

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."