknowledged how he missed Shantelle, but had not yet admitted it was love.

Evan placed a hand on his chest and clenched it. The pang in his chest was unbearable. He thought, ‘So this is pain... the pain of loving someone. I loved Shanty. Why didn’t I see it before? Was it because she was always there that I took those feelings for granted?’

'I loved her... I loved her, but she is gone. How unfortunate,' Evan mocked himself. For a minute, she listened to Mrs. Shaw cry in front of him. He shut his eyes, stopping his tears from escaping.

Finally, Evan massaged his forehead, sensing a headache. He tapped on Mrs. Shaw's shoulder and softly requested, " Please, Mrs. Shaw, prepare some chicken soup for me."

He looked up and studied the white gown he had bought Shantelle for her birthday. Mrs. Shaw had hung the same in the closet a few days back. Then he looked at Shantelle's other clothes.

Mrs. Shaw was still wiping the wetness on her face. She was about to leave the room when Evan instructed, "Please make sure to maintain Shantelle's clothes."

"When she comes back, she can readily wear them," he said. He left the walk- in closet and went for a hot bath.

Days went by again. Evan found himself in front of the Scotts' mansion. This time around, he had spoken to Kristine Jones before visiting. That day, he came with his assistant and a lawyer with an offer.

A maid guided them into the living room. Kristine and her husband were waiting for him. "Good Morning, Mister Thompson," Mister Jones greeted.

"Good morning, Mister and Misses Jones," Evan greeted back. His assistant and lawyer echoed the same. "Welcome to our home," Kristine said. After Evan and his companions took their seats, she sought, "What brings you here, Mister Thompson?"

"I would like to make an offer," Evan suggested. He turned to his lawyer and presented a document to the Jones couple. Kristine and her husband read the document carefully, flipping from one page to another.

When Evan saw their overwhelmed expressions, he explained, “I want to buy back this house twice the amount you paid Doctor Scott. This is... my ex- wife’s home, and I want it to remain the same.”

“Please, let me buy this house for her,” he repeated. The Jones couple looked at each other, contemplating. The Scotts’ estate was

really lovely, but... Evan’s offer was also very generous. They excused themselves into the library to discuss, and when they returned, Kristine said, “11 Mister Thompson, you must really love your ex-wife. I hope this is all worth it. We agree to sell you the property.”

Relief filled Evan’s heart. The house was nowhere close to having Shantelle back, but this was where she had lived for twenty years. Evan thought that one day Shantelle would return. One day, he will give this house back to the Scotts as a gift, and one day, Shantelle will forgive him.

One day. No matter how long it would take, Evan would hope for that... one day.

Chapter 26: The Playboy’s Backstory

[Sometimes, when things don’t work out the way you planned, something better is coming. It may be difficult to believe where you stand; often, redirection is a helpful intervention. This is a gift, and I know it. Love and kisses to my girl, Shanty! I’ll see you in a week.]

Shantelle smiled, reading Karise’s post on her profile. Soon, her other friends left comments.

[I don’t care if I am broke. I’ll see my girl, too] Felice said. Below, Felice, her other friend, Celest, remarked. [I am far more broke, but Karise will pay for my ticket. I love you @Karise! See you soon, beautiful Shanty!]

It made Shantelle smile altogether. Shantelle was leaning against the wall outside the classroom of her last subject of the day, going through her friend’s plans of flying out to Warlington. She sucked in a breath, and after putting her phone back inside her bag, she caressed her growing belly.

Two weeks ago, during her birthday, she had told her parents about the pregnancy. It broke their heart because plans were changing now with a new life taken into the equation. However, like the loving parents they were, they accepted the circumstance. Her father began making phone calls, assessing how she could get through medical school faster despite falling pregnant. 4

Shantelle walked out of the school, confident. She knew she could overcome her endeavors with her friends' and family's support. One day, she will become one of the best thoracic surgeons.

One day. Arriving outside the gates, she was stunned to see Keith Henderson. She looked around and realized the driver her father had hired was nowhere to be seen.

"I told your father I would send you home. I am leaving Warlington and don't know when I'll be back. I thought I'd say goodbye," he said. "Not forever, though."

Then he gave that sexy smirk that made Shantelle shake her head. "I'm keeping the baby," Shantelle revealed as they sat in the bench park.

Keith had decided to make a stop at where it all unfolded; the Warlington Park. He had bought her camomile tea from the coffee shop while he had an espresso.

She saw him nod, and his shoulders lifted and fell for a second. He replied, "It's the right thing. I hoped that you had pursued medicine right after graduation."

Shantelle lightly laughed. She answered, "When I finished college last year, I thought I spend more time with him, you know. Then, a few months later, I discovered that Nicole was back in town. So all that plan of taking medicine went down the drain. Back then, I could not allow Nicole to have her way. 8

"I was following Evan around, secretly checking his phone, going to his office, and making excuses like bringing him lunch – among other things." She chuckled and revealed, "I even went to one of Evan's client meetings at The Hillview restaurant, thinking he was meeting with Nicole."

Shaking her head, she revealed, "He lost that client because of me, and that's when we started arguing, really, really bad."

"I did stupid things for love, all of which lead me to this day. Can you believe it?" She said. Her statement wasn't meant to be a question, but an affirmation of her mistakes. However, Keith replied, "I know precisely what you mean. Love can make you do outlandish things."

“Wait, what is that statement? Why do you talk about love, Mister Henderson?” She nodded and suggested, “I doubt Mister Casanova has ever been in love.”

Keith chuckled and responded, “Shanty, you should know, every playboy has his backstory.” Shantelle laughed entirely. She snorted as she answered, “Really now? I’m all ears.”

For seconds, Keith just looked at the bystanders in the park. Eventually, he revealed, “I started to like this girl when I was twenty-three. She is younger than me, but unfortunately, she was in love with another man.

“I tried to turn up in front of her, looking sexy, the boy next door type, the hot shot businessman, but nothing. Not a single version of me attracted her. She never saw me,” he said. “Around two years ago, she broke my heart completely.”

“What happened? Did she reject you?” Shantelle asked. “You could say that,” Keith replied. “Oh, was that why you left town for two months without talking to anybody? I remember that. Evan was cussing about it all week,” Shantelle said.

“He was cussing about me during your honeymoon?” Keith asked with a frown. “Yeah, something to do with the children’s hospital in Lockwood,” Shantelle said, lifting her brow.

“Oh, that.” Keith sneered. “Well, I took care of those insurance claims when I returned. Evan was being theatrical.”

There was an awkward silence that stretched between them. Shantelle never recalled Evan saying something about Keith liking a girl. She turned to him, asking, “Is it someone I know?”

Keith chuckled. He ran his fingers through his hair, and, without looking at her, he answered, “No. Not really. Maybe in time, I will introduce you to her. I don’t know yet if that time will ever come.”

“So anyway, that’s when I started –” Keith frowned, trying to find the right words. “Serial dating?” Shantelle said before laughing. “I’m pretty sure you dated back then, but I admit, the number of women’s hearts you had broken doubled, if not tripled, in the past two years.”

“I wanted to forget her. I know I’ll never have a place in her heart, but I know my methods were wrong,” Keith said in the end. “The idiotic things we do for love, right?”

Shantelle just laughed. She remarked, pointing to him with her hand, “This doesn’t suit you at all, Keith.”

Keith chuckled with her and said, “Laugh all you want. You wanted my backstory, so I gave it. How dare you ridicule me?”

The two continued to laugh and chat as they finished their drinks, but after some time, Keith received a call. From the corner of Shantelle’s eyes, she saw it was Evan’s name on his screen. She quickly looked everywhere, not wanting to appear affected.

Keith got up and walked toward a tree, the same trunk he had punched the last time when he learned she was pregnant. After two minutes, he returned, saying, “I have to go, Shanty. I’ll take you home?”

Shantelle nodded and said, “Need to go back to Rose Hills?” “Nah. Not yet. I need to fly out to Lockwood and meet everyone there,” he said. Then, noticing her curiosity, he explained, “Evan won the bid for the Lockwood National Park.”

“Ah,” Shantelle said. “That means one thing, he will buy the Lockwood Children’s Hospital.” “Yes,” Keith acknowledged. “It’s his biggest humanitarian project.”

Shantelle smiled as she got up. She expressed, “I may hate Evan for breaking my heart, but I must admit that he can be such a philanthropist.”

Keith nodded in agreement. He remarked, “He took a business risk – a big one, but it’s for charitable reasons.”

“But you are also generous, Keith. I know that you offered insurance coverage to those poor children in Lockwood,” Shantelle said.

Keith paused, as if he was thinking. Then he smiled and answered, “Yes, that’s right, Shanty, we can talk more about my humanitarian projects. You might just... fall in love with me.”

Shantelle laughed. She replied, “What a sudden shift!” “Can I tell you a little secret?” Keith said as they were walking towards his car.

“What?” Shantelle asked. “I have always thought that single moms are hot!” He teased and winked at her. Shantelle chortled hysterically. She replied, “Your lines won’t work on me, Keith.”

“Really? But I wasn’t aiming for your heart. I was aiming for your smile,” he answered, making Shantelle smile from ear to ear.

Chapter 27: Give Me A Chance

“Evan, son. Do we really need to go?” Erick Thompson asked. The Thompsons were in the car, heading their way to the airport. They were flying to Lockwood for the formalities of Evan’s recently acquired property. “Of course we do, Erick. Evan wants us to see his plans,” Clara said in the car.

“Please, father,” Evan said in a lifeless tone. “I booked a charter flight, so it will be comfortable for everyone. I want you to see the potential of the place.”

With a sigh, Erick answered, “Very well. Evan was on his laptop while in the car, reading emails he had missed the other day. Work had to continue for Evan, being the CEO of his father’s company, but it was obvious that he was unhappy.

He lost that glow on his face. He let his beard grow lengthier than usual, and his eyes looked tired. It was clear to everyone how Evan still had not slept properly.

While reading one email, he noticed a familiar person walking down the street. His eyes rounded, recalling how his private investigator could not find her new address. She lived in the same city but proved rather hard to find.

“Karise,” Evan said under his breath. His heart raced, seeing hope at last. “Stop the car, Howard. Stop the car!”

After the vehicle pulled over on the sidewalk, Evan rushed out and chased after Karise. “Karise! Karise!” He called. “Please stop! I need to speak to you!”

Karise heard and glanced his way. He saw how her eyes rounded and how she ran in another area. “Karise! Please, stop!”

Eventually, Karise was out of breath, and Evan cornered her in one alley. Karise was taking deep breaths as she comforted her chest with her palm. She barked, “What do you want, Evan?”

“Karise,” Evan was also panting. He moved toward her and pleaded, “Please, I beg you. I need to know where Shanty is.”

“Why? You are divorced! Let her have her peace!” Karise shot back. “She needs to live her life, Evan. What do you want from her -”

“I miss her. I miss her so much. It’s been so hard to live through the day and not think of her I miss her scent, her smile, her beautiful face, the way she talked about science –

everything about her.” Evan did not hesitate to let out his inner thoughts. “I was wrong to ask for a divorce. I need her to know that.”

Evan saw Karise was taken aback, but very quickly, her face showed a hint of anger. She countered, “What the hell, Evan? First, you pushed her away, and then you say you miss her? Well, too bad because Shanty doesn’t miss you!”

“Where is she? Let her decide for herself,” Evan suggested.

“And what about Nicole?” Karise pointed out. “Isn’t it that Shanty stood in your way? Didn’t you love Nicole? Then you could not get over the forced marriage thing, Evan. Tell me, what really went on with your head, huh? Did your pride get in the way? Did your fucking ego make you blind to see how great Shanty was for you? Almost every man in Rose Hills was jealous of you, Evan!”

“I did not have any relationship with Nicole! And fucking no! I never loved Nicole. I never cheated on Shanty!” Evan maintained, but he did not have the time to explain it all how Nicole turned out to be Melody Campbell. He was more surprised that Karise did not seem to know. Evan tried to describe his point of view. “My reasons were more than just about Nicole. Hear me out.”

Seeing how Karise paused, he admitted, “Yes, you are right, Karise. My ego got in the way. I could not get over how my father pushed me into our marriage. I felt suffocated. I thought I wanted my freedom – I thought that being single, I would be contented, but I’m fucking miserable, Karise. I miss Shanty so much!”

Evan tried to reach for her hand, but Karise pushed him away and firmly answered, “I don’t know where she is.”

“You are lying! You are her best friend! Evan rebutted. Then, he did the impossible and went down on his knees. In front of her, he asked, “I know you are just looking out for Shanty, but please let me see her – let me speak to her. I was wrong to let her go.”

“Get up, Evan! Get up!” Karise raised her voice and said, “Why now? Why did you realize this now when it’s already too late?”

Karise berated. “I’m sorry, Evan, but I don’t know where Shanty is.” @ “Karise!” Evan held her wrist and asked, “I am asking you not as Evan, but as an acquaintance who is regretful. No one is perfect, and I certainly am not. I beg you, give me a chance.”

Evan looked into Karise’s eyes and declared, “I love her, Karise. I know that now. I love Shanty. Give me a chance to prove it.”

“If you won’t let me see her, at least please tell her for me,” Evan implored. “Karise, you are my only hope.”

Karise looked down at Evan pitifully. She listened as he begged again. She thought about it deeply, but recalling Doctor Scott’s goal for Shantelle, she responded weakly, “I’m sorry, Evan, but the Scotts left without saying where they were headed. They meant never to come back. I think... it’s better that way.”

“Forget Shanty,” She suggested. “Your story ended the moment you asked for a divorce. It’s time to close that chapter of your life. She has moved on, and so should you.”

Karise walked away, leaving Evan still on his knees. She had already made it out in the same alley, and only then did she turn to check on him. She saw Evan, still kneeling from afar, his back facing her, his head down, looking thoroughly defeated.

She should not feel sorry for Evan, but considering that Shantelle was pregnant, she whispered, “Should I let Shanty know?”

Later that evening, Karise called Shantelle’s new mobile number, but she did not pick up. She called the landline of the new Scotts’ residence in Warlington, and Doctor William Scott answered the call.

“Doctor Scott, is Shanty home?” She asked.

“Yes, but she is studying right now for her exams. Eleanor is giving her some pointers. Can I take a message?” Doctor Scott offered.

There was silence between them, but finally, Karise revealed, “I – I bumped into Evan. He seemed apologetic -”

“Karise, Shanty has to become a doctor. Please don’t give us news about Evan. I already cut relations with the Thompsons. I don’t want to have Shanty cut ties with you too. Do you want that to happen? Will you promise me never to bring this up? I don’t care about Evan or whatever he has to say. I don’t care that he is the father of Shanty’s child. My daughter has us, and she has you too. We are more than enough,” Doctor Scott declared.

“Promise me, Karise. Promise me,” William continued. “I’m – I’m sorry, Doctor Scott. It won’t happen again,” Karise said in the end.

After the phone conversation with Shantelle's father, Karise looked out the window of her home. She thought it was funny how Evan only realized Shantelle's worth now that she was out of his life.

Barely a whisper, Karise said, "I'm sorry, Evan, but you are just going to live with the choice you made."

Chapter 28: The Lockwood National Park

"Mister Thompson, this is for you," a young bald girl walked up to Erick, Evan's father, and gave him a teddy bear.

Another young boy, wearing a cannula, breathed deeply as he handed a single flower to Clara Thompson. He said, "For you."

"This is Lily. She has leukemia. She is waiting for a bone marrow donor," Evan whispered to his parents. "And the boy is Scott. He has damaged lung cells. He easily gets sick and is a common visitor at the hospital."

One by one, kids at the Lockwood Children's Hospital gave their thanks to Erick and Clara Thompson. The decision to purchase the Lockwood National Park meant saving the hospital, the very last scenic view in town, and possibly saving their lives.

Some children could not get out of bed. They were attached to the machines that kept them alive. Erick and Clara could only watch as the children lay on their beds.

When they made it to an entertainment room, they saw older children, some wearing masks, playing in their hospital gowns. They were admitted because of different illnesses but only had one goal: to live longer. 2

"Children, say hello to Mister and Misses Thompson," one of the hospital administrators said. Her name was Mina. She guided Evan, his parents, and his friends through the hospital. "Mister Thompson! Misses Thompson, thank you for saving the park!"

"It's nice to meet you!" Some children gave a piece of their belongings as a token of appreciation. The parents who were around also gave their gratitude to Erick and Clara.

Behind Evan, his friends, whom he had invited, gave their approving nods. Sean, Wendell, and Keith had been walking with them.

After the playroom, Mina guided them to a resting lounge near her office. Pointing to the sofa seats and said, "Please take a seat."

Refreshments were provided as they settled on the sofas. It was from there that Mina stood in front of the guests, saying, “Mister Thompson, I cannot thank you enough for helping our hospital-”

Erick raised his hand and said, “This was... my son’s idea the whole time. He is now the CEO of my company. I have transferred all rights and assets to him. Besides, I don’t have any other heir.”

Mina glanced at Evan, but knowing their prior agreement, she said to Erick, “Still, if you had pulled out from the bid two years ago, we don’t know what would become of our hospital.”

Erick choked. Yes, Evan was not the CEO of his company two years back. Back then, he threatened Evan to pull out from the bidding of the Lockwood National Park. Erick had briefly looked away to think. Then he smiled at Mina, saying, “I’m glad I changed my mind.”

The lounging area had huge glass windows that faced the park. The hospital was situated right next to Lockwood National Park.

More than two years ago, the Lockwood government faced a significant deficit in funds that the governor had decided to sell the very last nature reserve in the city, which stretched to over three hectares of land, and that was the national park.

The sale announcement made headlines! Many locals questioned the government’s decision. Environmentalists and residents were against it. Whereas bidders readily offered their prices, many of them were for industrialization.

Mina pointed to the park and said, “The children here at the hospital have direct access to the park. The government had allocated a certain area for the children to use.”

“Critically ill children need it. The natural environment, fresh air, pines growing several feet high and lush, birds nesting in the trees, and squirrels running around.” Mina gasped. “The peace and serenity are what some of these kids live for.”

“And it is not just the kids, me, including. The park keeps me sane. It’s true for many locals out here,” Mina added. “While many bidders were eyeing to turn this park into another factory or a mall, Mister Evan Thompson promised to keep the park while finding a way to earn from it.”

“So-” Mina wept instantly. “So, you don’t know how thankful we are for bidding for the park, and thankfully, Sir Evan won the bid.”

“The bidding was so controversial that it took over two years to be fully approved. There were two conditions for winning the bid. Aside from the price, it had to be approved by many local officials.” Evan described. “Some politicians were my college professors, while others had known me because of our financial branch here in Lockwood. I won the bid, not just because of the 50 million dollar promise, but because the people trust me, father.”

“Well, I’m glad you won the bid, son,” Clara softly said. “Congratulations, Evan,” Wendell said. “I’m proud of being your business partner.”

When they were alone to enjoy their refreshments, Clara broke down in tears. The children moved her heart thoroughly. As she sniffed her tears away, she said, “Son, even if you fail in this investment, I will be proud of you. Either way, it’s just money.”

“This is a big risk, Evan, but let’s hope you do not fail,” Erick said. “Tell me about your plans.”

Evan explained his intentions. The park was previously a public property that everyone could freely visit. He meant to bring in more animals, impose entrance fees and build stalls to provide guests with food and beverages.

“I will build only lodges at the end of the park, which will be up for daily rent,” he added. “Aside from that, the park can host special events and many more. Much could be done while keeping the park’s natural habitat.”

He pointed to Wendell, Sean, and Keith, saying, “My friends will be my first business partners in this new venture.” “And the hospital?” Clara asked.

“I will buy the hospital too. The owner already intended to sell the hospital to: the other bidders. If I did not win the bid, this hospital would probably be demolished,” Evan revealed. “I’ll make this hospital far greater with Keith’s help. It will have flexible insurance claims.”

“Very well. Very well,” Erick said approvingly. While their party continued to chat about the park’s potential, Erick walked to the window and looked at the park. It was undeniably beautiful.

Evan walked up to him and appreciated the view as well. He relished the moment, but suddenly remembered his encounter with Karise the other day. He felt sad all over again.

Meanwhile, Erick turned to the right and pointed to a building not so far. "That was your old apartment back in college."

"Yes, father. That's why I wanted to save it, and during weekends, I sometimes volunteer here at the hospital," Evan revealed. "We all have our... humanitarian goal. This one was my biggest."

Erick nodded, and silence fell upon them. Soon, he said, "I'm sorry, Evan. I'm sorry I threatened to cancel the bid two years ago. I'm glad you did not give up on this project."

* FLASHBACK MORE THAN TWO YEARS AGO *

"Father, did you have Nicole evicted from her apartment? Wasn't it enough that no establishment would hire her in town?" Evan barged into Erick's office in the middle of the day.

"Yes, I did. Because I can, and I don't like her. You were supposed to be with Shanty from the beginning. You forget how William and I had agreed on your marriage beforehand!" Erick said. "I don't want you seeing Nicole anymore."

"Father, I brought her here. She was my responsibility!" Evan reasoned. "Evan! Do not oppose me. I am getting old and don't have time to dwell on this matter. I have a business to run!" Erick stood from his seat and announced, "Being my son, I will protect you from what I know best!"

At that point, Erick had tried several methods of driving Nicole out. He paid her off, but that did not work. How long will he have to endure and keep pushing the woman away? The best solution was taking Evan out of the market!

"You will marry Shanty and stay away from Nicole!" Erick declared. "If you don't, I will disown you, and I will have you fired from the company-

"Father, are you serious? I was born and raised to be your successor. I lived for it every day. I don't know what else to become of me other than running your business! That's what I have been doing my entire life!" Evan reasoned. "How could you do this to your son? Don't you think you are overreacting? I'm not even marrying Nicole!"

The father and son continued to argue, exchanging the exact words. After some time, Evan felt he had had enough. He turned his back, wanting to walk away, but as soon as he held the doorknob to his father's office, Erick said, "If you do not marry Shantelle, you will have nothing. I will disown you! I will cut your credit cards, take away your cars,

and whatever privileges you have for holding my name! Last, I will cancel the bid for the Lockwood National Park!”

Evan stilled, and Erick said, “I got your attention now, didn’t I? Admit it, Evan. You need my money. How will you raise 50 million dollars on your own?”

Seeing Evan still unresponsive, Erick picked up his phone and called the Lockwood governor’s office. He said, “I’d like to speak with Governor Lamont, please. It’s about the bid for the national park -”

“Okay,” Evan said in a lifeless tone. He breathed in and closed his eyes, saying, “I will marry Shanty.” “Nevermind, I’ll just call later,” Erick said on the phone and canceled his plans altogether.

“Listen to me, Evan. One day, you will thank me for my decisions. Shanty is a good girl. She will be the perfect wife for you. Marry Shanty, and you will still be my sole heir. You’ll have every right to continue the bid for the Lockwood National Park.” Erick resumed.

* END OF FLASHBACK: BACK TO PRESENT *

Thinking about the past, Erick sighed. Tears welled in his eyes. He still did not regret his decision. If only he had found a more creative solution to the problem.

The father and son were silent for some time, but soon, Evan softly said, “Father, I’m sorry I did not listen to you then. Yes, you pushed me into the marriage, but unknowingly, your methods protected me from the real danger. You were right about everything.”

Water fell down Erick’s face. He turned to Evan and embraced his son, saying, “I’m sorry too, Evan. I’m sorry for being harsh on you back then, and I’m sorry for how things turned out.”

“Let’s forget about everything. You at least have this project to keep you busy,” Erick suggested. He paused and added, “Now that Shanty has left, also consider... letting her go. As much as I hate it, Evan, I’m afraid we already lost them. They are, too, now part of our past.”

Chapter 29: Nicole’s Judgement

Evan, his friends, and his family stayed in Lockwood for two days, finalizing documents. It was on the last day that Evan asked Keith for a favor. In the lobby of the same hotel they were staying, “Evan invited Keith for coffee.”

As they were drinking their beverages in front of a round table, Evan said to his friend, “I’d like to apologize again about, you know, Nicole.”

Keith laughed and answered, “No need to apologize. That’s all good. Besides, I also have things to be sorry about.

“What?” Evan asked with a frown, but Keith just shrugged. How could Keith tell Evan about Shantelle? He can only keep his mouth shut.

“That I am hotter?” Keith teased, and Evan managed a weak smile. “Fuck, you look like shit, Evan,” Keith remarked. “You can’t even smile properly.”

Evan groaned. He replied, “It hasn’t been easy, but I’m trying to live through it.”

He looked at Keith and said, “Keith, I need a favor.” “What is it? Wasn’t it enough I approved those insurance claims? Evan, you better do your part and market Prima MedCare. It was difficult for me to approve the kids’ policies. Most insurance companies do not cover pre-existing illness,” Keith said back. “I would not have agreed to it without your promises.”

“I know. I owe you, and the children owe you,” Evan acknowledged. “Tell me if it goes beyond the policy limit, and I’ll find a way to cover it.”

“Shut Haven’t up. you realized your thoughtful nature got you involved with Nicole slash Melody? I’m telling you, Evan, sometimes, you have to be cruel,” Keith suggested.

“I can be cruel when I lose my patience, but I get what you mean.” Evan nodded and answered, “I’ve already considered that, but it has nothing to do with helping a sickly child. It is better to give than to receive.”

“Anyway, about what I need from you. Evan first drank his coffee. After which, he revealed his intention. “I need help... in finding Doctor Scott.”

“You have the right connections, Keith. Your father’s company has opened branches in ten states, and I know you are expanding,” Evan said. “You know doctors you know people in the medical field more than I do.’

Evan leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees. He said, "I need help in finding Shanty," Keith fell silent. He sucked in a breath and said, "Do you have to, Evan _"

"Are you my friend? Fine, you were right. I was wrong. I'm sorry, I did not listen to you about not divorcing Shanty. I regret it now, and that's why I need to find her," Evan revealed. "But she left, Evan. Let her be," Keith insisted. "I just want to try," Evan reasoned. "Please, help me."

After a few more convincing, Keith unwillingly agreed, saying, "I will do my best, Evan, but no promises. It's not like we have the entire country covered. Plus, there is always the possibility that they left the country."

"Consider one thing, though, Evan," Keith proposed. "I've dated a lot of women to know them well. For love, they do many crazy things give up many things, but when they give up on the relationship, it means they are tired of loving you."

"What if Shanty doesn't love you anymore? Are you going to be that man who will push yourself into her life?" Keith asked. He finished his coffee and added, "Just think about it, but I will see how I can help you find Doctor Scott."

Evan sucked in a breath, listening to his friend's words. After giving it much thought, he answered, "Keith, I don't want to have another regret. I have to try before I willingly let her go." "Thank you for helping me, Keith," he added. "I appreciate it, friend."

"Nicole Lively, since you have changed your name legally, and it is within records, you will be addressed as such in this court," the judge in the courtroom said.

Months had passed since Evan learned of Nicole's true nature. It was finally time for the judge to give the verdict. The judge, including the audience, listened to both the defense and persecution arguments. Pieces of evidence were re-presented and reviewed.

After two hours, the judge came to a decision. He asked everyone to stand as he first looked at Evan on the prosecutor's side and lightly nodded. Then he directed his gaze to Nicole.

"In the case of Rose Hills versus Nicole Lively, for wasting police hours, the court is going to impose a sentence of five years without the possibility of parole," said the judge.

Instantly, Nicole's eyes widened in horror. She turned to her father behind the audience, and Thomas shook his head, looking defeated. Thomas Campbell was only locked up for over a month, unlike Nicole, who was facing serious charges.

"For your fraudulent activities, the court is going to impose a sentence of another five years without the possibility of parole," the judge added, making Nicole completely lose her temper.

"That's absurd! Are you kidding me? I did not kill anybody to deserve ten years!" Nicole complained. She turned to Evan and saw the menacing look on his face. She said, "you did this, Evan!"

On the other side of the bench, Evan repeatedly nodded, satisfied with the sentence. He was unaffected by Nicole's frantic claims. In Rose Hills, he was power now, and he meant to make use of it. Yes, he did it. He influenced the judge's decision and will do it over and over again to make Nicole Lively suffer.

"Miss Lively, you need to calm down!" While her defense attorney tried to put her in place, the judge became more irritated.

"You are a scheming woman, Miss Lively. The kind who is dangerous to the community. Just look at your reaction!" The judge scolded. "For disrespecting this court and seeing your violent nature, this court will send you to Long-Island Penitentiary!">

The judge ended the session without giving Nicole another chance to speak, saying, "The court is now adjourned."

"No! Father! Please, help me!" Nicole became more delirious, thinking about where she would be imprisoned. The Long Island Penitentiary was intended for murderers, drug dealers, rapists those involved in heinous crimes, yet why was she sent to such a facility? All she did was try to get Evan's affection! It was injustice!

"Evan!" She snapped at Evan while he took his leave with his attorneys. "You paid the judge! I'm sure you did! You can't get away! I will file a plea! This isn't fair!"

"You did this to yourself!" Evan coldly said. "You want to appeal, then try. Try to try if the court will even listen to you. Suffer and pay the price for messing with my life!"

Chapter 30: Shantelle's New Love

"Sorry, Evan. Doctor Scott isn't in Hamlin, either," Evan heard Keith say on the other line, and very quickly, his heart sank.

“What about the private investigator you hired? Didn’t that come up with any results?” Keith asked. “Who was the PI again? Mr. Ren Austen, yeah what about him?”

“Strangely, no,” Evan replied. Evan thought it was unusual. Mr. Austen was the same person who had found out about Nicole. Despite his experience, he could not find Doctor Scott. Still, he trusted the investigator due to his previous dealing with him.

Aside from hiring a private detective, Evan did what he had never tried to do before: he created a social media account. James, his assistant, walked him through it.

Evan tried to spy on Shantelle’s friends, creating a fake name, but they would not randomly accept unknown persons on their friends’ list. He felt like a foolish teenager, but what else could he do? Evan had to use every method possible to find his ex-wife.

He also asked for Keith’s help. He always knew his friend had social media, but it was the same; According to Keith, Shantelle’s friends had blocked him. Not only Keith but also Sean.

Of course, Evan considered there was also that possibility that Shantelle eventually disabled her social media or that she might have changed the name on the account.

“Well, what can I say, Evan? A person in hiding cannot be found,” Keith suggested. “I’m sorry, Evan, but at least we tried. I have to go. I need to make money. It’s an important day for me tomorrow.”

“Thanks, Keith,” Evan said. “Thanks for trying.”

Evan was on the road, counting the months in his head. It had been almost ten months since Shantelle left, yet he still had not found her.

They say time heals, but time has not helped at all. The Lockwood National Park had kept him busy, but he felt emptiness and longing whenever his day ended.

He had his laptop open in front of him, but he gawked outside the car’s window. As he closed the laptop, his eyes landed on the ring on his finger. Till that very day, he still wore his wedding ring, including the gift Shantelle gave him.

“Mr. Thompson, where to?” Howard, his driver, asked. “To the cemetery,” Evan instructed. That day was another attempt to find Shantelle, and he hoped he would succeed. Within Rose Hills cemetery, Karise was with her family and friends, mourning the loss of her mother.

Her mother's sudden stroke left her in the hospital for a month. Despite the efforts of the doctors, her mother still passed away. It left Karise's family heartbroken. With the length of period, her mother was in the hospital, Karise's family fell into near bankruptcy.

Karise was crying in front of her mother's coffin when she saw the man collecting the payment for her mother's burial. She walked towards him and begged, "Please, not now. I promise I'll pay for everything. It's just been so hard -"

Her words were cut off when the man before her gave her a receipt. The man said, "The memorial package has been fully paid. You don't need to worry."

The man left, and from where she remained, she understood the reason. She saw Evan Thompson. Karise scoffed. When she caught Evan walking towards her, she said, "If this is a bribe, it won't work. No matter how you pay me off, I won't tell you because I do not know where Shanty is!"

"I wasn't expecting anything in return. What I do hope is for Shanty to come and see your mother," Evan replied. You don't need to pay me back. Consider it as my help, for old time's sake." Evan placed a hand on Karise's shoulder and said, "I'm sorry for your loss, Karise."

Minutes turned into hours. Evan boldly joined in the gathering of Karise's family and friends, despite being uninvited. He wished he could finally see Shantelle. She would not miss this very last day of the wake. Shantelle loved Karise and her mother. She would come and pay respect.

Time passed. People around the wake had already begun to leave, and the rain started to pour, yet Evan remained in his seat under the tented lawn of Rose Hills Cemetery.

"Evan, it's getting dark. My mother is already beneath the ground. She is not coming. I'm telling you, she has already forgotten about Rose Hills," Karise warned Evan. "We are leaving."

"Shanty is coming here to see your mother. She would not miss this very last day," Evan insisted, looking past the rows of tombstones.

"You are crazy, Evan. Go home! She is not coming. I know it!" Karise said. She and her family left reluctantly. Only Evan remained while Howard, his driver, parked nearby.

Hours passed again. Evan slept in the car while Howard staked out the cemetery for Shantelle's possible arrival. However, to his dismay, Shantelle never came. As Evan

awoke the next day at six in the morning, he heard a knock on his car's window. It was Karise.

When he rolled down his window, Karise said, "Evan, what are you doing? It's enough. Let Shanty go. As you can see. She did not come. It's like I said to you yesterday, she would not come."

"Forget, Shanty, Evan. For your sake, for her sake, and everyone's sake." Karise was about to leave, but she returned to give Evan a piece of advice. She said, "If fate would have you meet again, then maybe you are destined, but stop torturing yourself and move on with your life -"

"You don't understand, Karise. I fear regret will continue to haunt me," he said in a lifeless tone. He looked at where Karise's mother was buried again and said, "I guess she isn't coming. I hoped that she did."

"Goodbye, Karise, and I'm sorry again for your loss," Evan said. Karise purposely drove back to the cemetery to see if Evan had waited for Shantelle. The crazy part was how he really did! 2

Karise watched as Evan's car drove away. Guilt consumed her completely, but what was she to do? She promised Doctor Scott not to tell Evan. She wondered, "Am I doing the right thing?"

Then, recalling how Shantelle cried over Evan, how she gave up so much for him only to get hurt, Karise muttered, "I'm sorry, Evan, but more than anything, my girl needs to love herself. She can't be with you."

Karise was confident that her best friend would not come that day. It was because, that very day, Shantelle was in the hospital, ready to give birth. In Warlington, within the hospital's delivery room, a woman's screams could be heard.

"Aahhh!" Shantelle was holding her tears. Beads of sweat formed on her forehead as she pushed and pushed." Arrghh!"

"The baby is almost out, Shanty! You can do it," the doctor instructed. In tears, Shantelle gave another push. Her beautiful face frowned as she held her breath. "Wah! Wah! Wah!" Upon hearing the baby's cry, she also howled in tears. Finally, her son was out.

"Baby boy Scott!" The doctor announced. Nurses quickly cleaned him up in Shantelle's chest. The baby kept crying and crying, making Shantelle shed more tears.

“Oh, you are so beautiful, little one,” Shantelle said, stroking his head and back. “I love you. I love you. You are my lucky baby, my gift, my love.”

She kissed the baby’s head and claimed, “Thank you for coming into my life. From this moment on, I will never love another man. Only you. I will love only you.”

“I’ll love you, Lucas.”