

2. A Showdown in Style

I scroll through my i*****. feed, feeling my heart sink as I take in the posts. The venue—an opulent ballroom in the heart of the city—glitters under the soft glow of chandeliers. Every detail, from the lavish floral arrangements to the perfectly aligned crystal glasses, screams elegance and perfection—just as I envisioned and organized. I've spent weeks prepping for this day, ensuring that everything would be perfect, up until the fateful night a week ago.

Now, I stand on the balcony of the adjoining building, a safe distance from the entrance, my eyes xed on the scene below. It's a grand affair, the kind of event that commands attention, and tonight, Mike is in his element.

From my vantage point, I can see the throngs of people arriving, mingling, and exchanging polite pleasantries. They're the sort of people you'd expect to see at events like this—high-powered businessmen, socialites, and even a few celebrities who grace the occasion with their presence. Everyone seems to be enjoying themselves, oblivious to the agony and insult I feel so acutely.

And then I spot him—my husband, soon to be my ex-husband—standing near the entrance with that same effortless smile I fell for years ago. Mike is the perfect host, charming and attentive, moving through the crowd with practiced ease. His tailored suit clings to his athletic frame, and his posture exudes condescence. He laughs, jokes, and chats with everyone, completely being himself, as if he hasn't a care in the world.

As if the woman he's been married to for the last two years—the one who set up this entire event—hasn't discovered his ugly, heart-wrenching secret.

But I know better.

My gaze shifts to the woman by his side—the same woman I caught him kissing in that dimly lit hallway a week ago. I can't deny that she's stunning, her sleek, dark hair pulled back into a polished bun, her body encased in a gure-hugging plum dress that subtly matches Mike's tie. She's careful not to linger too close to him, maintaining just enough distance to keep the relationship from looking too obvious, yet close enough to suggest something more than just a casual acquaintance.

As I watch them, Mike leans in close to her, whispering something that makes her laugh softly. He doesn't look the slightest bit bothered, not even sparing a glance at his phone to check on me. I've tried to contact Mike, desperately so, despite all my good judgment. But he has avoided my calls, brushing me off with excuses and acting as if I'm the one at fault. And now here he is, acting like nothing is wrong, like he isn't cheating on me with the woman right in front of my eyes.

I should've canceled the event, I think to myself. That would've been the perfect way to embarrass him. After all, I'm the one who paid the event planners, caterers, and decorators. I clench my sts, my nails digging into my palms. The time for tears has passed. I've dwelled enough in the betrayal and pain. Now, it's time for action.

I check my reection in the mirror one last time, adjusting the plunging neckline of my black, backless dress. It's a custom-made piece that clings to my curves in all the right places—a dress designed to turn heads and make headlines. My stylist has outdone herself, selecting the perfect ensemble for my revenge. My makeup is awless, my lips painted in a daring shade of crimson, and my long dark hair cascades in loose waves down my back. I look stunning, every inch the Hollywood actress I dreamed of being before becoming Mrs. Mike Cooper. And tonight, I'm going to remind everyone exactly who I am.

Taking a deep breath, I descend the stairs and make my way toward the venue. I time my entrance perfectly, just as Mike is about to take the stage for his welcome speech. The cameras that have been trained on him turn as I enter, ashbulbs popping in rapid succession. I walk with purpose, my hips swaying seductively, my eyes focused straight ahead as I glide through the crowd.

Gasps and murmurs ripple through the room as all eyes turn to me. I revel in the attention, knowing I'm making an entrance that will be talked about for days, if not weeks, to come. Mike's launch event will become secondary, a mere backdrop to the spectacle I'm about to create.

For a brief moment, Mike's smile falters when he sees me; his eyes widen in shock. I catch a ash of panic across his face, but then, as if ipping a switch, he regains his composure. The bastard has the audacity to smile at me as if nothing has happened, as if we're still the perfect couple everyone thinks we are.

"Nat," Mike says smoothly into the microphone, his voice carrying through the room. "I'm so glad you could nally join us. Everyone, please welcome my loving wife."

The words feel like acid on my skin. I see through his pretense—he's doing this to impress my father, Elliot Jones, who stands beside him on the stage. He wants to show the world what a great son-in-law he is, maintaining the facade that everything is ne between us. But I'm done playing the role of the devoted wife. I don't miss the disapproving glare my father passes my way, but I choose to ignore it, just as he has ignored my calls over the last week to discuss my divorce with Mike. I don't care about being the perfect daughter anymore.

I plaster a smile on my face as I ascend the stage, my steps slow and deliberate. "Thank you, darling," I purr, my voice dripping with sweetness. "I wouldn't miss this for the world."

Mike's eyes narrow slightly, as though he senses the threat beneath my words, but he remains composed. He turns back to the crowd, continuing his speech with practiced ease, though I can see the tension in his shoulders. He's nervous. God, he's nervous. And that's exactly what I want.

As Mike's speech comes to an awkward end, the room dims for the presentation—a video montage chronicling his journey from an ambitious young man to the successful entrepreneur he is today. I watch with detached interest as images of our early days together ash on the screen—pictures of us at various events, laughing and smiling, looking like the perfect couple.

Then comes the segment that nearly makes me lose my composure. A voiceover of Mike's deep, sincere tone echoes through the room. "I couldn't have done any of this without the support of my wife, Natalie. She's the woman of my dreams, the one who believed in me when no one else did. Without her, I'd be a nobody."

Although the audience claps as the video comes to an end, for a moment, only silence rings in my ears. I feel the weight of the lie pressing down on me, threatening to suffocate me. But then, a bitter laugh escapes my lips, loud enough to cut through as the applause fades.

Heads turn, and the room grows quiet again as people look at me, confused. I see Mike's jaw tighten, and I can sense the fury in his eyes. But I don't care. I'm not going to let him get away with this charade.

"Bravo," I say, my voice carrying across the room. "What a performance."

Mike's eyes lock onto mine, but he doesn't say anything. He doesn't need to. The message is clear—I'm done playing nice.

I turn away, heading to the bar, where I order a drink. I need something strong to take the edge off the anger simmering inside me. The bartender hands me a glass of whiskey, and I take a long sip, closing my eyes and letting the burn of the alcohol distract me from the pain.

When I open my eyes, I see Tyna Brooks, my co-actor from my debut movie and long-time frenemy, walking up to the bar. She has a scandalous look plastered on her sharp face, and I can guess her question before she even coughs it up.

"That bastard is lucky, you know? He has such a gorgeous wife. That was quite the entrance, truly. I didn't expect less from you, Nat. But some out here were betting on whether you would even show up."

I smirk, twirling the glass of whiskey in my hand as I watch Mike from a distance, deep in conversation with my father. "Now that would be something to talk about, wouldn't it?"

"Certainly would be. Worth making headlines," Tyna agrees, winking. "What are you doing here, though? Shouldn't you be by his side?"

"I should be now, shouldn't I?" I counter, already feeling myself tire from this conversation. Maybe if I keep throwing back questions, Tyna will leave me the hell alone.

"Gosh, don't tell me, Nat, that you're already drunk!" Tyna cackles, throwing her head back.

I take another sip, my smirk widening. "Not quite enough, Brooks. Oh, and... keep your ears tuned for another announcement later tonight."

Tyna nods slowly, her gaze shifting to a careful, predatory glint. She seems to have nally found the answer she was looking for. "Congratulations, honey," she mumbles before slipping away.

I watch her go, only to be greeted by another familiar face—my aunt Lizzie this time. "You took your sweet time to show up, woman!" Lizzie cries, nudging me in the shoulder. "You had your father worried."

I snicker, thinking bitterly of how my father only cares about his reputation. If he truly cared about me, he would've given me time to talk about Mike.

"Oh, I wouldn't miss this for the world, Aunt Lizzie," I reply with a sly smile, my eyes glinting with mischief. "After all, it's not every day you get to watch history being made."

It's then that I notice him—a man standing a few feet away, watching me with an amused expression. He looks older than me, probably in his late thirties, with dark hair streaked with grey and a strong, chiseled jawline. His tailored suit ts him perfectly, accentuating his broad shoulders and lean build. There's something about him, something in the look in his eyes that draws my attention.

I don't notice when Lizzie leaves, too focused on the man as he strolls over to me leisurely, as if he has all the time in the world.

"You seem like someone who could use another drink," he says, his voice deep and smooth.