

## Chapter 71 A Budding Friendship

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Alicia hailed a cab and made her way to the beauty salon.

She kept her attire simple and modest. Once inside, she wandered to the counter, her eyes skimming over the various beauty packages on offer.

The beautician, quick to notice Alicia's refined air, wasted no time in guiding her toward the more luxurious options, each one more extravagant than the last.

Alicia kept her eyes on the prize—to connect with Rachel Gray, Randolph's wife. With that in mind, she selected a package priced at a staggering \$100,000, sealing the transaction with a calm smile.

Moments later, her phone buzzed. It was Joshua.

"What did you just buy?" he demanded.

Alicia couldn't help but smirk, a sarcastic curve to her lips.

Even through a text message, she could sense his agitation.

Funny, she mused. A mere \$100,000 purchase had him asking questions, yet when he drained millions from her accounts, he never batted an eye.

She typed back a quick reply. "The autumn weather has dried out my skin, so I'm getting a facial."

Time passed, and by the time she was lying in bed, winding down for the night, his delayed reply arrived. "It's good to prioritize your looks."

A beat later, another message followed, more suggestive than the last. "Is your period over?"

Alicia rolled her eyes in exasperation.



"Not yet," was her dismissive reply.

She then promptly turned off her phone, wanting nothing more to do with him for the night.

The next morning, knowing Rachel's routine, Alicia made sure to position herself strategically. Sure enough, not long after, Rachel arrived for her usual beauty treatment.

Alicia smiled and greeted her warmly.

Rachel paused, her eyes lingering on Alicia's familiar face. After a moment, recognition dawned. "Ms. Bennett?"

On the surface, Alicia seemed calm, but she was secretly surprised Rachel recognized her.

Rachel, with her impeccably maintained appearance, exuded elegance as she settled into the bed beside Alicia.

"What a coincidence," she remarked smoothly. "I've never seen you here before."

Alicia smiled, sensing the opportunity she had been waiting for.

Plus, it seemed like Rachel liked her, which was an unexpected bonus.

"Mrs. Gray, you have an impressive memory. We've only crossed paths a few times, yet you managed to remember me."

Rachel chuckled softly, her eyes gleaming with a hint of warmth. "How could I forget? Gerry's movie was the talk of the town, and your voice made its theme song unforgettable. I always take notice of beautiful and talented women like you."

Alicia smiled graciously. "You're too kind, Mrs. Gray."

"Are you here by yourself?" Rachel asked, glancing around as though expecting someone to appear.

"Yes."

Rachel's expression shifted subtly, as though lost in a fleeting thought.



She didn't press further, though Alicia could sense the woman's curiosity.

To Alicia's surprise, Rachel was far more charming and personable than she had expected—gracious in a way that felt genuine rather than forced.

As they both finished their beauty treatments, thanks to Alicia reaching out, the two got acquainted with each other, turning a "chance" encounter into the beginnings of a budding friendship.

By the time they were ready to leave, Alicia had already taken the initiative to add Rachel on WhatsApp.

Rachel, now in a private room, carefully changed out of her spa attire and began putting on some makeup.

However, today something seemed to unsettle her. Perhaps it was because she was next to a younger face, she took longer than usual, touching up and examining her reflection with an unsatisfied grimace.

"Do you have plans later, Mrs. Gray?" Alicia asked, interrupting her thoughts.

Rachel offered a graceful smile as she applied the finishing touches to her lips. "Yes, my husband is meeting a rather important guest tonight. He's invited me to join them for dinner."

"You must adore your husband."

Rachel's smile faltered ever so slightly as she lowered her gaze, her voice quieter now. "Of course. We've been together for so many years, after all." She left her words hanging, a wistful air settling between them.

Quickly, Rachel shifted the mood, stepping away from the mirror and turning toward Alicia. "I feel like something's off with my look today. Would you mind taking a look and making some touch-up's?"

Alicia hesitated for a brief moment before moving closer. She examined Rachel's appearance.

"Your complexion looks lovely with the white pearls and soft lipstick," Alicia remarked thoughtfully. "But I think it feels a bit too... delicate. You could add a bolder contrast—perhaps some darker jewelry to balance it out and add a bit of edge."

Rachel sighed softly. "I didn't bring any dark jewelry with me today."

Alicia's eyes sparkled with an idea.

The salon had just released a new collection of jewelry.

Without hesitation, she went and bought a set.

Moments later, Alicia returned with a set of sleek, dark-colored jewelry—a bracelet, necklace, and earrings.

With her keen eye for style, she carefully helped Rachel adjust her accessories. The result was striking—though nearly forty, Rachel's new look retained her elegance while adding a touch of boldness.

Rachel looked at herself in the mirror, a satisfied smile curving her lips.

"I must admit, this is quite impressive. Thank you, Ms. Bennett. How much was the jewelry set?" Rachel's tone had become much more relaxed around Alicia. "I'll pay you back."

But Alicia shook her head with a soft smile.

"A new restaurant just opened downtown," she continued. "Next time, let me treat you to a meal, Mrs. Gray. I'm new to the area and would love to get to know you better."

Rachel, however, had a different idea. "Why wait for next time? Randolph's here; why don't you join us tonight?"

Alicia blinked in surprise, caught off guard by the spontaneous invitation.

She hesitated. "Mr. Gray is meeting a client, though. Wouldn't it be improper for me to tag along?"

Rachel waved a hand dismissively. "Oh, it's not really that formal. Mr. Ward has a big deal with the bank, and Randolph thought it would be good to connect with him, so it's more of a casual gathering."

The informal nature of the event eased Alicia's worries, but it was the name that Rachel mentioned that truly piqued her interest.

"Mr. Ward?" she asked, her brow arching in curiosity.

His attempt to escape worked almost too well, as a striking woman soon approached their table.

Gerry, spotting her first, flashed a confident grin and started to pull out his phone, but to his dismay, the woman completely ignored him.

Her gaze locked on Caden instead, and with a sweet smile, she asked, "Mr. Ward, may I add you on WhatsApp?"



## Chapter 72 Older Men

When Alicia entered the room with Rachel, she noticed a scene unfolding.

A beautiful woman, shyly showing Caden something on her phone, was ignored by him as he kept his head down, appearing utterly uninterested and distant.

It was enough to make anyone feel frustrated.

Gerry, visibly annoyed, addressed the woman, "You've got the wrong target. Mr. Ward isn't into women."

The woman looked surprised.

Gerry, unable to hide his jealousy, continued, "Yes, I'm in a relationship with Mr. Ward. I'm his partner."

Only at this point did Caden look up, giving Gerry a cold stare.

Meanwhile, Alicia caught Caden's eye as she walked closer.

He squinted slightly at her approach.

Nearby, Randolph, arm around Rachel, greeted them cheerfully. "Mr. Ward, Mr. Hopkins."

Alicia stuck close to Rachel.

Dressed in a loose sweater and subtle makeup, Alicia struck a balance that drew attention without being too imposing.

She noticed Caden seemed off, appearing exhausted as if he'd had a sleepless night filled with more than just restlessness.

He looked worn and disheveled, possibly from a passionate, stormy encounter the night before.

As they settled down, Gerry, finding amusement in the situation,



beckoned to Alicia. "Come here, Alicia. Sit with me."

His demeanor towards Alicia was carefree and platonic.

However, Randolph interpreted it differently, casting a meaningful look at Alicia, which she wanted to avoid at all costs, especially since Randolph was close to Joshua.

The potential repercussions of Randolph's words to Joshua were best avoided.

To maintain distance and prevent any misunderstandings, Alicia excused herself to sit farther away, explaining, "Sorry, Mr. Hopkins, I've caught a cold recently. Better to keep my distance so I don't pass it on to you."

Gerry, unperturbed by the mention of her cold, asked with curiosity, "You caught a cold too?"

Alicia, taken aback, confirmed, "You caught a cold as well?"

"It's not me. It's Caden," Gerry clarified, tilting his head. "He's been sick for three days and hasn't recovered. He's been increasingly irritable, almost like he's lost something personal."

Alicia's heart raced.

When she glanced at Caden, she noticed a faint mark on his lips.

The realization hit her—it was her fault.

She remembered how intensely they had kissed that day.

"Did I give him the cold?" she thought, panicking silently.

Feeling guilty, she rubbed her nose, pretending nothing was wrong.

Randolph, hearing about Caden's cold, showed concern. "Three days now and you're still not better? Is the medicine not helping?"

Caden gave a small cough.

With a casual tone, he replied, "It's just a cold. Thanks for the concern, Mr. Gray."

Randolph, sounding thoughtful, added, "Mr. Ward, you work so hard. You need to take care of yourself. As it happens, I have a friend here today who specializes in traditional medicine. Maybe he can check on you. What do you think?"

Caden frowned slightly at the mention of traditional remedies.

The thought of bitter herbs didn't sit well with him.

Before he could decline, Gerry, ever eager for something new, chimed in on his behalf, "Sure. Let's have him take a look right now."

Randolph stood to go find his friend.

Caden, feeling out of sorts, was still downcast. After exchanging a few words, Randolph and Rachel left him to be on his own.

Alicia noticed the affection between Randolph and Rachel.

She wanted to approach Rachel, but the timing didn't feel right.

Maybe she'd find an opportunity later.

After watching them for a while, Caden's voice broke her thoughts. With a mocking tone, he said, "So, Ms. Bennett, is Mr. Gray your type?"

Alicia turned towards him, at a loss for words.

Caden seemed to be in better shape, but his expression remained sharp. "It's fine if you like older men," he added, "just be careful when they're married."

Alicia shot him a smile. "Has the cold gone to your head? Sometimes it's better not to speak."

Gerry joined in, teasing, "You've got no room to talk. Aren't you fond of married women?"

Caden shot back, "Sometimes it's better to stay quiet, you know."

Just then, the man who specialized in traditional medicine arrived.

"Mr. Ward," he greeted. The man, who looked to be in his fifties, smiled



warmly, carrying himself with a gentle humility. "I heard you haven't been feeling well," he said.

Caden hadn't anticipated the man would actually come, but out of respect for his elder, he hid any displeasure.

In a calm voice, Caden responded, "My cold hasn't gotten better because I haven't taken any medicine. There's no need for a checkup."

Gerry quickly interrupted. "It's probably best if you check him anyway. It's more than a cold. He might even have a bit of facial paralysis. Since you're here, why not see if you can help?"

Caden remained silent, caught off guard by Gerry's insistence.

The doctor sat down and, with a kind smile, said, "Mr. Ward, let me take a closer look. You seem a bit unwell. Have you had trouble sleeping lately?"

His words hit the mark.

The weather had been gloomy with rain for days, and the shifting seasons, along with the dampness, had disturbed Caden's sleep for quite some time.

"Go ahead," Caden replied.

"I'll check your pulse first," the doctor said.

After feeling his pulse for a moment, the doctor's smile faded, replaced by a more serious expression.

The atmosphere in the room became tense.

Gerry, craning his neck, asked, "What's the deal? Is he dying or something?"