

1. The Cheating Bastard

[NATALIE]

The clinking of silverware and the hum of conversation surround me as I sit at the corner table of our favorite Italian restaurant. It's the eve of our second wedding anniversary, and Michael insisted on dining out, even though I would've preferred a quiet night at home. He's always been the social butterfly, the life of every party, while I'm the grounded one—the devoted wife who treasures our private moments, despite being a budding actress in Hollywood.

I sip my wine, but there's this nagging feeling in the back of my mind that something's off. I made an effort to dress up tonight, slipping into a red silk dress that hugs my curves in all the right places. I look amazing—everyone's eyes linger on me, except for Michael's. He hasn't even looked at me properly, let alone complimented me.

The ache in my chest deepens. I know our relationship has faltered despite everything I've done to keep it together. The spark that once made him fall head over heels for me has faded. Lately, he's been distant, coming home late with weak excuses about work. He works for my father, so I know exactly what's going on—and his excuses are lies. But I keep giving him the benet of the doubt.

Even his once tender kisses have become routine, and the desire that used to burn in his eyes is gone. He doesn't buy me owers anymore — not even tonight, when it feels like a bare minimum for the occasion.

Does he even remember tomorrow's our anniversary?

Deep down, I know something's terribly wrong, but I keep burying my doubts, hoping they're just products of my overthinking. I love this man. He proposed to me in front of a crowded stadium, fearlessly declaring his love. I gave him everything—my heart, my love, my body, my soul. He's my everything.

"The alfredo's amazing," Mike says, his mouth full. I force a smile, but inside, I'm jealous that he compliments the pasta, yet hasn't said a word about me.

"It is," I say, dropping my fork, my appetite suddenly gone. Trying to sound hopeful, I ask, "What are we doing tomorrow? I took the day off."

Mike looks confused. Wiping his mouth with a napkin, he asks, "Why? What's tomorrow?"

I laugh to keep from crying. "Nothing," I murmur, dgeting with my ngers. "We haven't gone out somewhere recently."

"We're out right now, silly," he says with a shake of his head. "Besides, I have an important meeting tomorrow."

He has to be joking. He's pretending to forget our anniversary because he's planning something huge, right? It has to be that.

"Sure," I mumble, my voice quieter than I intended. Then I get an idea, a way to test him. "I'll ask Meera to hang out with me tomorrow since you're busy."

Surely, he'll object. He'll feel guilty or show some sign he's planning something. But all Mike does is nod. "Sounds good. Do that."

My heart sinks. I want to scream at him, to storm out and never look back. But I remember my mom's words: You have to be patient, and understanding, and learn to make sacrices for the man you love.

I rot through the next few minutes, watching as he gives more attention to his food than to me. He doesn't even notice I'm not eating. He doesn't care.

Until his phone starts buzzing, again and again. He tries to ignore it at rst, but it's persistent.

"Just give me a moment, love," Mike says, ashing that charming smile as he stands up. "I need to take a quick call."

"Right now? Can't you just turn it off? Is work really more important than us?" I want to ask, but I just nod and watch him weave through the tables, disappearing around the corner.

As the minutes tick by, my anxiety grows. Why hasn't he come back? Did he leave me here? On the eve of our anniversary?

Unable to sit still any longer, I stand up and walk around to clear my head. The warm lighting and rustic charm of the restaurant usually calm me, but tonight, it feels suffocating.

I turn the corner, and my steps falter. There, in the dim hallway, I see him. Mike isn't alone. My breath catches as I watch him pull a beautiful woman into a passionate kiss. They cling to each other like they're the only two people in the world, completely unaware of anything else.

"This is dangerous," I hear the woman say, smiling as they break their kiss. "She's right inside!"

"Natalie's devoted to me. She would never doubt me for a second," Mike mutters with condence before pulling her back in for another kiss. "After my company's launch event goes well, and her father sends me the check he promised, I'll leave her. Then you and I can be together."

My heart shatters into a million pieces, but all I hear is silence—a deafening, crushing silence. The man I've devoted my life to, the man I've loved unconditionally, is betraying me in the most unforgivable way. And I've stumbled upon them, just around the corner.

I used to admire his condence, but now I want to spit on it. The pain threatens to consume me, but my anger rises higher. I won't be the victim in this twisted story.

"Well, well, well," I say, stepping forward with my arms folded, my voice surprisingly steady. "Isn't this a cozy little scene?"

Mike jerks away from the woman, his eyes widening in shock and guilt. I recognize her now—from his oce parties. She has the decency to look ashamed, but I'm not about to let her off the hook.

"Nat, my love," Mike stammers, stepping toward me. "This isn't what it looks like."

"Save it," I snap, holding up my hand. "I don't need your lies, Mike. I've had enough of those to last a lifetime."

I turn to the woman, who's wringing her hands nervously. "And you," I say, my voice dripping with contempt. "Didn't you know he was married? It was in the f****g newspapers, sweetheart. Do you have any idea what you've done?"

She opens her mouth to speak, but I cut her off. "No, you don't. Because if you did, you wouldn't be standing here, pretending to be innocent. You didn't steal my man. You did me a favor."

Her eyes widen, and she steps back as if my words have struck her. I see the guilt and confusion battling inside her, but I don't care. I have more important things to deal with.

"Mike," I say, turning back to him. "You said you loved me. You professed it in front of a f****g stadium full of people. Was it all for show? Just to impress my father? Was I just a convenience? A trophy wife to show off at parties?"

"That's not true, Nat," he pleads, reaching for me. "I do love you. This... this was a mistake."

"A mistake?" I laugh bitterly. "A mistake is forgetting our anniversary—which is tomorrow, by the way — or misplacing your keys. This is a choice. A deliberate, cruel choice."

I take a deep breath, feeling the weight of my decision settle over me. "But you know what? I'm done. I'm done being your fool. I'm done being the dutiful wife who sacrices her happiness for a man who doesn't deserve it."

Mike looks stricken, but I feel liberated. "I'm going to take my life back," I say rmly, more to myself than to him. "And I'm going to enjoy my freedom. For the rst time in years, I'm going to live for myself."

I turn to leave but pause, looking back at the woman. "And you," I say, a touch of pity in my voice. "You can have him. Just remember, a man who cheats once will cheat again. Don't fool yourself into thinking you're special."

With that, I walk away, my heart heavy but my spirit unbroken. The cool night air greets me as I step outside, stinging my skin, but I welcome it. As I take a deep breath, I feel a sense of clarity. I loved Mike with all my heart, but I deserve better.

I'm not going to be a damsel in distress. I'm Natalie Jones, and it's time to remember that. I lost myself becoming Natalie Cooper, loving a man who never truly loved me back.

I hail a cab and give the driver the address to my penthouse. As we drive through the city, I let myself imagine a future — a future where I'm free. I picture myself traveling, rediscovering my passions, and nding the woman I lost along the way. But I also picture myself kicking Mike's ass.

When the cab pulls up to my penthouse, I snicker to myself. I step inside, taking in the familiar scent of home—every corner of it nurtured by me—and pour myself a glass of wine, savoring the richavor as it slides down my throat. I strip off my clothes, admire my gure in the mirror, and sink into the hot bath I've prepared. The steam wraps around me like a warm embrace as I let out a contented sigh.

Freedom never tasted so sweet. Swirling the wine in my glass with a smile, I can't wait to get back into the game.