

3. The Final Performance

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

I nd myself staring into his eyes — older, condent, and dark, with an air of control that quickly makes me weak in my knees. His voice makes it clear that he's not asking; he's stating a fact. The hint of a smirk pulls at his lips, as if he already knows what my response will be.

I smile, intrigued by the unexpected interruption. "Is it that obvious?"

He leans against the bar, his gaze steady, assessing me with an intensity that makes me feel like I'm under a spotlight, more than any of the other cameras ever could. "Only to those who know what to look for."

I let out a soft chuckle, glancing down at my glass before locking eyes with him again. His presence is magnetic, but there's an edge to him that sends a thrill through me — something dangerous. I trace the rim of my glass with my nger, enjoying the tension in the air. "So," I say, my voice dipping, "you intend to get me drunk?"

His lips curl into a sly smile, his gaze ickering to my mouth for just a second longer than casual. "Looks like you're already halfway there," he replies smoothly. "But I was thinking," he leans in slightly, voice lowering to a conspiratorial whisper, "I could offer a better way to get intoxicated."

"And what would that be?" I ask, the words slipping out before I can stop myself, my voice turning breathy.

His eyes darken, and for a moment, it feels like the room fades away, leaving just the two of us. He stares at me with such intensity that it sends a surge of heat through my body, sparking a desire I wasn't prepared for, or even expecting.

Hell, I just found out the man I've been in love with has been cheating on me. How can I be so easily turned on by a stranger?

The way his gaze lingers, the slow, deliberate sweep from my lips to my throat, and lower — it's as if he's already imagining us tangled together, skin on skin, in a heated mess of sheets. I can see it too, the image ashing through my mind so vividly that I can almost feel his hands on me, our bodies intertwined in a way that leaves nothing between us but heat and desire.

I swallow hard, caught off guard by the wave of arousal that sweeps through me, my pulse racing in my chest. For a split second, I can't move, can't breathe, trapped. Trapped by him. Then he shakes his head, breaking the spell, but the smirk on his lips tells me he knows exactly what I was thinking — because he was thinking it too.

"That was quite an entrance you made back there," he says, his voice smooth but with an edge of amusement, pulling us back to the present. "Impressive, really."

I blink, the heat still lingering under my skin as I struggle to refocus. My heart is still pounding, but I manage to return his smirk. "You think so?"

He nods, his eyes still holding that dangerous glint. "Denitely. I'd say you turned a few heads. Mine included."

I raise an eyebrow, acknowledging how he's understating it. "I aim to leave a mark," I say, my voice steady now.

His gaze ickers again, as if he's considering his next move, but instead, he just gives a slow, almost predatory smile. "Oh, I think you've done more than that."

"Well," I say, nishing off my drink, "I guess we'll have to see if you're right."

Before I can set my empty glass down, his hand moves quickly, wrapping around my arm with a rm, deliberate grip. His touch isn't harsh, but it's commanding, holding my attention. He leans in close, his breath warm against my ear. "When are you going to leave him?"

I stiffen, my body tensing as his words hit me. I pull back slightly, my heart pounding. "What?" I whisper, barely audible over the noise of the party.

He doesn't back down. He releases my arm, leaning back just enough to avoid making a scene. "Your husband," he says smoothly. "When are you going to leave him?"

My heart races, shock and confusion swirling inside me. How does he know? Have I been that obvious? Does that mean the announcement I'm about to make will fall at? I narrow my eyes, trying to read him, but he doesn't seem bothered by my reaction. If anything, he looks amused.

"How do you know about that?" I ask, my voice carrying a hint of mock surprise.

He shrugs, playing along, his eyes still locked on mine. "Why else would you be here, Natalie?" he says simply, like it's the most normal thing in the world. "It's his big night."

"Maybe I'm just not one of those clingy wives," I say with a shrug, trying to match his condence.

"That man right there," he begins, pointing his nger at Mike, "has no clue what he had. What fooled you into marrying him?"

A pang echoes in my chest. I was a fool indeed. I open my mouth to respond, but he isn't nished. "I can even guess who he's been spending his nights with." His gaze shifts to the far side of the room. "The woman in the plum dress. Her gown matches the color of his tie."

My eyes snap to the woman he's talking about, and my heart sinks when I spot her again. The nerve of him. He's not just watching me — he's watching Mike, too. And he knows. The realisation hits me hard, but instead of breaking under it, I nd myself drawn deeper into his orbit. His condence, his audacity — it ignites something in me I haven't felt in a long time.

I swallow hard, my throat suddenly dry. "Who are you?" I whisper, barely able to get the words out. "What do you want with me?"

He leans in closer, his voice low and smooth. "I can be whoever you want me to be, Natalie," he murmurs, his breath warm against my skin. "And what I want to do with you..." His lips curl into a wicked smile. "Well, you could take a guess."

My pulse races, my body reacting to the dangerous allure of this man in ways I hadn't anticipated. Every instinct screams at me to pull away, to run, but I can't. The pull is too strong, the temptation too great.

"Tell me," I breathe, my voice trembling, "one of the things you would do to me."

He opens his mouth to respond, but before he can, my father's booming voice slices through the tension, snapping me back to reality.

"There you are, Nat!" my father calls, his voice loud as he approaches. He claps the older man on the shoulder, grinning like a proud dad introducing his friend. "I see you've met Richard. Ric Steward."

I blink, trying to catch up with the sudden shift in atmosphere. My father keeps talking, but the words blur. Ric. His name is Ric. An old friend of my father's, tied to the family business. Forbidden territory.

Ric's expression changes, hardening slightly as he realises what's at play now. His eyes narrow just a fraction, and he pulls back, the playful irtation replaced by something colder, more calculating. He's not retreating, but I can tell he's reassessing the situation.

"I want to talk to you later," my father warns me, his glare sharp like the one he gave me earlier. As he turns away to greet another guest, I act on impulse. Slipping a card with my penthouse address into Ric's hand, I let my ngers brush against his palm in a subtle but intimate gesture. "Come by later," I whisper, my voice low and deliberate. "And do one of the things you were about to tell me."

I don't wait for his reaction. I turn and walk away, my heart pounding with adrenaline. Every step feels calculated, deliberate, a power play that sends a rush through me. I'm about to cause a scene, and there's no turning back now.

I stride toward the stage, head held high, feeling the weight of the room's attention shift toward me. The crowd quiets as I approach the microphone, sensing that something big is about to happen. I can feel their eyes on me — especially Mike's. He's sitting there with that smug look on his face, completely unaware of what's coming.

I grip the microphone, my voice cutting through the silence, loud and clear. "Ladies and gentlemen," I begin, a wicked smile curling on my lips, "I'd like to make a little announcement."

My eyes lock onto Mike's now, watching the confusion spread across his face. He leans forward, obviously not expecting what's about to happen.

"To my wonderful husband, Michael," I continue, my voice dripping with sarcasm, "congratulations on your new life. I wish your cheating bastard ass and your little slut friend all the best."

Gasps ripple through the room as I gesture toward the woman in the plum dress, her face now as pale as a ghost. Mike's expression darkens with anger, but I don't care. I'm not done yet.

"Mike," I say, my smile widening as I prepare to deliver the nal blow, "it's been quite the journey, hasn't it? If you weren't a businessman, you'd make an Emmy-winning actor. Funny thing is, I'm the one who's making a career in Hollywood." I pause, letting the shock settle on his face before adding, "Consider this my nal performance as your wife."

The room erupts into whispers, murmurs spreading like wildre. I step down from the stage, feeling the weight of everyone's stares. My father stands frozen, his mouth slightly open in stunned silence. But I'm not focused on him — my eyes nd Ric across the room. He's watching me with that same smirk, the desire in his gaze unmistakable.

I've just declared war, and I'm ready for whatever comes next.