

CHAPTER 002: An Open Marriage

It's true what they say about marriage: one partner is always happier than the other.

In my case, I'm the unhappy one.

I'm the one who can't sleep. I'm the one who watches her husband's sleeping face at night, looking for a sign—anything to prove what I've suspected all along, that he's cheating on me. Just say a word, goddammit, a name. That's all I want. Say Emily, Ryan. Say Emily.

But Ryan never does. He's too controlled for that.

I'm the one checking his phone, seeing notifications from the same person, the same tiny image. But I can't see the name of the sender, can't recognize the face due to the image size—though it looks like Emily. I can't even read the messages because Ryan has privatized his pop-up notifications.

I'm in the kitchen right now, already on my fifth cup of coffee. And it's just 6 AM.

"Morning," Ryan says, walking in, rubbing his temple. "Feels like someone took a chainsaw to my head."

"I'm glad you had fun yesterday," I reply, trying to keep my voice steady, but the bitterness slips through. He notices it, of course. He always does.

"Something wrong?" Ryan asks, eyeing me cautiously.

"Wrong?"

"You seem... I don't know, off."

I'm counting down from ten in my head. Calm down, Julie. Calm the hell down. But how can I? Ryan disgraced me last night, and he doesn't even remember?

"I'm ne," I say.

Ryan fetches himself a cup of coffee and joins me at the table. He's watching me with that innocent look of his.

Sometimes I forget how handsome he is. With his lovely, sharp jawline and his bright green eyes. The eyes were the first thing I fell in love with. We were freshmen in college, and Ryan mistook me for some girl he brought to the frat party, a girl he swore was his girlfriend. And well, I played along. I enjoyed letting him call me Vivian. And in the morning, when he was sober again and didn't recognize me, I told him Vivian no longer wanted him and I did.

Funny how things turn out.

"You say you're ne," Ryan says, breaking the silence, "but you keep looking at me like you want to murder me."

I grip the edge of the table, my nails digging into the wood. "You humiliated me last night, Ryan. How is anyone supposed to respect me when my own husband doesn't?"

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about your stupid karaoke performance yesterday with that b***h, Emily."

Ryan slaps his forehead dramatically. "Oh, not this again. I've told you a hundred times, Julie, there's nothing to worry about. You always bring her up, like you're obsessed or something."

"Obsessed?"

I want to throw my cup at something, and it definitely isn't the wall.

"You have a life most women would kill for," he continues. "A great job, a husband who comes home every night. Do you know how many women throw themselves at me? And yet, I come home to you. I pay your family's bills. I've set up trust funds for your nieces and nephews. But it's never enough, is it? You're always whining about the same thing—Emily this, Emily that. It's exhausting."

I'm shaking now, my heart pounding so hard I can barely breathe. But if I say anything more, he'll call my mother again, and she'll tell me I'm being ungrateful. "Stop trying to push Ryan into divorcing you, Julie," she'll say. "No one wants hand-me-downs. Do you want to be alone forever? Go on your knees and tell Ryan you're sorry for being a bitch."

"My lord," I say, "how would you like me to show my gratitude? Should I commission a carved image of you and worship it?"

"I'm not in the mood for your sarcasm, Julie," Ryan says. Then something crosses his eyes, a strange look. "Actually, there's something I've been meaning to discuss with you. I feel like now's the right time."

Oh, God. My stomach tightens. He's going to ask for a divorce. I can feel it. Mom's going to kill me. She already planned a vacation in Rio for Christmas.

"What is it?" I ask, bracing myself.

"I want an open marriage."

For a moment, the words don't register. "What?" I say.

"That's when a couple decides to give each other room to see other people, and—"

"I know what an open marriage means, Ryan. Jesus Christ. The answer is no."

He looks at me with disdain. "I wasn't asking. From now on, we're in an open marriage. When you see me with someone else, don't bother asking questions."

My heart slams in my chest. "It's only an open marriage if I agree. And I don't."

I'm on my feet now, pacing the kitchen, trying to contain the rage and hurt boiling inside me. Seven years of marriage, and I'm already gearing close to a heart attack.

"I want kids, Julie," Ryan says. "How am I supposed to have any if I don't date someone else?"

I can't help it; I begin to cry. "But it's not my fault," I say.

"It's not my fault either. Maybe it's just us together."

I can't believe he said that. We've tried for seven years, spent a lot of money. And it's always the same reply: you're both healthy. The embryos are just acting weird. Nine IVFs.

I untie my robe and let it fall to the floor, stripping down until I'm standing naked in front of him. Ryan's eyes widen in surprise.

I move closer and straddle him. I then grab his hand and place it on my chest. "Does this not move you anymore?"

"Julie—"

"Am I ugly to you now?" I reach into his pants, but he quickly stands, pushing me away.

"Stop it," he says firmly, putting space between us. "Put your clothes back on."

Trembling, I watch as he walks away, heading for the stairs.

"Wait," I call out, my voice shaky.

Ryan turns, impatient. "What?"

"It's cool," I say, my voice hollow. "Do whatever you like."

Ryan nods. "Good."

And just like that, he walks away, leaving me in a million pieces.

~~~

I like to say I'm a calm person. Sometimes I swear I'm the most level-headed person I know. All my family are maniacs. My sisters, my brothers. My parents. I've always been the one bailing people out of prison. I've been the designated driver during college wild night parties. I've been the cover-up story for my friends in high school.

But for the first time in my life, I think I want to do something bad. I want to kill someone.

I'm watching our driveway from the window, and Ryan is stepping out of his car with none other than Emily. f\*\*\*ing Emily. And she's carrying suitcases.

"What's going on?" I ask, as soon as Ryan and Emily step into the house.

Ryan smiles. "Julie, meet Emily."

"I know who she is, Ryan."

"Good. Then I won't need to explain. Emily's moving in."

I'm honestly too stunned to speak. What does he mean by that? After what feels like ages, I ask, "Is she homeless?"

"No," Ryan says. "She's my girlfriend now."