

THE NEXT WIFE

A NOVEL

By Kaira Rouda

Also by Kaira Rouda

Suspense

Best Day Ever

The Favorite Daughter

All the Difference

Women's Fiction

Here, Home, Hope

In the Mirror

The Goodbye Year

Romance

The Indigo Island Series

Weekend with the Tycoon

The Billionaire's Bid

The Trouble with Christmas

The Forbidden Love

Nonfiction

Real You Incorporated: 8 Essentials for Women Entrepreneurs

To Harley.
My partner in life.
I love you.

PART 1: Tish & John

Chapter 1

Tish

Despite popular notions to the contrary, it isn't easy being the second wife.

I mean, sure, I have the benefit of his success without struggling through the “early days,” whatever that means. But I also don't get to enjoy the open spaces of possibility—the freedom to create a life together, baggage-free. So as we gather in the conference room to celebrate EventCo's big news, baggage invades my space.

I note one of the pieces of baggage standing just outside the conference room door: Ashlyn, the opinionated and overly dependent twenty-year-old daughter. For the most part, we have an amicable relationship, one I've worked hard to cultivate, and she understands the parameters. I used to babysit her, and we have a certain bond, since she told me so many secrets. She thinks I have done likewise.

Next to her stands the steamer trunk of baggage: Kate, wife number one. People say I'm the spitting image of Kate “when she was young.” And I am. We both are slim with shiny brown hair and big smiles. She is simply older by thirty years, a more worn version of me. In her, I see my future. Sort of. She can't seem to stop wearing business suits to the office. I mean, the 1980s are calling, and they want their clothes back. Today she's wearing all white, meaning she's either a suffragette or pure as snow. As if.

Despite our differences in age and style, that cliché about men having a type is true. I mean, men aren't that original. They're simple beings, easy to figure out. Keep them happy, well fed in all areas, if you get my drift, and voila—a happy life.

Especially after they've had success.

Why would you let them slip through your fingers then? That's when you hold on tight. Sure, they're more work as they get older, and more successful, but that's just part of the deal. Some of us know how to hold on to our men and some, well, they just don't. I will hang on. There will be no other next wife.

Kate and I make eye contact, and I grin, reveling in the fact I'm here, inside the conference room, seated next to John while she's milling around outside, trying to figure out where to be. Where her place is. Awkward for her, I'm sure.

Oh good, there's Jennifer, our beautiful vice president of marketing, going out of her way to make Kate feel welcome in the conference room. She's gushing over John's past family as if she were a long-lost relative. I should never have allowed her to be hired. Jennifer meets my eye and quickly finds something to stare at on the floor. I wonder again why I am forced to work around someone who could be ripped from the pages of a fashion magazine: long blond hair, impossibly smooth skin, big green eyes and other enhancements. I'm a fool, that's why: Heaven knows I don't need John's attention divided any more than it is.

The conference room door opens again and in walks Lance Steel—our COO—bald, brilliant and impossibly young. He slides into a chair two down from me.

"Hey boss," he says to John. Lance's jaw is drawn, intensity radiates from him. He's always thinking from what I can tell. John says we were lucky to lure him away from a tech giant and maybe we were, but I'd appreciate a friendlier COO if I had a choice. I sense Lance watching me, as always, and meet his stare. I'm not sure if he's attracted to me, or if it's something else.

We're about the same age, Lance and I, so I'm not interested. I like older men. I squeeze John's thigh under the table but he pivots his chair away.

I force a smile as Kate and Ashlyn settle into their seats in the conference room, selecting chairs at the opposite end of the large glass table from me. All the officers and key employees fill the room now—the stakeholders as they say—numbering twenty-four of us. Ashlyn stares at me across the table, her entitled confidence misplaced. She has no power here. If she had behaved, been a friend after John and I married, maybe things would be different for her. But it's too late for that. We act like we have a relationship when John's around, but it's a lie.

I break away from the brat and look around the table. Almost all of the people at the table have been here since the beginning. Their tension and excitement is palpable. Beside me, I feel John shift in his seat. He's never quite gotten used to this—all of his family being together in one place, despite the fact we all worked here together in ignorant bliss not so long ago.

John stands, commanding the room. He's wearing a black polo shirt with EventCo stitched on the sleeve in red, black pants and a big smile. We both dressed Steve Jobs-style, all in black. We planned it this way. Serious. Techy. My hair is pulled back in a low ponytail. My pants and black t-shirt display my curves. Bright red lipstick completes my look. I know the men in the office notice what I wear, and I enjoy the attention.

John wears a leather bracelet, the one with a metal peace sign on it, a gift from me that I know makes him feel young. We're ready. The lines sun-beaming next to his blue eyes convey warmth, experience. I think I fell in love with his eye crinkles.

The sheen on his forehead is the only sign he isn't feeling one hundred percent. I fight the urge to hand him a napkin. Sweat is so unappealing.

"So, how does it feel to be rich?" John begins the applause and the rest of us join in. My heart pounds in my chest. I for one think being rich is the only way to be. And now, we have so much more, John and I.

John continues, and I feign devout attention. "I know it's been a tough couple of months, with the quiet period and those nuisance lawsuits, but just look at those shares of EventCo popping!" John points to the television screen in the corner of the sleek conference room. It feels surreal. On a typical business day, dry eraser scribbles and charts cover the walls of this room in various bright colors. One of my jobs used to be wiping these walls. That seems long ago now.

Today, someone else wiped the walls clean, stark white, like a blank piece of paper. John and his black attire stand out more than usual. I decide to stand up next to him, enjoying the frowns from Kate and Ashlyn.

I smile at them both and wink at Ashlyn before turning my attention back to the TV screen in the corner. It's tuned to Market Watch. The stock market never mattered that much to me, but now, with EFC—the stock symbol of EventCo—it matters. It matters very much.

"Look at her go!" John exclaims. I jump before realizing he's talking about the stock. Geez, I'm not sure why I'm so on edge. I guess it's just the excitement of today. The last day before everything changes.

John glances at me, a look of concern but mostly of *what the heck are you doing standing next to me*, in his eyes?

“This is so exciting, honey.” I kiss him on the cheek and whisper, “You should wipe your forehead.” I push a tissue into his hand, but he ignores me.

John continues. “Before we go out there and join the rest of the company to celebrate, I wanted to gather you all here and thank you. Because of your hard work, Kate and I were able to build the company of our dreams. I hope you’re happy with the results, and I hope you’ll still come to work, even if you don’t need the cash anymore.”

I lean into John and smile, sharing the moment in the spotlight again. I wonder if any media are here to capture this happy scene through the glass-front conference room. If they are, it will be a great shot. Me and my man, all in black, standing in front of a white background, with an entire team around the conference table staring up at us with pure adulation. A Getty Image to be sure.

But I don’t see any cameras, unfortunately, even though there should be. This is a huge moment for EventCo. John started the company with Kate almost fifteen years ago and it’s grown to become one of Central Ohio’s most prominent and well-respected companies. We’re the All-American success story based in the All-American City in the heartland. Come on, you can’t make this stuff up. We processed more than one billion in gross ticket sales last month. Successful beyond our wildest dreams, we’re online invitations, party supplies, and a one-stop shop for the hottest concert tickets all rolled into one. When I say “we” I mean they. My only job since I arrived was to keep John organized and happy: First as his executive assistant and then as his wife. I guess I did my part.

I’m satisfied when John finally wraps his arm around my waist and pulls me in close. That’s better.

“Special thanks to Tish who has put up with a very stressed-out CEO for these past few months. I know it hasn’t been easy keeping my schedule organized. And to all of you, I know I haven’t been the easiest person to work for lately.”

Was that a slam? I mean, I am “officially” his executive assistant, but I’m so much more than a scheduler. We’re married, so half of his half of this now-public company is mine. My chest thumps again with the bigness of it all. John’s right, though. To say he’s been stressed out is an understatement, but I smile and turn to the EventCo team.

“I’m so proud of you, John. You worked hard to make sure this IPO would be good for everyone. As for me, I just can’t wait to whisk you away for a much-needed vacation this weekend.”

Even though this is the first John has heard about our trip, he doesn’t react. That’s fine. We leave tonight after the festivities. I’ve packed his clothes and toiletries. The plane waits for us at the private airport. It will be nice to have a little weekend together in the mountains.

We have so much to talk about.

