

## **Chapter 11: Nicole's Request**

Evan was staring blankly at the glass window of the hospital room, wondering how Shantelle was. He fished his mobile from his trouser pocket and gawked at his phone.

"Fuck." He still had no means of communicating with her.

"Evan, the doctor said I can go home in two days," he heard a female voice say behind him.

He lazily turned and looked at the source of the voice and realized it was Nicole. Yes, that's right. How could he forget he had visited her at the hospital and had been for more than a week?

Instantly, Evan felt regretful about how Nicole looked. She had cuts and bruises on her face.

A bunch of thugs violated Nicole in the streets, all because he left her at the LEX club. Keith, his friend, did not even bother apologizing in person for not taking Nicole home.

While he was being intimate with Shantelle, Nicole suffered in the streets. All the more, Evan felt obligated to aid Nicole. He paid for her medical expenses and found time to visit the hospital daily.

"Evan? Did you hear me? The doctor said I could finally be discharged in two days," Nicole repeated.

"That's good news," Evan answered. "Since you are feeling better, how about we have the police visit you today? Your statement would help capture those who did this to you."

"Evan." Nicole was suddenly teary-eyed. She said, "I don't want to. I can't. I can't bear to recount what happened to me. I know the heavens will take care of them - punish them for what they did to me." 1

"I don't want to press charges. I don't want people to look at me in a dirty way - to look down at me and pity me." Nicole howled further in tears as she added, "All I need... is you, Evan. You are all I need."

"Don't remotely leave me behind again - anywhere. I'm afraid of what might happen to me next, Evan." She lifted her hand, suggesting she wanted to hold Evan's hand.

Evan reluctantly took her hand. He sat next to Nicole and said, "But, they have to be punished -"

"Karma will get to them," Nicole insisted. "Evan, all I need is you now, please. Please. Let's forget about what happened."

Evan frowned. He just could not let it go. Given that Nicole was ashamed, what about other women who may be violated? All because such scums can walk around the city?

"Okay. For now, I'll let you recuperate first." While Evan appeared to agree, he still meant to follow up with the police. As necessary, he can have someone privately look into it. Besides, Evan thought that in cases of violence and abuse, the city's prosecutor would always pursue the case, even if the victim chose not to press charges. 2

"Evan, I'm scared to be on my own. This would not have happened if you had not left me at the club." Nicole looked up at him with pitiful eyes and said, "What happened was so traumatizing, I don't know if - if I could sleep at night."

"Even here in the hospital, with the nurses and doctors - it's been hard resting. I could only rest when you come and visit me after your work," with her lips trembling, Nicole resumed. "With all this, maybe I - I can live with you temporarily? I feel much better, and with you near, I could sleep better."

"Can - can I stay at your villa?" She added.

'Live in my villa? Our villa?' Evan's eyes widened, referring to his marital home with Shantelle. His brow raised, and his mouth parted, but before he could answer, his phone rang. He used this as an excuse and stepped out of the room.

When he returned to Nicole's room, he revealed, "There is a problem at the company. If I can't come tomorrow, I'll send someone to look after you."

He left, not wanting to entertain her request to stay with him in the villa.

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[Evan, why is your maid here? Aren't you coming to take care of me?] The next day, Evan received a message from Nicole. He did not want to speak to or see her, especially after she suggested staying with him in the villa.

Moreover, there were problems at the company that he had to deal with. His schedule was bound to be busy up until the next day, and he needed to get home and rest for the night. He figured he would respond to Nicole later - much later.

It was already past eight in the evening when Howard, the Thompson family driver, picked him up at the office. Often, Howard would drive him when he was entirely out, exhausted from a day's work.

They drove past a boutique selling formal wear, and a long white evening gown on display caught his attention. "Howard, stop."

Sarah Kate. It was a dress designed by a fashion designer in Braeton City. Evan recalled how Shantelle liked the designer's dresses. He stepped out of the car and went into the shop. 3

"Sir, we are sorry, but we are already closed," a store manager said. She had just flipped the signboard over when Evan walked in.

"Please, I'm Evan Thompson. My wife is your regular customer here," he said. "I can pay you any amount." 2

"Ah, yes, Miss Shantelle." The store manager frowned and said, "I haven't seen her in a while. Looking up at Evan, she asked, "What can I do for you, Mister Thompson?"

"That gown at the front. Is that a limited design?" He asked.

"Yes, sir. It's a limited edition. There are only four of the same design. The owner of the brand, Misses Sarah Kate, has one. One had already been bought. The other is in London, still available for sale," the lady proudly said.

"Then, I want that for Shantelle," Evan said. "But not now. Send it to her next month, please. It will be her birthday this coming December."

"You know her size, right?" Evan asked.

"Ah, yes, Mister Thompson. Miss Shantelle has lost a lot of weight over the past few months. It was more than a month ago since she last came here. She looked very sad. I hope she is okay

now, though," the store attendant muttered unknowingly.

This made Evan feel unhappy. He gulped and replied, "I - yes, of course. Problems in business. Please adjust the gown as necessary according to your last recorded size of Shantelle."

He gave the lady his card and said, "Thank you for arranging everything. My assistant will be in contact to make sure the delivery happens."

Recalling how the store may send it to the villa, he added, "And... you'll need to send to a different address."

Before leaving the shop, Evan glanced at the dress displayed in the window. A smile formed on his face as he pictured Shantelle wearing it on her birthday.

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Another day had passed, and Evan was busier than ever.

The Thompson Group of Companies had several businesses. Their biggest one was the E&E Shipping Lines. Recently, they acquired a Russian client, moving cars from a nearby coast to Russia. It was their most noteworthy deal yet, but also the most challenging.

The client was very demanding and often asked for huge shipping discounts. The client went to see Evan personally to get the required adjustment.

Evan had to take the client for a tour, showing and explaining why they could not lower the shipping cost.

After dealing with the Russian client, Evan returned to his office. He was reading one document to another when Mrs. Shaw called.

Remembering how he had sent Mrs. Shaw to attend to Nicole, he frowned. Then, Mrs. Shaw would never bother him unless it was an emergency. Thus, Evan answered the call.

On the other line, Mrs. Shaw said, "Mister Evans, Miss Lively is in the villa. She insisted on coming here after her discharge from the hospital. She said you had agreed to let her live here. I reluctantly followed her instructions, but now Miss Lively is inside your room. She has removed Miss Shanty's clothes and replaced them with hers."

Evan's eyes darkened in irritation. He wondered, 'Did I ever make her think she could replace Shanty?'

## Chapter 12: Misunderstand

The double doors abruptly opened, resulting in them banging against the wall. Mrs. Shaw and Nicole snapped their heads in Evan's direction.

"Evan." Nicole jolted in her stance as she called his name. "You - you startled us! Thank goodness you returned early."

Nicole still had a butterfly tape on her cheek. Part of her eye bag was still swollen with a purple tint on her skin. The crack on her lips had dried. Overall, she was better compared to how she was severely battered over a week ago.

She pointed to the clothes scattered on the sofa and then to an empty box, saying, "You were probably too busy that you failed to pack Shantelle's clothes. So I did it for you."

When Evan did not answer, Nicole walked up to him and described, "The villa is amazing. It will be a good environment for me to heal better. With you -"

"What are you doing here, Nicole?!" In an ice-cold tone, Evan asked. His voice raised while he was at it.

"Evan? We - we talked about this, right?" Nicole said. "Evan, I was raped and assaulted because you left me at the club! I need a nurturing environment to get better. Aside from my wounds, my emotional trauma -"

"I never said! That you could live here!" Evan shot back, the veins on his neck protruding as he spoke. "This is mine and Shantelle's home!"

Nicole was taken aback. Her eyes widened at Evan's words. Her voice broke in and out as she replied, "Shantelle? But, Evan, you already divorced her."

"It doesn't change the fact that this was our home. My father bought this as our marital home! Out of respect for Shantelle, I would never let another woman live here!" Evan announced. "And whoever told you I wanted Shantelle's clothes out of our bedroom? Did you really put your clothes in there?!"

"For one, I did not even agree that you live with me. I avoided answering your request because it was my way of politely rejecting it! Can't you take a hint?" Evan added. His eyes immediately shifted to the direction of the stairs, and he marched into the second level of the villa, finding his way to the master's bedroom.

Evan was horrified when he looked at the contents of the walk-in closet. Nicole's clothes were certainly there!

Evan gulped. His brows met as he thought, 'Just... what was Nicole thinking?'

"Evan! Evan, I can explain," Nicole had chased after him. Standing behind Evan, she reasoned, "Evan, I told you I was traumatized, and I only felt safe around you. I can sleep on the floor. I don't mind. I put my clothes there, so it's more convenient -"

"Enough," Evan said. He turned to Nicole and ordered, "I want you to get your things out. I'll ask Howard to take you to your apartment."

Nicole's eyes widened. She said, "But Evan, I'm afraid. I'm afraid of being alone. I might have nightmares about how I was badly beaten and raped! We went out at the club together, but you ended up leaving me for Shantelle! Why? You have already divorced her, and she was with her

friends! Whereas, I - I was alone."

Suddenly, Nicole collapsed on the floor, saying, "Evan, I would not be like this if you had not left me at the club. I was in an unfamiliar place - Evan, please. Don't you feel sorry for me at all?"

Yet again, Evan felt guilty, but he also thought, 'So I have to sacrifice my personal life because of that mistake?'

Moreover, Evan considered how he had just gotten a divorce. He wanted his freedom, his time alone, and to experience a single life with his friends while holding the most powerful seat in his father's company. He did not want Nicole or any woman sleeping in the same house as him, much more, his marital home with Shantelle!

Evan groaned as he stabbed his hair with his fingers. He clenched his jaws and finally said, "I can't - I can't repay you for that mistake with my personal life - my private space. Please go to your apartment. I will hire a caregiver and security guard for you. I'll ask my assistant to find the best therapist who can help you return to your old mental and emotional health, but I'm sorry, Nicole... You cannot live with me."

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Nicole gave Evan one last glance. Her eyes watered as she entered the private car of the Thompsons.

Evan could tell Nicole hoped he would change his mind, but he would never. He did not judge Nicole just yet, but why did it feel like she was using the assault incident to force her way into his life?

When the car disappeared into the road, Evan returned to the villa. Seeing the maids, he instructed, "Please help Mrs. Shaw return Shanty's clothes to the room."

"Yes, sir," one maid replied.

"Mr. Thompson, there is something else you should know," Mrs. Shaw reported.

Evan's brows met. He turned to Mrs. Shaw with his heart racing. 'What else could it be?' He absolutely did not like the worried expression of Mrs. Shaw.

Mrs. Shaw pressed her lips. Then, she revealed, "Just before you arrived, the Misses." She still resumed addressing Shantelle as the "Misses" of the house. Strangely, Evan did not seem to mind it at all.

"The Misses called the landline," Mrs. Shaw revealed. "Shanty told me about a ring she ordered, but we never finished our conversation."

Mrs. Shaw frowned. She added, "Because Miss Lively took the phone and said something to the Misses. I'm afraid Shanty will misunderstand."

"What did Nicole say to Shanty?" Evan asked as calmly as he could, but inside, his heart was drumming against his ribcage.

"Miss Lively suggested that you are living together now - here in this home," Mrs. Shaw described.

Silence fell upon the living room. The other maid looked at Mrs. Shaw before she also said, "I - I also heard it, Mr. -"

Evan rushed outside the villa, heading to his car without letting the maid finish.

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More than an hour ago, at Warlington, Shantelle was completing her information online for medical school. She went back and forth from an old email to a new one, transferring files when a specific email reminder caught her attention.

Subject line: Winning Bidder for Jade Prosperity Ring.

Her eyes widened, remembering how she had bid for a twenty-four-carat male's ring with a jadeite head. The ring was supposed to be her belated gift to Evan - to congratulate him for taking the CEO seat of his father's company. She had forgotten all about it since she and Evan had been arguing a lot before the divorce.

Shantelle carefully read the email and confirmed that she had won the bid and had twenty-four hours to complete the payment.

She thought about canceling the order, but then again, she considered how the ring would look good on Evan. In the end, Shantelle decided to push through with the order and gave delivery instructions. She did not dare to speak to Evan. Instead, she made a long-distance call to the villa's home phone in Rose Hills.

When Mrs. Shaw picked up the call, Shantelle said, "Mrs. Shaw, I'm glad it's you."

"Oh, Misses! How are you, dearest Shanty?" Mrs. Shaw asked. "It's so nice to hear your voice."

"I'm... coping, Mrs. Shaw. Your voice also brings me joy," Shantelle answered. "Anyway, Mrs. Shaw, I ordered a ring for -"

"Is that Shantelle?" Shantelle heard a woman's voice.

The next thing she knew, the same woman took over the call, and she introduced herself, "Shantelle, this is Nicole. Evan and I are living together now. Thank you for setting Evan free. We can finally be together the way it should have been... two years ago."

It was Nicole Lively, and she was living with Evan in their marital home!

Learning of this, Shantelle cried. The news broke her heart completely.

Shantelle was certain Nicole sensed her weeping as well. Still, remembering that she was the woman who came in between Nicole and Evan, she faintly replied, "Congratulations, Nicole. You have already won. Take care of Evan. Goodbye."

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Meanwhile, in a private community within Rose Hills, Evan was ringing the gates to the Scotts' mansion.

"Shanty! Shanty!"