

CHAPTER 003: The Bar

I look at Ryan, then Emily. “I don’t understand.”

Ryan doesn’t even look at me, just grabs Emily’s hand and starts leading her away. “Stop being such a bad host, Julie. We’ve had a long day.”

“No way, Ryan. She’s not staying in this house,” I say, my voice shaking with disbelief.

He doesn’t respond.

“Do you hear me? She’s not staying here! Take her back to wherever you picked her up. I don’t want her in my house.”

Ryan stops, turning just enough to glare at me. “Your house? I put a roof over your head. If I say she’s staying, she’s staying. If you don’t like it, go somewhere else. I don’t have the energy for your nonsense, Julie.”

Oh, my god. My chest tightens. “How could you do this?” I say. “Don’t walk away from me, Ryan. Stand here and answer me.”

Emily turns to look at me, smirking. “By the way, you’ll need to move your things into the guest room. I’m not sharing a bed with you and Ryan. It’s bad enough sharing him with you.”

All the energy in me evaporates. I just stand there, speechless. I can’t move. I can’t breathe. I hear them whispering and giggling as they head into our bedroom. My room. They’re kicking me out of my own room.

The living room suddenly feels too small.

I stumble to the front door, fling it open, and run outside, needing to escape. I don’t know where I’m going, but I can’t be here.

“Ma’am, are you alright?” Justin, Ryan’s bodyguard, asks as I approach, breathless. He’s wiping down Ryan’s Rolls-Royce, eyeing me with concern.

I hold out my hand. “The keys.”

“Ma’am?”

“The damn keys, Justin.”

He hesitates for a second, but hands them over. I know he’s wondering why I need Ryan’s car when I have my own. Honestly, I don’t know either. But if I stay here for one more second, I might lose it completely.

“Mrs. O’Brien, let me drive you—”

“No, Justin. I’ll drive myself.”

I pull out of the driveway and speed off into the night.

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It’s been over an hour, and I’m still driving aimlessly. My mind is a blur of everything—Ryan, Emily, their smug faces. Initially, I’d planned a Saturday evening manicure and pedicure, just to get my mind off things. Things that involve Ryan. But I’m no longer in the mood to get my feet and hands pampered. It’s not even been two days since he dropped that bombshell about an open marriage, almost giving me a heart attack, and now he’s bringing his mistress over? Emily? The same Emily?

The craziest thing is I can’t cry. I feel nothing. No tears, no anger—just this hollow emptiness. The last therapist I spoke with said it’s a defense mechanism. That I’m in denial of my actual emotions. Cry it out, Julie, she used to say. Let yourself be free of the burden.

Well, they can all go to hell. Ryan. Emily. The therapist. My entire family.

I know what I need. A drink.

I pull into the nearest bar and head inside.

“A shot of whiskey,” I tell the bartender. “Neat. And keep them coming.”

“Long night?”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” I say.

He pours the first shot, and I throw it back, welcoming the burn in my throat. It’s harsh, but it’s better than the alternative—thinking about what’s happening back home.

As I down my second shot, I hear someone call out, “Maggie! Maggie!”

I turn, confused, and see a tall, handsome man approaching me, his eyes locked on mine. Before I can react, he’s wrapping his arms around me. “Thank God I found you,” he says, pulling me into a tight hug.

I stiffen. “Who the hell are you?”

“Please, just go along with it,” he whispers in my ear. “I’ll explain later. I promise.”

Before I can push him away, a furious-looking woman storms over.

“Luke! I knew it. You can’t hide from me.”

The stranger—Luke, apparently—turns to face her, still keeping his arm around me. “Veronica, what a surprise,” he says, feigning nonchalance.

“My name isn’t Veronica, it’s Evelyn.”

Luke ashes her a sheepish smile. “Right, sorry. I get those mixed up sometimes. Anyway, this is Maggie—my wife.”

He lifts my hand, showing off my wedding ring, and I nearly choke. What is happening?

Evelyn glares at me. “You married this scumbag?”

I don’t know what to say, so I just nod.

“You should divorce him,” she snaps. “He spends one night with you and disappears the next. Who does that?”

“But that’s what we agreed on. A one-night stand—” Luke begins, but Evelyn cuts him off.

“f\*\*k you, Luke.”

And with that, she storms off, leaving the two of us standing there, stunned.

Luke breathes a sigh of relief. “Well, that one was a stalker. At least she’s off my back now.” He turns to me, smiling. “Can I buy you a drink? You’ve definitely earned it.”

I stare at him and then stare at the spot where the angry lady once stood. It all happened so fast. I can’t even process it. I think I need that drink.

“Make it two,” I say.

And Luke smiles.