

## Chapter 15 Playing Cards

The following morning, Lilliana saw Alicia's message, and fury boiled within her. She stormed into the room, her voice sharp and cutting as she confronted Joshua.

"Explain yourself! What did you want her to 'think carefully about'?" Her words dripped with accusation. "What kind of shady deal are you tangled up in this time?"

Joshua, having spent the entire night preparing his excuse, remained unnervingly calm. He knew she'd come at him like this.

"She's impulsive, you know that. After what happened, I worried she might cause a scandal online, so I paid her off to keep quiet."

Lilliana's eyes narrowed, skepticism etched on her face. "And why didn't you think to discuss this with me first?"

Joshua employed his usual charm, pulling her close, his arms wrapping around her like a soothing blanket. "Don't read too much into it, my love. If I was interested in her, do you think I'd have gone through all this trouble?"

His voice was soft, almost pleading, as he pressed a tender kiss to her lips.

His explanation seemed reasonable enough, and despite her lingering doubts, Lilliana was naturally inclined to believe him.

Slowly, the tension in her shoulders melted away, and she gave in to the warmth of his embrace.

"Alright," she whispered after a moment, resting her head against his chest. "But don't contact her again."

"Of course." Joshua, sensing victory, reassured her with a quick nod. "Also, I paid Caden a fortune to keep him out of our hair. All of this—it's for us."

His words worked like a charm.

Pouting like a spoiled child, Lilliana nestled into him and murmured, "Fine, I forgive you."

But in her mind, Alicia was far from forgiven; she'd give that bitch a piece of her mind in due time.

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Those two slaps, satisfying as they were, nearly gave Lilliana a concussion.

Alicia knew Lilliana wouldn't let it go, and to avoid dragging Monica into the inevitable shit-storm, she quietly rented a new apartment. As she packed, Monica hovered nearby, her face pinched with concern.

"Are you sure you have enough money?" Monica asked, glancing at Alicia with worry.

She was well aware that Alicia had left her marriage with nothing, so she fished out her phone and started tapping away. "Here, let me transfer some cash to you."

Alicia quickly pressed Monica's hand down, stopping her. "I'm fine," she assured her friend with a gentle smile. "Remember, I did a few side gigs before all of this."

Monica's expression softened with sudden recollection. "Oh yeah, I completely forgot. Phew!"

Her face lit up as she remembered something else. "Oh! Guess what? Yesterday, Gerry Hopkins announced his new movie, and Lilliana's writing the theme song!"

Alicia's lips twitched into a sly smile, though her eyes glinted with a mix of amusement and disbelief. "Well, given how famous she is, it's no shock she's working with Gerry."

Monica scoffed. "I mean, how dare she? She's in way over her head. Doesn't she know she's a terrible songwriter?"

Alicia arched a brow, a hint of mischief playing on her face. "That's her

problem, not ours."

Then, she gently squeezed Monica's hand and offered a reassuring smile. "I have to head out now. Try not to miss me too much while I'm gone, okay?"

After settling down in her new apartment, she promptly sent her polished resume to Gerry's inbox.

It didn't take long before her phone buzzed, Gerry's name lighting up the screen.

"Alicia," Gerry's voice was easygoing, laced with amusement. "Are you really trying to challenge Lilliana for the theme song? Did you lose a bet or something?"

Alicia chuckled softly, her lips curving into a smile. "The release date is still a ways off. By then, you'll have to pick between the two of us. Just think of it as a fun little game."

Gerry let out a low, amused chuckle. "You haven't changed, Alicia—still competing with everyone, just like old times."

Alicia shrugged, her tone light. "I'm just here to make some money, nothing more."

"I've got more money than I can spend," Gerry replied with a hint of teasing. "But I don't have enough time to indulge in your little games. What's a married woman like you doing meddling in the entertainment industry anyway?"

Alicia exhaled softly, her voice lowering as she said something that made Gerry pause.

After a moment of silence, he spoke again, this time with a bit more seriousness. "Alright, I'll review it and get back to you."

"I'll be waiting," Alicia replied smoothly, a slight smile tugging at the corners of her mouth.

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The first person Gerry called was Caden, the playful glint in his eyes

evident in his tone. "Guess what? She's actually going head-to-head with Lilliana!"

Caden scoffed incredulously. "Has she completely lost her mind?"

Gerry grinned, but then his tone shifted, surprising even Caden.

"I'm thinking of hiring her."

Caden scoffed again, rolling his eyes as he leaned back in his chair. "You've got to be joking. Have you lost your mind, too?"

"I have my reasons." Gerry was on the verge of bursting into laughter, a mischievous glint in his eyes as he continued to gush. "You'll never guess what she said to me, though."

But by this point, Caden's patience had worn thin.

Not wanting to waste time on Gerry's stupid games, he hung up on him abruptly.

Seconds later, Gerry's number flashed on his screen again.

This time, Gerry's voice was filled with challenge, daring. "How about this, Caden? Let's make a bet. I'll put my money on Alicia, you back Lilliana. Loser hands over a piece of land."

Gerry's confidence was practically oozing through the phone, making Caden pause.

He leaned back, considering it for a moment before finally agreeing.

"Fine," he said, his tone firm. "You're on. Have you told her yet?"

"Not yet. I was about to."

Caden's eyes flickered with mischief. "Don't bother. Send her to me instead."

Gerry and Lilliana had finalized and signed their contract a few days ago.

But now, with Alicia stepping into the mix, Caden's approval was required.

She knew how these things worked, so without hesitation, Alicia made

her way over as soon as she was summoned.

She soon arrived at the sleek glass doors of the building. Thinking this would be a quick visit, she started to head to the elevators, intending to go straight to Caden. However, the receptionist on the first floor stopped her in her tracks.

"Excuse me, Miss, do you have an appointment?"

Alicia offered a polite smile and explained why she was there.

The receptionist, a stickler for protocols, smiled apologetically. "I'm sorry, but Mr. Ward is very busy. You'll need an appointment. Please fill out this form first."

Alicia's polite smile faltered somewhat, but she obliged and filled up the form.

Then, the waiting began. Half an hour crawled by. Then an hour.

Growing restless, Alicia returned to the receptionist, only to hear the same dismissive response—that Caden was still too busy to see her, and she should wait just a bit longer.

Alicia's instincts prickled with suspicion. Something wasn't right.

She decided not to press the issue further and turned on her heel to leave.

"Ms. Bennett, aren't you going to see Mr. Ward?" The receptionist's confused voice trailed after her.

Without breaking her stride, Alicia glanced over her shoulder. "I'll wait for him somewhere else."

The receptionist, perplexed, quickly passed the message along to Hank.

Moments later, the news made its way to Caden.

"She said she'd wait somewhere else?" Caden's brow lifted in mild surprise as he leaned back in his chair, taking his time.

Hank, sensing the unspoken command, slipped away to investigate.

When he returned, his expression was a bit flustered.

Caden eyed him suspiciously, his tone sharpening. "Well? Where did she go?"

Hank hesitated for a moment before answering, his voice somewhat awkward. "She's... She's at the cafe across the street."

"And?" Not understanding what was so out of the ordinary about that, Caden snapped impatiently, "What's with the face? Did she blow up the cafe or something?"

"No, not exactly, but let's just say... she's made herself comfortable." After a slight pause, he confessed, "Mr. Ward, Ms. Bennett's playing cards in the cafe."