

What makes a power couple

Chapter 21:

Nicole heard him clearly. Her brows furrowed slightly, a flicker of disappointment flashing through her eyes. She had believed, even for a moment, that progress was finally within reach.

Playing the same sweet card she always did, Marissa tilted her head and asked carefully, “Mr. Moore, do you think you could introduce me to that friend? Maybe if I see him, it’ll trigger something.”

At that, Aidan’s eyes grew colder, his expression tightening. Nicole couldn’t tell if he was about to agree or shut Marissa down completely.

But deep down, she saw that she could use Marissa to help her find that man.

Letting out a soft laugh, Nicole leaned into the act. “Great suggestion, Marissa. Besides, we’re long overdue for some quality sister time.”

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That threw Marissa off. She blinked in surprise, not expecting Nicole to go along with it so easily. A smug smile flickered through her mind. She assumed nothing had changed. As far as she was concerned, Nicole was still fumbling in the dark.

With her most practiced innocent smile, Marissa nodded sweetly. “Sounds great.” A quick glance at his watch, then Aidan’s eyes shifted to Nicole. His voice was clipped, efficient. “It’s time to head home.”

The words landed hard. Nicole hadn’t heard anyone say that to her in years. And somehow, it still managed to hit like a punch to the chest.

Without a word, Aidan turned on his heel and walked out, his tall frame vanishing through the doorway like a storm finally passing.

Nicole stayed deep in thought. She’d been certain the ring was Aidan’s, but now the story had taken another turn. Looking back, it actually lined up. Aidan had been tucked away in some remote countryside five years ago, and there was no way he could have been involved directly.

Even so, the revelation that the ring might belong to one of Aidan’s friends changed everything. As long as she remained under the Moore family’s roof, the truth would eventually surface.

Her fingers curled into tight fists at her sides. She’d made a vow to herself that she would find that man, no matter what. Until that day came, she had to keep every motive buried beneath the surface.

And if Marissa wanted to act the fool? Perfect. Nicole would make sure Marissa played the role to its fullest.

Nicole emerged from the shadows, her steps measured and steady.

Spotting her, Marissa wasted no time slipping into her usual routine. Her eyes brimmed with well-practiced tears as she plastered on a guilty expression. “Nicole, I swear I didn’t mean anything by it. I was just curious. I shouldn’t have asked to come to the Moore estate. If you want, I’ll go to Aidan right now and confess. I’ll tell him the ring belongs to you. Whatever happens, I’ll take the blame. It’s all my fault.”

Nicole rolled her eyes. Another performance. Same script, new scene, she satirized inwardly.

Outwardly, she softened her features, masking every trace of suspicion behind a delicate smile. “It’s alright. But if you open your mouth now, our entire family might suffer for it. Let’s just let this go.”

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Chapter 22:

With a shaky breath, Marissa dabbed at her fake tears and nodded. Her head dipped low, but behind lowered lashes, a flicker of ambition gleamed. Despite her calm exterior, Marissa was still wrestling with the unexpected turn of events. Things weren't supposed to unravel like this. That old man she'd arranged for Nicole—he had to be pushing sixty—so how had Aidan ended up in the mix?

The thought unsettled her. Could the man from back then be related to Aidan? Maybe an uncle? Whoever they were, this was her chance to edge closer to Aidan, and she wasn't about to waste it.

At Riverside Haven,

Marissa stepped into the elegant foyer, eyes wide as she took in the lavish space. She quickly put on a sweet smile. “Mr. Moore, this place is stunning. You and Nicole really live in style. So... any idea when I'll meet that friend of yours?”

Aidan didn't bother acknowledging her. Not even for the ring. His voice, cool and detached, finally broke the silence. “He's overseas. I'll pass along your interest.”

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Still beaming, Marissa clutched onto her practiced charm. “That’d be wonderful. Thank you.”

Before she could say more, Fang came charging toward them, tail wagging in a frenzy as it bounded straight for Aidan.

Frozen in place, Marissa’s face drained of color. A second later, she shrieked and ducked behind Aidan as if her life depended on it. The cloud of perfume she wore hit him full force, and Aidan’s face darkened with irritation. That overpowering scent—it was the kind he couldn’t stand.

Without hesitation, he took a deliberate step away, widening the space between them.

Still trembling, Marissa cried out again, “It’s a wolf! Mr. Moore, help! I’m scared!”

Fang lowered its head and bared its teeth, letting out a warning growl. Her loud panic had clearly agitated it.

Unbothered, Aidan gave a quiet signal and led the wolf away, his pace calm. Behind him, Leonel followed without a word as they moved toward the study. Once the door clicked

shut, Leonel broke into motion. He rushed forward, eyes lit up with urgency. “We finally found—”

“She’s not the one,” Aidan cut in flatly. His voice sliced through the air, cold as steel. Beneath that chill, though, something volatile stirred—just out of reach.

Caught off guard, Leonel stopped in his tracks. Confusion etched across his face as he asked, “But how do you know that? She’s carrying your token, isn’t she?”

Aidan took off his watch, tugged his tie loose, and sank into the sofa with a quiet sigh. He crouched down and scratched his wolf behind the ears. The wolf thumped its tail, pleased, while Aidan’s gaze turned sharp, the warmth slipping into something cold and calculated.

“Keep a close eye on Marissa. She’s connected to what happened all those years ago. I’m sure of it.”

Leonel felt his chest tighten as his heart hammered. He nodded quickly. “Got it. I’ll handle it.”

Maybe this time, they were finally on the trail of that woman from five years ago. Aidan hadn’t chased anything harder in his life. She had become the only thing he ever cared to catch.

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Chapter 23:

Meanwhile, Nicole stood quietly in the courtyard, her face unreadable. She had thought she might finally come face-to-face with the man who had taken her virginity. But it looked like the wait wasn't over yet. Still, she couldn't let Aidan get even a glimpse of what she was really thinking. All she could do now was act clueless.

Across from her, Marissa was still shaken by the encounter with the wolf. She looked over at Nicole, clearly confused by how calm her sister seemed. "Weren't you even scared back there?"

Nicole didn't flinch. Her eyes stayed steady on Marissa, and her voice was smooth and steady. "Animals don't pretend. They make it obvious who they care about and who they don't. They're direct, unlike people."

The comment hit harder than Marissa expected. Her brows furrowed. Nicole's tone felt off, like something was buried beneath it. Her nerves flared. "Nicole, can we just go back to the bedroom? I'm still worried that thing might come out and bite me."

Nicole's lips curled into a soft smile, though it never reached her eyes. "Sure. I've actually been wanting a word with you."

Once they were tucked inside the guest room, Marissa finally exhaled and tried to settle her nerves.

But Marissa's thoughts were far from calm. She couldn't stop imagining Nicole running into that old man. If he turned out to be someone from Aidan's family, or worse, a business partner, things were going to spiral fast.

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And when Aidan discovered Nicole had been lying about her virginity the whole time, there'd be no saving her.

The idea alone sent a thrill through Marissa that she couldn't quite contain. While her eyes scanned the room aimlessly, Marissa's voice dripped with sweetness. "This place is stunning. Nicole, I never imagined that one tiny idea from me would flip your whole life around."

Nicole offered a thin smile, her tone dry. "Am I supposed to be grateful for that?"

Marissa paused mid-turn, only to go stiff when she caught the look on her sister's face. Whatever warmth had been there earlier was gone. In its place was something sharp.

"That's not how I meant it..."

Nicole didn't flinch as she moved in closer, her gaze slicing through the space between them. "Let's not pretend anymore, Marissa. You orchestrated the whole thing five years ago, didn't you?"

Even though she framed it as a question, her voice didn't leave room for argument.

Terror gripped Marissa's throat. Nicole no longer looked human. She looked like vengeance dressed in skin. "I seriously don't know what you're talking about!"

"After it all went down, I found a little pouch in your drawer. Thought it was something harmless at first. Maybe you were just experimenting. But I had it tested anyway. Know what came back? An aphrodisiac. Not the weak kind. The kind that traps you and burns every way out. It was the exact same stuff I was drugged with that night. Still planning to lie?"

"That's not— It wasn't what you think..."

A loud crack rang through the room as Nicole's palm struck Marissa across the face, silencing her mid-excuse.

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Chapter 24:

With a sharp gasp, Marissa grabbed at her cheek, the sting flaring across her skin like fire. It was the second time Nicole had laid hands on her, and this time, she wasn't going to swallow it.

Marissa's eyes narrowed, full of rage. "You actually hit me?"

"Of course I hit you!" retorted Nicole. "You've been dying to stir up trouble, so let me return the favor. I'll help you find that man. And once the truth about your sick little scheme comes out, want to guess how fast your perfect life unravels?"

Frozen in place, Marissa looked at her like she'd been slapped again. Her voice trembled. "You're... using me?"

A humorless chuckle slipped past Nicole's lips as she grabbed Marissa's necklace and gave it a sharp tug, forcing her to lock eyes with her. "Using you? That's harsh. You practically offered yourself up like a gift."

"You're getting it all wrong..."

Nicole scoffed, her voice laced with poison. "Wrong? Let's wait and see, shall we? When Aidan's so-called friend arrives, I'll let him be the judge. You've been clawing your way toward money and status for years, haven't you? Let's see if you can stomach what it actually costs."

Nicole didn't say another word. She just shoved Marissa aside, as if clearing garbage from her path. Without hesitation, she reached for the door, pulled it open, and walked out without a glance back.

Marissa dropped to the floor as if her bones had given out. Though her skin was slick with sweat, not an ounce of heat remained in her body. A bitter cold worked its way down her spine like a ghost crawling under her skin.

Everything was clear now. Nicole had known the truth all along. She hadn't been fooled. Nicole had simply chosen to wait, letting her walk blindly into every step of the setup.

Since when had Nicole turned into someone this ruthless?

Down the hallway, Nicole moved without breaking stride. Her face stayed unreadable, eyes forward, mouth set in stone. The maids who caught sight of her hurried to the sides, barely breathing as she passed.

Not far from the courtyard, Lilah was making her way through the garden when hushed voices stopped her in her tracks.

"Nicole's not someone we can mess with. She made her sister cry like a toddler."

"You're kidding. What could've happened that bad?"

"Think about it. Marissa was supposed to be the one marrying into this family, not Nicole. But look who's living here now. She probably snatched the whole deal and made sure her sister kept her mouth shut. That girl's got a strategy, I'll give her that."

"Nicole's playing the long game. She's after wealth, and I'm telling you, she's not done yet."

Their chatter came to a halt when Lilah stepped out from behind. “Do you all think this is break time? Get back to work,” Lilah reproached. Startled, the three maids scattered like birds startled from a wire.

Without skipping a beat, Lilah halted one of them. “Avalynn, go pick the dried coffee beans from the yard and drop them off in Analia’s room.”

“Yes, Ms. Buckley,” Avalynn Ruiz nodded.

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Chapter 25:

When Lilah stepped into Analia's room, the first thing she saw was Analia's sour expression. She walked over and greeted her calmly. "Analia."

Lifting her gaze, Analia spoke in a level tone. "The maids have been talking. Apparently, Nicole hit her sister and forced herself into the marriage. Some think she's hiding something. Do you believe that?"

Easing onto the seat beside her, Lilah offered a soft smile. "From what I know, Marissa was the one expected to marry into the Moore family. But somehow, it ended up being Nicole instead. I don't really know how the change happened."

Analia's brow creased, the frown deepening as silence settled between them. Lilah's smile held steady as she added gently, "Honestly, sisters squabble all the time. Maybe Marissa said something cruel, and Nicole snapped. We shouldn't dwell too much on it."

"Maybe you're right," said Analia. Her voice carried weight now. "One day, you'll have a husband and a home of your own. Nicole is married to Aidan, and he's the Moore family's heir. The two of them will face life together. These days, the wife often runs the household, and in this case, that'll be Nicole. You'll need her on your side. Respect her, support her. I'll make sure to find you a husband who treats you right."

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Biting down gently on her lower lip, Lilah felt the shift in the air. It was more than advice—it was a clear message. Analia had accepted Nicole completely. And if Lilah wanted a secure future, she'd need to do the same.

Eyes brimming with emotion, Lilah gave a small snuffle. “I didn’t expect you to be thinking so far ahead for me. But I don’t want to get married. I just want to stay here, with you.”

That earned her a sharp glance. “Every girl says that until she falls in love. Don’t talk nonsense. Go lie down and rest.”

“Alright.”

Elsewhere in the house, upstairs—Nicole had been studying her medical texts until fatigue tugged at her. She closed the book and stepped out for a quiet walk through the garden to clear her mind.

The moment she came back, Nicole barely had time to step into the living room before the scene stopped her in her tracks. Several people were scouring the space, opening drawers, and checking corners. It wasn’t hard to read the chaos. Their tense expressions said it all—something valuable had vanished.

Out of breath, a maid rushed toward her and said quickly, “Ms. Wilson, Lilah’s late mother’s keepsake has gone missing. Mrs. Moore is livid. She wants it found immediately. Have you seen a platinum necklace with a sapphire pendant?”

Composed and unfazed, Nicole gave a small shake of her head. “I haven’t come across it.”

Just as Nicole finished, Lilah entered the room. Catching wind of the conversation, she scowled and retorted, “Nicole just got here. Why would she know anything about what’s missing?”

“I’m sorry for that,” the maid apologized.

Lilah’s irritation didn’t fade. “Then stop wasting time and keep looking.”

Without protest, the group gave hurried nods and resumed their frantic search.

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Chapter 26:

“I’m really sorry, Nicole. Please don’t take it personally. They didn’t mean to offend you; they’re just panicking. I’ll talk to them once this is over.” Her eyes welled with emotion, and worry clouded her expression. “If I can’t find it, I don’t know what I’ll do...”

Nicole didn’t offer comfort. Her voice remained even. “I’m heading back to my room.”

As Nicole nudged the door open, something shifted in her periphery. Her gaze dropped to the plush carpet—slightly disturbed. Earlier, everything had been perfectly in place. Now it wasn’t.

A shadow crossed her face. The glint in her eyes went cold.

A faint mark on the carpet caught Nicole’s attention: it was a footprint, just enough to give someone away. Judging by the size, it looked like a women’s 7.5. Nicole’s feet were smaller, and Aidan’s towering frame made his shoe size an obvious mismatch.

Clearly, this wasn’t just carelessness. Someone had planted this.

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So, they were finally getting bold enough to play games right under her nose.

She almost laughed. If they wanted to act, then she'd give them an audience.

Instead of reacting, Nicole stepped around the footprint with calculated grace. She shifted the rug out of any common path, then sank onto the couch and casually opened a book, pretending to relax while she waited for the show to begin.

It didn't take long before noise erupted outside the hallway. Moments later, a knock landed at the door.

She kept her tone light, laced with feigned confusion. "Is something going on?" From the other side, Avalynn's voice came through with a careful edge. "Ma'am, we're continuing the search for Miss Buckley's necklace. Sorry for the intrusion. May we take a look in your room?"

Lifting an eyebrow, Nicole smirked. Now they were trying the polite approach, just before twisting the knife.

Her voice rose just enough to carry weight. "You do realize this is Aidan's room, don't you? You really want to dig through his belongings?"

Though new to the Moore estate, Nicole wasn't clueless. Aidan had one strict rule—only Analia was ever allowed inside his personal quarters.

"It's the last room left unchecked. We're only following instructions. Please don't make this harder than it has to be."

A chill cold flashed behind Nicole's eyes. Those were the words she'd been expecting all along.

With deliberate calm, she set her book aside, rose from the couch, and made her way to the door before pulling it open.

"Appreciate your cooperation," Avalynn said as she stepped forward without hesitation.

Nicole raised a hand, stopping Avalynn at the threshold. Her gaze was cool. "Did I say you could come in?"

Nicole's voice sharpened, dropping in temperature like a sudden cold front.

"Let me make something very clear. Only Analia and I are allowed in this room. So, which accusation are you making here? That Aidan took the necklace? That Analia did? Or are you pointing your finger at me?"

No effort was made to soften the blow—Nicole spoke with surgical precision. All color drained from Avalynn's face. "I would never accuse Mr. Moore or Mrs. Moore—"

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Chapter 27:

“Then you’re saying I’m the one who took it?” Nicole didn’t raise her voice, but the chill in her tone sank deep, leaving no room to breathe. It cornered Avalynn like a wall closing in.

Words failed Avalynn. “That wasn’t what I meant.”

“Foolish,” said Analia sharply as she was steadied by Lilah and guided toward the scene.

Analia caught every word. Her brows drew together. “Why are you all gathered here?”

With her hands folded and voice lowered, Avalynn explained, “This is the last room we haven’t searched. But Ms. Wilson won’t allow us inside.”

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A flash of indignation flickered in Analia's eyes as she took a step closer. "I heard every bit of that nonsense. Everything in this house belongs to her. Are you truly suggesting she'd stoop so low—for one necklace?"

Lilah's breath hitched, and for a moment, she slipped out of control.

Even Nicole found herself momentarily surprised. She hadn't expected Analia to come to her defense with such unwavering force, practically handing her the reins to the entire household.

Trying to maintain composure, Avalynn offered a strained smile. "Miss Buckley's really attached to that necklace. We only came here after hearing some... things being said."

"You actually bought into that nonsense?"

Unable to hold her head up, Avalynn looked down, her embarrassment plain. With a flick of her hand, Analia cut the tension. "Enough already. Stop loitering here and take your search elsewhere."

Gently stepping forward, Lilah added in a soft but pointed voice, “Analia, someone’s clearly been spreading lies about Nicole. We should figure out who it is and toss them out—before...”

“They do more damage to the family’s name.” That seemed to strike a chord with Analia, her expression shifting ever so slightly in agreement.

Nicole’s gaze swept over the room, cold and precise. Since someone had stirred up drama, she wasn’t going to let it end that boringly.

“If this involves me,” said Nicole, her tone calm, “Avalynn, why don’t you go ahead and share who’s been talking and what they’ve been saying?”

Avalynn froze, her mind racing to catch up. Nicole had walked straight into her own trap, and that stunned her. Still, Avalynn wasn’t about to let it go.

Avalynn paused uncertainly, shifting from foot to foot before finally whispering with feigned reluctance, “It’s about Ms. Wilson. She might have...”

With narrowed eyes, Analia’s voice turned icy and demanding. “Out with it, Avalynn. Speak plainly.”

Pushed by Analia’s sharp words, Avalynn steeled herself. “Earlier today, Zoe told us something strange. She claimed she was heading to tidy Miss Buckley’s room when she spotted Ms. Wilson sneaking inside. She had something in her hand and left in a hurry.

Zoe didn't stop her or say anything then. But now, with the necklace suddenly missing, we thought it couldn't hurt to look into this."

Uneasy silence filled every corner of the room. Suspicious glances quickly found Nicole. From their spot in the hallway, even the household staff traded quiet, disapproving glances.

"Zoe described everything so clearly—it must've been Nicole."

"No wonder nobody found the necklace anywhere else."

Tension crept into Analia's face as her jaw clenched and her brow drew in with barely restrained anger.

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Chapter 28:

But Lilah gently placed her hand on Analia's arm, saying softly yet firmly, "There's no way Nicole would do something like that. This has to be some kind of mix-up. Maybe Zoe got the wrong idea about what she saw. The best thing we can do now is call Zoe in and have her explain it herself. That should put an end to all this talk."

Analia studied Lilah thoughtfully before giving a stiff nod. "Very well. Someone fetch Zoe. I want to hear her side myself."

Without wasting a second, someone rushed off to get Zoe Becker.

Zoe soon appeared, nervousness evident on her pale face. "Madam, you wished to speak with me?"

With a slight lift of her eyebrow, Nicole spoke in a voice that was steady but firm. "Actually, I asked for you."

Cautiously, Zoe's eyes darted toward Nicole, visibly preparing herself for the confrontation ahead. In a deliberately timid voice, masking her true intent, Zoe said softly, "Ms. Wilson, honestly, I never wanted things to come to this. But when I saw how deeply hurt Miss..."

“Buckley was, I couldn’t remain silent. That necklace means the world to her. You already possess everything anyone could desire here, so please, return what you’ve taken.”

Sharpness flashed through Lilah’s expression, and her voice lashed out sternly. “Zoe, watch your words carefully—especially with Analia around. Don’t you dare tell lies.”

At Lilah’s firm reminder, Analia visibly relaxed, reassured that Lilah had remembered her earlier counsel and acted accordingly.

Steadying herself despite the subtle tremble of her lips, Zoe responded with renewed certainty, “Even if you put me under oath, my story won’t change. I saw what I saw. I owe everyone the truth.”

Pausing briefly, Lilah tentatively suggested, “Nicole has nothing to hide. If she’s innocent, surely she won’t object to us searching her belongings. It would settle the matter immediately.”

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Analia’s expression turned troubled. Her trust in Nicole remained firm, and while Lilah’s suggestion could silence the whispers, it disturbed Analia deeply to imagine Nicole enduring such embarrassment. “Perhaps we shouldn’t—” Analia hesitated, clearly torn.

“I don’t mind at all. Actually, I was about to suggest the same thing,” Nicole said, smiling faintly yet confidently.

Moving swiftly to Nicole's side, Analia clasped Nicole's hand warmly, her voice gentle with sympathy. "Nicole, I'm truly sorry you have to go through such humiliation."

With quiet dignity, Nicole shook her head, calmly reassuring her, "It really isn't a problem." Stepping aside, Nicole indicated for the inspection to begin. Avalynn and Zoe marched forward, accompanied by two eager maids, their attitudes self-righteous and smug. Ignoring Aidan's possessions entirely, they immediately targeted Nicole's belongings, searching through them aggressively and without restraint.

Observing the spectacle, Nicole remained composed, her expression betraying none of her inner amusement at their melodramatic display.

A short moment later, Avalynn shrieked in exaggerated shock, her voice trembling dramatically. "I can't believe it! It's actually here—the necklace!"

Stunned disbelief clouded Analia's face.

Lilah's expression shifted in an instant, her eyes narrowing as she stepped forward, swiftly seizing the necklace. She examined it with a careful, almost reverent gaze, her fingers brushing over the delicate piece. Pressing it against her chest, she took a shaky breath, her eyes reddening as a rush of emotion overcame her. "Thank goodness we found it," she whispered, her voice thick with relief. "That's all that matters now!"

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Chapter 29:

The maids, who had merely harbored suspicion moments ago, now exchanged knowing glances. Seeing the change in Analia's demeanor, they were certain that Nicole was in grave trouble.

"She's from such a low-class family," one whispered, her voice dripping with disdain. "It's no surprise she doesn't belong in high society. And now, she's been caught stealing."

"I heard Nicole was sent off to some remote village as a child, raised by a woman from the backwoods. People like that can never change," another maid chimed in.

"There's hard evidence now," a third added with certainty. "Analía must be utterly repulsed by her. A woman like Nicole doesn't deserve someone like Aidan."

“She’s nothing but…” one of the maids began, her voice dripping with disdain, but was quickly cut off.

“Enough!” Analia’s voice rang out, a soft but unmistakable authority cutting through the whispers. It was fragile yet commanding, bringing the conversation to an abrupt halt.

The group stood frozen, their hearts racing in their chests. No one dared to utter another word, though all eyes subtly shifted toward Nicole.

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But Nicole remained unmoved, her posture relaxed as she leaned against the doorframe, absentmindedly twirling a strand of hair. Her gaze didn’t waver, nor did she acknowledge the tension in the room. It was as though she were simply an observer to the chaos around her, detached from it all.

Zoe, feeling a surge of certainty, stepped forward with a bold voice. “I told you! I saw it with my own eyes. There’s no way I’m wrong about this. Ms. Wilson, you took something that doesn’t belong to you. Don’t you think it’s time you owned up to it and apologized?”

Avalynn, now stepping forward to defend Lilah, spoke with a firm tone, her eyes narrowing. “She wouldn’t even let us in earlier. That was a clear sign she was hiding something—why else would she be so secretive?”

Avalynn, her sneer evident, added with a venomous edge, “That’s right. Miss Buckley’s been doing her best to maintain your reputation, trying to be the gracious one, and you’re acting smug? How ungrateful.”

Nicole’s lips curled into a smirk, her eyes narrowing as she stared at them coldly. “What a joke,” she said, her voice dripping with sarcasm. “I didn’t take anything. So why would I be grateful to anyone?”

The room fell silent at Nicole’s words, the air thick with confusion. Everyone exchanged puzzled looks, unsure of how to process her audacity.

Lilah’s breath caught in her throat, and for a moment, her eyes lowered, her expression betraying a flicker of hurt. She stood frozen, speechless, the weight of the moment pressing down on her.

After what seemed like an eternity, Lilah finally lifted her head, wiped away the tear that threatened to fall, and forced a smile. “Of course,” she said, her voice soft but steady. “How could you possibly steal something from me? This must be a misunderstanding.”

Nicole, unwavering in her coolness, spoke again, her voice sharp as ever. “There’s no misunderstanding. Someone took something, but they planted it in my suitcase to set me up.”

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Chapter 30:

Analia, who had been silent up until this point, met Nicole's gaze and seemed to come to a sudden realization. "Someone's trying to frame you? The audacity! Who would dare do that to you, Nicole?" She paused, her eyes narrowing as she shifted her focus to Zoe.

Zoe's face drained of color. The unshakeable trust Analia had placed in Nicole left no room for doubt—there was no questioning it.

Trembling, Zoe dropped to her knees, her voice quivering with desperation. "Madam, I swear I saw it happen. It's the truth... please believe me..."

"We'll soon find out whether that's true," Nicole replied slowly, her tone deliberate, yet calm.

Lilah said nothing; her gaze lowered in quiet resignation, the weight of the moment pressing on her shoulders.

Zoe, sensing the growing tension, dared not even exhale too loudly.

Nicole turned towards the door, her expression unreadable. “Duran, how many maids are currently in the house?”

Duran hesitated for a moment, calculating before replying, “There are twenty-three maids in total.”

Nicole’s expression remained unchanged. “Please bring in the younger maids who are taller than five-foot-five.”

The others exchanged confused glances, their minds racing to decipher Nicole’s intentions.

Without hesitation, Duran nodded. “I’ll have them brought in immediately.”

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Approximately five or six minutes later, four young women entered, each one fitting the description. Their movements were hesitant, their eyes darting between each other with a shared sense of confusion and unease as they quietly wondered what was about to unfold.

One of them, desperate to prove her innocence, stepped forward, her voice trembling with urgency. “Madam, a fresh batch of medical supplies arrived today, and I’ve been in the storeroom all day handling it. I haven’t left the room for a single moment. There’s no way I could have planted anything on anyone. Please, you have to believe me.”

The others shared similar apprehensions, their mouths opening to speak, but Analia’s voice cut through the tension like a blade. She slammed her hand down onto the coffee table, the sound ringing out sharply. “If you’re innocent, then why are you so nervous? Do you honestly think Nicole would accuse you without solid evidence?”

The room fell into a heavy silence, the weight of her words pressing on everyone.

Lilah, her mind whirling with questions, surveyed the tense atmosphere, her confusion deepening. “Nicole,” she began, her voice laced with uncertainty, “why did you summon them here? What are you trying to prove with this?”

Avalynn’s brow furrowed, her frustration rising. “Exactly! The necklace was found in your belongings—why are you involving everyone else in this?”

“Enough!” Nicole’s voice cut through the air like ice, her gaze locking onto Avalynn with a cold, unwavering intensity. “Since when did you have a say in this house?”

Avalynn recoiled, the force of Nicole's words catching her off guard. She instinctively shrank back, her head shaking in submission, too frightened to say anything further.

A faint smile curled at the corners of Analia's lips, a flicker of satisfaction in her eyes. She was clearly pleased by the confrontation—this was the assertiveness she valued. At that moment, Analia thought that Aidan had indeed made a wise choice in marrying Nicole.

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