

## CHAPTER 001: PDA

~~Julie~~

My husband, Ryan, is standing on the karaoke stage, making a fool of himself. His shirt is unbuttoned halfway, his tie long abandoned, and his cheeks are flushed from too much whiskey.

"And I.....will always love you..." he sings, closing his eyes.

His voice is terrible.

Standing next to him, practically glued to his side, is his secretary, Emily. Her left arm is around Ryan's waist, her fingers lightly grazing his back as she sings along. She's younger than me, at least by half a decade, all wide eyes and perfect curves, dressed in a tight, low-cut dress that makes it impossible to ignore her presence. She leans into Ryan, whispering something in his ear, and he throws his head back, laughing. He looks at her like she's the funniest person in the world.

I've never seen him this happy.

The last time I saw him this happy was on our wedding day, seven years ago. Back then, his eyes sparkled when he looked at me. Now, the light in them has grown dimmer; they're shining for someone else.

Around me, everyone is laughing. It's the company's quarterly review party, and the employees are loose after a few too many drinks, and Ryan and Emily's performance hilarious. But I know what they're really laughing at. They're laughing at me. The CEO's wife, sitting here while her husband practically gropes his secretary in front of everyone. The whispers, the side glances, they don't even try to hide it.

"Do you think they're going to kiss?" someone whispers behind me.

"Denitely. Bet they'll be doing more than kissing after this," someone else replies, and they both chuckle.

I turn around to look at the people talking. Young, drunk, probably high on weed too. They must be interns. Only people with zero knowledge of the company's hierarchy would make such a statement close to their employer's wife.

Or maybe they just don't care.

The girl, with messy blonde hair and red cheeks, locks eyes with me. "Hi!" she says, a little too loud. "Do you work here?"

Do I work here? My eyes narrow. She's denitely an intern.

She's pretty, the kind of pretty that comes with youth and arrogance. The boy next to her drapes his arm lazily over her shoulders.

I don't respond. I just stare at them, cold and unblinking.

Before I can say something that would make them regret their existence, I hear my name called.

"Julie!" the voice says, drawing my attention.

Even before I turn, I know who it is. Samantha, the vice president of marketing. We both work for Paragon Jewels, Ryan's company, the leading manufacturer of luxury jewelry in North America. Her position is just below mine, so she's one of the few who calls out my name like we're friends, even though we're not.

"Samantha," I reply, forcing a polite smile.

"I didn't know you were here, Julie. I was just telling the marketing team we have to get you involved more!"

"Oh?" I say. "Why's that?"

"Well, you're the head of marketing, and everyone wants to meet you! You're so hard to catch these days. And besides, we never get a chance to chat at work," she says, with an overplayed wink.

Her gaze drifts to the stage where Ryan and Emily are swaying together, sharing the mic, laughing like they're on some private date instead of a work event.

"So, Mrs. O'Brien," she says, smirking, "how are you enjoying the show so far?"

She's mocking me. The f\*\*\*\*g b\*\*\*\*h.

I force a bright smile. "Oh, it's... fantastic," I say, struggling to keep a straight face. "I'm thrilled to see my husband's hard work is being rewarded with such... dedication from his staff."

The crowd is clapping now, giving Ryan and his secretary a standing ovation. I guess they're done with their nonsense.

But then Ryan speaks into the microphone. "Before we get down, we've got one more song for you!"

More applause. More laughter. And I just want the ground to open up and swallow me.

Samantha looks at me with pity in her eyes. "Well... umm," she says. "I'll catch up with you later."

She quickly excuses herself.

Behind me, I hear those interns whispering again. "Oh, my God. Did you hear what she said? That's Mrs. O'Brien."

I turn to glare at them one last time, and the boy shifts uncomfortably, pulling the girl to her feet. "Let's go," he mutters under his breath, and they stumble away, sneaking a look at me before disappearing into the crowd.

Good. Let them run.

I turn back to the stage, my heart pounding in my chest. Ryan is singing "Everything I Do"—if you can call that singing. Emily is now pressed against him, her hand running up his arm in a way that makes my stomach twist. She's completely shameless, and he's too drunk to even notice—or worse, he doesn't care.

I can't take it anymore.

Without thinking, I push my chair back and stand. My heels click against the floor as I march toward the stage. I can feel the weight of everyone's eyes on me, the whispers dying down as they realize what's happening. They've been waiting for this—waiting to see if I'll crack.

But I don't care. I'm done playing the perfect wife.

I climb the steps to the stage, each footstep feeling heavier than the last. Ryan doesn't notice me at first, too lost in his drunken performance, but Emily spots me and her smile falters. Good.

"Ryan," I say. "We're leaving now."

Ryan looks at me, surprised. "Why?" he slurs, still holding the microphone. "The party's just getting started."

I grit my teeth, my fists clenched. "Let's go. Now."

"Julie, come on," he says, sounding annoyed now, as if I'm the one ruining his night.

I can't help it. Something inside me snaps.

Without another word, I turn and walk toward the back of the stage. The technical operators sitting in the booth look up as I approach, their faces going pale.

"Who's in charge here?" I ask.

They all point to a man standing near the soundboard, holding a half-eaten donut. His eyes widen as he sees me.

"Mrs. O'Brien," he stammers, quickly setting the donut aside. "Is there something—uh—something I can do for you?"

"Shut it down. All of it," I say. "The party's over."

He blinks, not sure if I'm serious, but one look at my face and he scrambles to obey. His hands fly across the controls, and within seconds, the speakers cut out with a harsh screech. The lights dim. The music dies. Silence falls over the room like a heavy curtain, and all that's left is the sound of my heels as I walk back to center stage.

Ryan is standing there, his microphone useless in his hand.

"Julie, what the hell?" Ryan mutters.

I meet his eyes, feeling the weight of everything I've been holding in for too long. "You've had your fun," I say quietly, but with enough steel in my voice that it stops him from saying anything else. "Now it's over."

I don't wait for a reply. I grab his arm and start leading him down the stairs.

Ryan stumbles slightly, caught off guard by my sudden forcefulness. His eyes ick to the crowd, scanning their faces for something, maybe support, validation, but all he finds are wide eyes and muted whispers. Everyone's too shocked, too entertained by the unfolding drama, to come to his defense.

The whispers start immediately. I hear snatches of conversation as we pass. Let them talk. Let them laugh.

Ryan's too drunk to ght me, too embarrassed to protest. For once, he's the one who's quiet, and I'm the one in control.

Justin, Ryan's bodyguard/chauffeur, sees us coming and is already moving into action. He steps forward, opening the back door of the car without a word.

Ryan mumbles something under his breath—maybe an apology, maybe an excuse—but I don't stop. I don't even look at him. I tighten my grip, forcing him into the backseat with a firm push, and he collapses into the car.

"Take us home," I say, climbing in behind Ryan. Then I slam the door shut.