

What makes a power couple

Chapter 41:

Leonel's eyes widened in disbelief. "Wait, what?!" The words hung in the air, but he quickly realized the futility of protesting. He knew better than to challenge Aidan's decisions. He swallowed his objections and nodded, his voice resigned. "Got it. I'm on it."

Just as Leonel made a move to leave, Aidan's gaze shifted back to him—sharp and unwavering. "Keep someone on her," he said, his voice calm but insistent. "I want eyes on every move she makes."

Leonel's response was immediate. "Understood." As he walked away, he couldn't shake the feeling that Aidan remained as unpredictable as ever.

Nicole wandered across the campus, her gaze drifting over the familiar fields, the freshly renovated buildings, and the gleaming new library. So much had changed in the five years since she last set foot here, yet some things remained constant—the basketball court, where a group of energetic college students were shouting and dunking, filling the air with youthful vigor.

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Earlier that morning, the report she'd sent to Leonel hadn't been a complete fabrication. Lily truly had been hurt, and the cause of the injury was tied directly to her.

Nicole couldn't shake the thought that everything she had endured five years ago might be connected to Lily as well.

Squall had now transformed into the most successful and sought-after young lawyer in Ariosa, renowned for his ability to win even the toughest of cases. Tomorrow, the college would host a major debate competition, with Squall scheduled to give the keynote speech. Preparations for the event were already underway.

Nicole had no doubt Lily would show up. Lily had spent years pursuing Squall, and this moment was too significant for her to miss.

Nicole's eyes narrowed as her mind wandered back to that night, five years ago. Lily had been there—she had to know something.

As Nicole rounded the corner, she unexpectedly collided with Marissa. For a fleeting moment, she had almost forgotten that Marissa was a student here now.

Marissa approached with casual confidence, arm in arm with her best friend, a knowing smile tugging at her lips. Her voice oozed with feigned concern. "Nicole, wow... Still not over Squall, huh? After all these years, you're really still stuck on him?"

A chill settled into Nicole's voice. "It takes someone like you to believe a brainless guy is worth holding on to."

That hit Marissa like a slap. She stood frozen, eyes wide. "You really just said that about him?"

"Not my fault if the truth hurts. Now move. You're standing where I need to go."

Off to the side, Lula Gray—Marissa's best friend—snorted and rolled her eyes. "And who exactly do you think you are? This isn't even your school anymore. Get lost!"

With a faint, cool smile, Nicole met her gaze. Her voice stayed calm, steady. "Last I checked, there's a code here about showing respect to upperclassmen. I was enrolled before you, which technically makes me an upperclassman to you. Unless you want a demerit, I suggest you watch your tone."

A giggle, sweet and fake, slipped from Marissa's lips. "Nicole, sweetie, I think you've forgotten something. You dropped out five years ago, remember?"

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Right on cue, Lula burst into obnoxious laughter, barely able to keep herself upright. “Just being in these halls is pushing it for you. Pretending you outrank us? One semester doesn’t make you someone we have to listen to. What a joke.”

It didn’t take long for the commotion to draw attention, and people started drifting toward Lula.

Right then, Lula clutched her chest dramatically and burst into exaggerated sobs. “Look at what you’ve become. You used to belong here, and now you’re just loud, nasty, and violent!”

Whispers swirled through the growing crowd like wind through leaves, and fingers started pointing straight at Nicole.

The arrival of a security guard only stirred the tension further. He looked Nicole up and down with open disdain. “This is a university, not some street corner. If you’re not here for a valid reason, stop making a spectacle of yourself.”

Not even flinching, Nicole flicked her gaze to her watch. “I’m here to collect my certificate. That’s it.”

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Marissa chuckled behind her hand, eyes sparkling with mock concern. “Wow. Have you finally snapped after all that time in the psych ward? What certificate? Don’t embarrass yourself, Nicole. You’re just making it worse. If our parents hear about this, they’ll say you’re dragging the family’s name through the mud. Again.”

Laughter erupted around them. The students looked at Nicole as if she were some tragic punchline, eager to retell the story.

Lula couldn’t resist turning the moment into her personal spotlight. With a sweet smile, she added, “Back when Marissa first joined as a freshman, she snagged first place in the campus-wide piano contest. Now, she’s front and center at every big event. Honestly, how do two girls from the same family turn out so differently?”

Nearby freshmen slowed down, their eyes lighting up with awe as they glanced at Marissa.

Not letting up, Lula continued, “In case it slipped your mind, Marissa was top of her class all through high school. Now she’s practically the pride of the entire college.”

With every passing second, the crowd's admiration for Marissa grew, while their disdain for Nicole deepened.

Closing the distance, Marissa took Nicole's hand with a touch that was too deliberate. "Say the word, and I'll help you graduate. I can teach you piano, even talk to the president, and get you a fresh start as a freshman."

From the side, Lula burst out laughing. "Twenty-two and just now starting over? That's not ambition. That's a joke—a sad one at that."

Instead of replying, Nicole glanced at her watch before letting her hand fall. Her eyes, once still, now sliced through the crowd like a blade. "That won't be necessary. I already earned my postdoctoral certificate."

The shock lasted only a heartbeat before the crowd erupted with laughter, louder than ever, as if they had just heard the funniest joke of the year. "Marissa, maybe she's finally lost it for good."

"Someone better send her straight back to the asylum."

Instead of flinching, Nicole's eyes shimmered with amusement. A crooked, cold smirk touched her lips.

Just then, a new voice cut through the noise, slicing clean and fast. “Is this a place to fool around? Because last I checked, it’s meant for serious study.”

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Heads turned at once. Standing at the edge was Phelps Dixon, the president’s assistant.

In an instant, the students straightened up, their voices dropping into respectful tones. “Mr. Dixon.”

Not wasting a beat, Lula rushed toward him with watery eyes and a trembling voice. “She barged in and started harassing us.”

Phelps didn't so much as glance at her. Instead, he walked toward Nicole and, with unmistakable respect in his tone, said, "Nicole, the president would like a word with you in his office."

Every whisper vanished. The air froze. No one said a word.

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The same students who had been laughing at Nicole moments earlier stiffened, their smug expressions now frozen in place.

This didn't make any sense at all. In all the years anyone had attended the school, the president had never once requested a private meeting with a student. Why would he pick Nicole, of all people?

Lula stared, as if she were watching something crawl out of a grave.

"Hold on—Nicole was telling the truth? But how? She's spent the past few years locked away in the asylum!" Marissa thought.

It took Marissa a few seconds to speak, and when she finally did, her voice wavered. “Mr. Dixon, you’ve got to be mistaken. My sister hasn’t been enrolled for about five years now. What possible reason could the president have to meet with her?”

Phelps’s expression tightened, clearly growing impatient. “Regardless, you girls shouldn’t make a scene here.”

A bit of tension drained from Marissa’s shoulders as she took in his tone.

“Of course she’s bluffing again. Same old Nicole, faking her way into looking important. Still, what business could the president possibly have with her?” Marissa thought, bewildered. The uncertainty lingered heavily inside her, twisting her stomach into knots.

Nicole promptly took control of the situation. “We should get moving, sir. We wouldn’t want to keep the president waiting.”

“All right.”

Nicole walked beside Phelps, moving through the stunned crowd like the place belonged to her.

Meanwhile, Lula’s cheeks blazed red with humiliation.

Just then, the college's loudspeaker crackled to life. "Attention, all students. Lula Gray has been formally disciplined for disrupting campus order, attracting a crowd, violating student rules, and hindering the academic atmosphere. Consider this an official warning to stay focused on your studies."

In seconds, Lula became the laughingstock of the entire college.

Pale and stunned, Lula stood frozen. She couldn't believe the school had humiliated her, and all because of that bitch, Nicole. In her mind, both Marissa and Nicole were to blame, and she wouldn't forget it.

Lula's stare burned into Marissa, who still looked like she'd forgotten how to breathe. Her tone came out like broken glass. "Wait, you're Nicole's sister, and you honestly don't know why the president wants to meet her?"

A hard thump echoed in Marissa's chest. Caught off guard, she stumbled over her own words. "Honestly, Lula, I have no idea—"

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Chapter 44:

Frustration erupted from Lula as she stamped her foot. “Quit playing innocent! You used me, didn’t you? Forget it. Don’t bother showing up at my grandma’s birthday party tonight.”

Shock froze Marissa on the spot. Lula’s family might not match the wealth of the Moores, but in Ariosa, they were still major players. An invite to Lula’s grandmother’s party could boost someone’s social standing overnight.

Especially since Aidan would be there. Marissa had planned everything around this night. Her efforts to get close to Lula had taken weeks, and now, Nicole had managed to ruin it all in a matter of minutes.

Without thinking, Marissa lunged forward and caught Lula’s hand. “No, Lula, wait—you’ve got it all wrong! My sister screwed up years ago, badly enough that the university kicked her out. I’m sure the president only wants to criticize her personally to make sure she stays away for good.”

She leaned in even closer and whispered something else into Lula’s ear.

Slowly, the anger faded from Lula’s face.

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What Marissa said started to click into place. It was true—the president wasn't known for being gentle. A student like her could be punished by official rules. But someone like Nicole, who wasn't even enrolled anymore? A stern reminder would be more than enough.

In Lula's mind, the situation seemed clear now. The president was just trying to show Nicole the way out with a little dignity.

After a moment, a calculating smile curved Lula's lips. "Alright, Marissa. I'll give you another chance."

Nicole left the president's office and immediately made her way toward the event hall.

Lily was in the middle of arranging decorations when she saw Nicole approaching. She instantly stiffened and stumbled backward, almost knocking over a large vase.

With steady confidence, Nicole closed the distance between them. Before Lily could make a run for it, Nicole grabbed her arm, eyes cold and sharp, one brow barely lifted.

"Well, Lily. Fancy running into you here."

“Y-Yeah... It has,” Lily stammered, unable to meet her eyes.

Keeping a firm grip, Nicole steered Lily toward the quiet lawn near the basketball court.

Lily stood rigidly, avoiding Nicole’s gaze. “What do you want from me?”

One look at Lily’s lifeless stare was all it took. An unexpected ache crept into Nicole’s chest before she could shove it away.

Once, Lily had been the campus queen. Stunning, confident—the kind of girl people noticed without trying. But the accident had stripped all of that away. Not even multiple surgeries could bring back the lively spark she once carried. What remained was a stiff mask, hollow and unnatural for someone barely in her twenties.

The memories tried to pull Nicole under, but she shut them down and let the cold settle back into her gaze. Her tone was blunt, free of any soft edges. “There’s no need to be afraid. You had no idea what you were walking into that day. Truth is, we both got played.”

Surprise flickered across Lily’s face as she blinked, her features easing and her eyes growing glassy with emotion.

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Chapter 45:

They hadn't always been like this. Five years ago, they'd been as close as sisters. They shared secrets, jokes, even dreams. There was no one Nicole trusted more.

Everything had fallen apart because of a man.

Since childhood, Lily had pined for her neighbor, Squall. Her feelings weren't just a phase—they ran deep.

Getting into the same college as him hadn't been a coincidence. She'd worked her tail off to make it happen, all so she could stay by his side.

Her plan had even included introducing Nicole to him. Lily never imagined he'd take one look at Nicole and become obsessed, chasing after her like they were in some cheesy romantic comedy.

In the beginning, she wasn't too worried. Lily had faith in Nicole. No way would her best friend fall for the same guy. She believed that much.

That changed the moment Marissa told her Nicole was dating Squall. And Lily believed it. Because if Nicole's own sister said it, it had to be true.

Blinded by anger and betrayal, Lily had stormed over, demanding answers. But Nicole denied it all. Said it wasn't true.

That moment shattered everything. Lily had given her whole heart to that friendship, and now it felt like a cruel joke. She walked away and didn't look back.

Heartbroken, Lily wandered into their old hangout spot, a little bar tucked away from the campus noise. She drank like she was trying to forget her name.

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While Lily was too wasted to fight back, a group of women—claiming they were standing up for Nicole—ambushed her. They beat her without mercy and even slashed her face with a knife.

People urged Lily to speak up and file charges, blaming Nicole for hurting her. Lily's resentment for Nicole still simmered, mostly for stealing Squall. But deep down, even in her worst moments, she couldn't fully believe Nicole had been cruel enough to destroy her face.

Even Marissa refused to believe Nicole would go that far. Wanting the truth, she stepped in and arranged a meeting between the two women.

The plan had been simple. Just a calm conversation to set the record straight. Instead, everything fell apart quickly—Nicole had been taken advantage of.

A shaky breath escaped Lily as she fought off the memory. Her lips quivered. "Nikki, I—"

"Stop calling me that," Nicole interrupted, cutting her off with a voice that could freeze fire. "The moment you drugged me, whatever friendship we had ended right there."

Lowering her head, Lily barely managed to speak above a whisper. "The only reason I did it was to find out if you were the one behind those who hurt me. I spiked your drink, yeah—but just so I could take a few pictures and corner you into admitting the truth. Whatever happened after that... I didn't expect it."

For a brief moment, Nicole closed her eyes. That night never returned whole—just broken flashes of panic swallowed by darkness. Every time it crossed her mind, the memory hit her with a wave of pain she couldn't shake.

Not wanting to dwell on emotions, Nicole kept her tone sharp. “Tell me what happened after I blacked out.”

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Lily went pale. Even after all these years, thinking about that night still made her blood run cold.

Impatience flared in Nicole's eyes. “Start talking. I'm not going to sit here all day.”

It took Lily a second to gather herself. Her breath trembled. “Right after you passed out, I was reaching for my phone. Before I could take a single picture, a bunch of people rushed in. They yanked you away. I chased after them, but a woman blocked me and wouldn’t let me get any closer.”

That caught Nicole off guard. Her voice was sharp. “A woman did that?”

“Yeah.” Lily gave a slow nod.

That didn’t line up. Nicole’s foggy memory painted a different picture. She remembered someone—a man—lifting her and carrying her into a place with no light. His face had been a blur.

Realization hit hard—there might have been two parties.

A sudden tightness gripped Nicole’s chest. If Lily was telling the truth, the mess she was trying to sort out had just grown a hundred times worse. It might have taken several different people to carry her to that room while she had been out cold.

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Marissa, as far as Nicole knew, probably only had fragments of the whole picture. Someone else had been pulling the strings from the shadows.

“Can you describe what that woman looked like?” Nicole asked.

Lily squinted, digging through the blur in her mind. “Didn’t raise her head once—like she was hiding on purpose. I glimpsed her face just as she stepped into the elevator, but it was too quick to make out clearly. She looked mid-thirties back then, so she’s probably about forty now.”

“Was there anything about her that stood out?”

“There was.” Lily gave a firm nod. “She had a mole on the left side of her forehead. Big, about the size of a bean.”

Nicole’s expression tightened. That detail didn’t match anything she remembered. Not even close.

“Is there anything else you remember?”

Lily shook her head, her face clouding over with guilt. “That’s all I’ve got. By the time I tried to catch up, you were already gone. I haven’t been able to look your sister in the eye ever since.”

A slow, bitter smile spread across Nicole's lips as she raised an eyebrow.

Caught off guard by the unexpected reaction, Lily blinked. "Why are you smiling like that?"

"Still haven't figured out who turned your face into a horror show, have you?"

Tension sparked in Lily's face. Her jaw tightened. Anger flickered through her eyes. "I found one of the girls who attacked me. She was just a teenager. Said some guy paid them off. She didn't know anything else."

Rising to her feet, Nicole casually dusted off her jeans. She looked at Lily like she was something stuck to the bottom of her shoe. Her tone dropped to a dry murmur. "Did it ever occur to you that it might be Marissa?"

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Chapter 47:

Lily flinched like she'd been slapped. "Marissa? Are you serious? That can't be right. She always acted like she cared so much about you. After you disappeared, she sobbed until she collapsed. That wasn't fake."

Rather than explain much, Nicole simply stated what Marissa had done, her voice low and steady. "None of it was random. She planned it all. You were just the first step. And those scars you carry? Partly because of me."

Color drained from Lily's cheeks. Her breathing turned ragged and shallow, as if she'd just been slammed in the gut by something she hadn't seen coming.

What on earth was Marissa aiming for if she really was behind all this? First, Marissa had ordered her face destroyed. Then, she lured her into agreeing to a meeting with Nicole. Every piece had been placed with purpose. Nothing had been left to chance.

But why? What kind of hatred could make Marissa go that far? Back then, she had been just a little girl.

That realization hit Lily like ice water, sending chills down her spine.

“I remember lying in that hospital, still hooked up to tubes, when your letter came in. You broke my trust. Drugged me. Left me helpless. And then you delivered me to monsters. I don’t hate you, Lily. But you’re dead to me.” With that, Nicole turned on her heel and walked away.

Lily stood frozen, unable to move. Her gaze locked on Nicole’s retreating figure, her heart pounding like a war drum in her chest.

Experience had taught her not to question Nicole’s words. If Nicole said it, then it was as good as fact.

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Looking at what she had been doing all this time, anger surged through Lily. She’d wasted years groveling at Marissa’s feet, throwing herself into guilt like it was penance. Apologizing in silence. All while Marissa strung her along like a puppet on invisible threads.

Lily’s voice cracked as the scream burst from her, rough and furious. “MARISSA!” Nicole heard it, even from a distance. That scream—full of anger and grief—made the corner of her mouth twitch.

It had taken five damn years, but the moment was finally here. Nicole wanted Lily’s soul to rot slowly, eaten alive by the same hate she had once buried. Once that seed took root, there was no chance Lily would ever let Marissa live in peace.

To Nicole, Lily wasn't just a piece. She was art. The perfect pawn.

Just as she stepped beyond the campus gates, her phone started buzzing in her pocket. She picked up without missing a beat. "Hello?"

"It's me."

Nicole's breath hitched. There was no mistaking it—Aidan.

Nicole clamped her mouth shut before answering, "Yeah? What is it?"

With a calm yet steady tone, Aidan replied, "You're going to Jade Gray's birthday party. Leonel's on his way to pick you up."

That name made Nicole pause as she straightened her collar. Lula's grandmother, no doubt about it. "Is skipping an option?"

Without hesitation, Aidan answered, "My grandma and her were best friends in school. My grandma's too weak to go now, so I'm going instead."

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There went any chance of wriggling out of it. Nicole let out a breath. “Alright. I’ll go.”

She ended the call and made her way to the campus gate without dragging her feet.

Roughly twenty minutes later, Leonel’s car rolled up to the curb.

The moment Nicole slid into the passenger seat, her face twisted in disgust. The overpowering scent of cement clung to the air like a bad decision. She shot him a sideways glance. “Did your house get hit by a wrecking ball or something?”

Leonel let out a strained chuckle. “Close enough. Don’t ask.”

That trace of misery in his voice made Nicole grin. She tilted her head and raised an eyebrow. “Aidan showing up tonight?”

“I have no idea. All I know is I was told to fetch you.”

“Figures. Whatever.”

Thirty minutes passed before the car finally turned into the Gray estate. It rolled down a tree-lined driveway that looked like something from a countryside wedding brochure, then curved toward the mansion.

Perched halfway up a slope, the home was surrounded by trees, enough to make it feel like a private retreat. It didn’t scream wealth the way the Moore mansion did, but it oozed that quiet, generational kind of money.

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Inside, the chandelier lights cast a soft amber hue across the oversized living room. Everything glowed with a mix of warmth and class.

Across the room, Jade's eldest son and his wife mingled with ease, playing hosts to the elite crowd. Nearby, waiters glided past, refilling glasses without skipping a beat.

Nicole, however, was completely ignored. Not that she expected fanfare. Her marriage to Aidan had been kept off the radar for a reason. To everyone else in the room, Aidan's wife was just a rumor.

Her eyes swept the crowd until they landed on a familiar face tucked in the corner—Marissa, all charm and grins, deep in conversation with none other than Squall. Ariosa's golden boy—rich background, top university education, and a face straight out of a casting call. Girls from the city's top families lined up for a chance with him.

Marissa had a habit of chasing things that were never meant to be hers. Somewhere along the line, she must've decided Squall was next on her list.

A slow, crooked smile tugged at Nicole's lips. Everything that had happened with Lily all those years ago—it all circled back to this man.

A too-sweet voice rang out behind Nicole. "Nikki!" With a sweet smile and a skip in her step, Lula strolled over, nothing like the brat she'd been just moments ago.

Gripping Nicole's hand gently, she gave a soft laugh. "Hope we didn't mess up the welcome too badly."

Nicole eased her hand away, her expression unreadable.

This kind of hospitality felt off. Way off. Her gut was already sounding alarms before anything even happened.

And right on schedule, Marissa arrived, her arm laced through Squall's like they were the poster couple for a romance flick.

“Nicole.”

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Nicole gave Marissa a faint nod. For a split second, her eyes met Squall's—and in that brief moment, she saw it. His face tightened, like he'd tasted something sour. That look was ice cold. The moment their eyes met, he looked away. Nicole felt the chill in his glance—and beneath it, a sharp edge of loathing. Nicole almost laughed. They weren't close. Hell, they barely had history. Where did that kind of hostility even come from?

In a voice laced with false sweetness, Marissa chimed in, "You remember Squall, right? When you were hospitalized, he's the one who stayed by my side." The shamelessness was...

Almost impressive. After everything that happened back at Riverside Haven, Marissa still had the guts to play the endearing-sister role in public.

"I'm gonna step outside for a smoke. You two catch up."

Marissa gave a quick nod, but the second Squall moved, she trailed after him like a shadow. By the time she caught up, he was already on the balcony, resting against the rail, cigarette burning between his fingers, frustration etched into every line of his face.

Her voice turned quiet, almost pleading. "I'm sorry, Squall. I didn't mean to let it slip to Nicole that you'd be here tonight."

She didn't need to spell it out. The message she intended to deliver was clear—Nicole had shown up because of him.

Not a trace of calm touched Squall's face, even with Marissa trying to ease the tension. If anything, his jaw clenched tighter as he took a long drag from his cigarette and exhaled a thick cloud of smoke, his eyes dark with fury.

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Back then, five years ago, he'd only met Nicole once. At the time, curiosity had sparked just enough for him to ask Marissa if she could introduce them. That curiosity vanished quickly.

Nicole had taken that single meeting and turned it into an entire fantasy. She ran around claiming to be his girlfriend, throwing his name around like it gave her power, intimidating anyone who crossed her at college. It wasn't long before the president dragged him in and handed him a formal warning over the drama.

The fallout didn't stop there. Even Lily, his childhood friend, started pulling away without explanation.

Fed up, Squall had confronted Nicole directly. He told her to stop running her mouth and dragging his name through the dirt.

Her reaction still burned in his memory. She blinked at him like she didn't understand, acted all innocent, and said none of it was true. The conversation had gone sideways fast.

He thought maybe—just maybe—she'd gotten the hint. But that same night, a letter arrived. A love note, full of fake vulnerability, claiming she'd been too shy to confess before. And she even suggested they share a night together.

Coming from a family of teachers, where respect and restraint were core values, Squall had never encountered anyone with such nerve. And the worst part? That wasn't even the peak of her madness.

If Marissa hadn't asked him to go easy, he'd have confronted Nicole fiercely.

Letting things slide only made it worse. Nicole spiraled out of control—she even messed up Lily's face. Later, they diagnosed her with a mental illness and sent her to an asylum.

Now, five years later, she was back. Still unstable. Still clinging to him like some haunted memory that wouldn't fade.

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A shaky whisper slipped from Marissa's lips. "I'm so sorry, Squall. This all started because of me. I never should've involved you. But... she's still my sister. I can't—"

Her voice cracked, and she buried her face in her hands, her shoulders trembling as the tears came.

Without a word, Squall stubbed out his cigarette and stepped closer. He gave her shoulder a light pat. "Hey, don't carry the weight of someone else's mess. This isn't on you."

"She's not stable. That place messed her up even more. Every time someone brings up the past, she totally loses it. So don't, just leave it alone, especially with her."

Frustration tinged his voice as he pulled her close, wrapping an arm around her. "Nicole did this to herself. She spiraled. She got locked up in a psych ward. And even now, she has the nerve to twist the story and act like you're the one who hurt her. Why do you still give a damn about what she feels?"

"She's still my sister, no matter what she's done."

Squall watched her in silence, then gave a reluctant nod. “Fine. You win. I’ll let it go.”

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Lowering her gaze, Marissa masked the satisfaction flickering in her eyes. A small breath escaped her lips, quiet and calculated. As long as Squall stayed loyal and didn’t go digging into history, she had nothing to fear. The truth—that Nicole’s ruined name had always been part of her plan—had to stay buried.

Her chest tightened with resentment. How could someone like Squall ever fall for a girl like Nicole? If she couldn’t have him, then there was no chance in hell Nicole ever would.

Now, though, Squall finally liked her. All the lies, all the manipulation—it hadn’t been for nothing. Until she had Aidan locked in for good, Squall remained her safest bet. She wasn’t about to let him slip through her fingers.

Sometime later, Marissa made her way back to the main hall. She spotted Lula still locked in conversation with Nicole and approached them, all smiles. “Lula, didn’t you say something about showing us some dresses?”

Blinking in surprise, Lula laughed, clearly thrown off. “We totally lost track of time talking.”

Clapping her hands together, she lit up. “They’re gorgeous, Nikki. I really hope you’ll like them.”

“Lead the way.” Nicole was curious. Whatever these two were planning, she wanted to see it unfold firsthand.

The three headed to Lula’s bedroom. It was draped in white, crisp and clean. Elegant, yes—but it carried a chill that made it feel more like a hotel suite than a home.

Without wasting time, Lula darted over to her massive wardrobe and pulled out three gowns. She picked one for herself and handed the remaining two to Marissa and Nicole.

Taking hers in hand, Nicole let her fingers trail along the material. A strange scent clung to it—subtle but distinct. Her breath caught just slightly, and her brow creased, though the change in her expression was barely noticeable.

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