

CHAPTER 004: The Deal

~~Luke~~

Lord knows I've seen my fair share of beauties.

But the lady beside me is something else. Not only is she the prettiest thing I've ever seen, but she's married. Some men are just lucky.

"So, I'm guessing your name isn't Maggie?" I ask, trying to ease the tension.

"No," she replies atly.

I nod, waiting for her to give me something more. "So, what is it?"

She gives me a slow, deliberate look. I can't lie, wherever her eyes touch immediately burns.

"Look," I say, raising my hands in mock surrender. "I'm not hitting on you. Honestly, I'm taking a break from women. They're problematic."

She lets out a laugh, a bitter one. "You're the one who just hugged a stranger to dodge another woman you've wronged, and you're saying we're the problematic ones? You men are all the same."

She downs her drink like it's water and winces at the burn. That's her second shot in less than ve minutes. I've got to say, I'm impressed.

"Let's start over," I suggest, offering her a fresh start. "I'm Luke."

She rolls her eyes. "Yeah, I caught that. Your 'problematic' ex wouldn't shut up about it."

"She's not my ex," I say.

"Whatever."

Great, another woman convinced I'm the villain. Not even ve minutes in and she's already pegged me as the problem. I guess I deserve that one.

"So, are you going to tell me your name?" I ask, trying again.

I can tell she's got money just by looking at her. She's probably an heiress or the wife of some big-shot businessman. Those Louboutins, the Rolls-Royce keys sitting on the bar, and that dress—all of it screams wealth. Maybe that's why she's not keen on giving me her real name.

"You don't have to tell me your last name," I say with a grin. "But you look like you could use someone to talk to. Since you just saved my ass back there, I gure it's the least I can do."

She watches me for a moment, her expression unreadable, before nally relenting. "Julie. My name's Julie."

"Nice to meet you, Julie," I say, extending my hand.

She takes it.

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Julie's on her fth glass of whiskey, and at this point, she's unstoppable, pouring out her life story like we've known each other for years. I've already told the bartender to cut her off, but she hasn't noticed yet.

"...So, I'm standing there, and they're both going upstairs. To my room. And do you know what the b\*\*\*h says?" Julie doesn't wait for me to reply. "She says I need to move out of my room. My room." She laughs so hard that she starts coughing. And then she sobs.

I don't know what to do. How do you comfort someone else's wife without crossing a line?

"Julie," I say. "Are you okay?"

She shakes her head. "I need another drink."

"No, you don't."

She frowns at me. "I beg your pardon? You think I need one more person telling me how to live my life? You can all go to hell. I said I need a drink." She taps her empty glass against the bar, but the bartender, Mart, knows better than to disobey me.

"Sorry, I own the bar, and I can't let you drink anymore," I say.

Her eyes narrow. "Oh, you own the bar? Good for you. I'll nd another one."

She tries to stand, but I step in her path.

"Listen, Julie, I know you're hurting, but this isn't the way to go about it. Have you thought about divorce?"

For the rst time, her eyes soften, and she slumps back onto the barstool. "I can't. I don't want to be a disappointment to my family. They depend on Ryan's money."

I let out a snort. "Screw them. It's your life. No one should make you feel like this."

She gives a sarcastic smile. "Easy for you to say, Mr. I-own-the-bar."

I've seen people like Julie before, people who won't leave a toxic relationship because, deep down, they still love the person. She's saying it's because of her family, but I can tell it's more than that. She's not ready to let go of him. Love does that to you—it makes you hold on even when you shouldn't. I know that feeling all too well.

What kind of solution could I possibly suggest that wouldn't involve me physically dragging her out of the marriage?

Suddenly, an idea hits me. "You know what?" I say. "You need to get yourself a boyfriend. Someone to introduce to Ryan."

"A boyfriend?" She looks at me like I've lost my mind.

It sounds like a stupid plan, but one thing I know about guys who cheat is that they can't stand being cheated on. It'll drive him crazy. I'm hoping it leads to Ryan divorcing her, since she's too chicken to do it herself.

"It doesn't have to be a real relationship," I add. "Just hire someone to play that role until Ryan comes back to his senses."

Julie's quiet for a moment, turning the idea over in her head. "That's actually not bad," she says, surprising me. "Are all bar owners this good at giving advice?"

I laugh. "We try."

"Okay, but where am I supposed to nd this 'boyfriend'?"

Without thinking, I blurt out, "I could do it."

Her eyes icker over me again, slower this time. "You?"

"It's easier than hiring someone. No need to go through the hassle of nding the right guy, making sure he knows what he's doing. I'm single, not looking for a relationship, and I like a little adventure. I'd be perfect for the job."

She studies me, weighing her options. After a moment, she says, "You are good-looking too."

I raise an eyebrow, but she cuts me off.

"Don't ask." She pulls out her phone. "So, how much is this going to cost me?"

I hadn't thought about money. I don't need it, but if I offer to do it for free, it might seem weird.

"How much are you willing to pay?" I ask, playing along.

She glances around the bar, one arm raised as if to appraise the place. Her diamond ring catches the light, sparkling like it's worth a fortune.

"Your bar's decent," she says. "What does it make? Two hundred thousand a year? Maybe ve?"

I stay silent.

"I'll double that," she says.

I raise an eyebrow. "The two hundred?"

"The ve hundred."

Wow. She's serious. "Deal. But I'll only take the money after we pull it off."

She extends her hand. "Deal."

I shake her hand, her skin soft against mine. I then pull out a pen and scribble my number on a napkin. "Call me when you're ready."

She tucks the napkin into her purse and gives me one last look before heading out of the bar. I'm right behind her, escorting her toward a sleek Rolls-Royce.

"You sure you can drive?" I ask.

"I'm not that high, Luke."

"Alright," I say. "Give me a call."

She drives off into the night.

I feel so guilty for letting her leave in that state. But what else could I do? I head back into the bar, already wondering what I've gotten myself into.