



Taking it All (The Surrender Trilogy)

By Maya Banks

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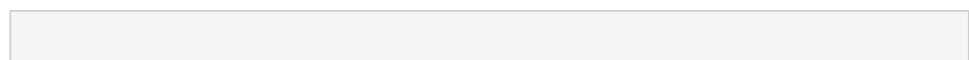
“MAYA BANKS...I’M READY FOR THE NEXT RIDE NOW!” SAID *USA TODAY*. AND NOW, MAYA BANKS IS READY TO DELIVER. FROM THE “MUST-READ AUTHOR” (*ROMANCE JUNKIES*) OF *LETTING GO* AND *GIVING IN*—THE NEW NOVEL IN HER SURRENDER TRILOGY.

In her sensational *Breathless Trilogy*, *New York Times* bestselling author Maya Banks tested the boundaries of desire. In her new trilogy, there’s only one thing left to do: cross them. And for a married couple taking steps to renew their marriage, the consequences of one single moment of inattention may come at a price the husband never expects...

Chessy and Tate have been married for several years. In the beginning, their relationship was everything she wanted. Passionate. All-consuming. She offered her submission freely and Tate cherished her gift with a tenderness that made her feel safe. Content. Wanted. Loved beyond all measure. But as the years have gone by, Tate has become more immersed in making his business a success, and Chessy has taken a back seat to his business obligations. Growing unhappy with the status of their once blissful marriage, Chessy knows that something has to give, or they stand to lose it all.

Tate loves his wife. Has always loved her. Providing for her has always been his number-one priority. But lately she’s seemed unhappy, and he’s worried. Worried enough that he arranges for a night together that he hopes will reignite the fire that once burned like an inferno between them.

But a business call at the wrong time threatens everything. Chessy’s safety, his concentration, his wife’s faith in him as her husband—a man sworn to love and protect her above all else. Gutted with the realization that he’s going to lose her—has already lost her—he readies for the fight of his life. Whatever it takes, he’ll get her back, show her that nothing is more important than her love. And that if she’ll allow him to prove himself one more time, he’ll take it all. Everything. But he’ll give back far more: Himself. His undying love.



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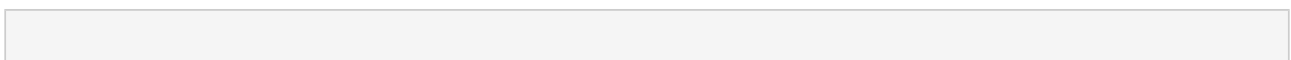
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Editorial Review

Review

Praise for the novels of Maya Banks

“Incredibly awesome...I love Maya Banks and I love her books.”—Jaci Burton, *New York Times* bestselling author

“Maya Banks...really dragged me through the gamut of emotions. From... ‘is it hot in here?’ to ‘oh my god’...I’m ready for the next ride now!”—*USA Today*

“[A] one-two punch of entertainment that will leave readers eager for the next book.”—*Publishers Weekly*

“For those who like it naughty, dirty and do-me-on-the-desk hawt!”—*Examiner.com*

“A cross between the *Bared to You* or *Fifty Shades* series and the *Wicked Lovers* series by Shayla Black.”—*Book Savvy Babe*

“Hot enough to make even the coolest reader sweat!”—*Fresh Fiction*

“You’ll be on the edge of your seat with this one.”—*Night Owl Reviews*

“Definitely a recommended read.”—*Fallen Angel Reviews*

“[For] fans of Sylvia Day’s *Bared to You*.”—*Under the Covers*

“Grabbed me from page one and refused to let go until I read the last word.”—*Joyfully Reviewed*

“An excellent read that I simply did not put down...Covers all the emotional range.”—*The Road to Romance*

“A must-read author...her [stories] are always full of emotional situations, lovable characters, and kick-butt story lines.”—*Romance Junkies*

About the Author

Maya Banks is the *USA Today* and *New York Times* bestselling author of the *Breathless Trilogy*, the *KGI* novels, and the *Sweet* series. Her chart toppers have included erotic romance, romantic suspense, contemporary romance and Scottish historical romance.

She lives in the South with her husband and three children and other assorted babies, such as her two Bengal kitties and a calico who’s been with her as long as her youngest child. She’s an avid reader of romance and loves to dish books with her fans and anyone else who’ll listen! She very much enjoys interacting with her readers on Facebook and Twitter, as well as in her Yahoo! Group and on her webiste.

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ONE

CHESSY Morgan pulled into a parking spot at the Lux Café in Houston, her eyes widening in surprise when

she saw both Kylie's and Joss's cars parked short distances away.

Kylie being there didn't shock her. Kylie was always punctual. But Joss? Joss was perpetually running late. Chessy and Kylie almost always had to wait on Joss, who'd dash laughingly inside the restaurant where Chessy and Kylie waited, an unnecessary apology always on her lips for her tardiness.

And, well, who could ever get mad at Joss? Especially for something so insignificant as being habitually late. Joss was just someone who lit up a room with her warmth and sweetness. She'd come a long way from grieving widow after losing Carson to where she was now. Happy. In love. Married to Dash, her former husband's best friend. Chessy was genuinely thrilled for both her friends. Joss and Kylie had both found love. For Kylie, this was huge. She'd made monumental steps in her life, being able to finally overcome the demons from her past that had ruled her present for so very long.

Kylie had more than met her match in Jensen and they made a wonderful couple. Chessy didn't doubt for a single moment that Jensen was absolutely perfect for Kylie.

If only Chessy could say her own love life—her marriage—was as perfect as her friends'.

She let out a sigh and climbed out of her Mercedes SUV, glancing ruefully back at the seven-passenger vehicle. When Tate had surprised her with it, she'd wondered why on earth he'd gotten her something so big, but he'd looked at her with that charming, devilish twinkle in his eyes and told her that it was the perfect car to hold their children. The children they used to talk about having—it had been a frequent topic early in their marriage. They'd spoken of their dreams of a large family and a house full of children, love and laughter. But more recently, Tate had been unwilling to broach the subject of having children.

He was still building his business after going out on his own and having his partner bail on him. He wanted to wait until things were more stable and he was established before having children. But Chessy wondered quietly if that day would ever come. She hadn't had the courage to broach the subject in the last year.

She felt as though Tate was slipping further and further away from her, his career taking over, and she was second or even third or God only knew how far down his priority list she currently was.

"For God's sake, Chessy. Quit being a drama queen. It's not that bad. Tate loves you. You love him. You just have to be patient and see this through. Everything will work out," she scolded herself aloud.

She braced herself to greet her friends as she entered the restaurant and made certain her expression contained none of her dour thoughts. The last thing she wanted was to worry them more than they already were. They'd known for months that things weren't as they should be. She saw the looks passed between them when they thought she wasn't aware. But she missed nothing. Not the worried looks. Not the doubt in her friends' eyes. She knew they were deeply concerned about hers and Tate's relationship. But both women were happy. Deliriously so. And Chessy didn't want to drag them down into the mire of her own unhappiness.

She was the "bubbly" one of the group. The one everyone always counted on for good cheer, the happy spark. Except she was absolutely horrible at concealing her emotions. Good or bad, she was utterly transparent. When she was happy, she was really happy. Exuberant. Bubbly. Sparkling even, as her friends often told her. The problem with that was when she wasn't happy, she was an open book for her friends to see right through any sort of façade, and no amount of acting ever fooled them for a second.

Still, she gathered herself and pasted on her brightest smile, which made her cheeks ache with effort as she walked up to the booth Kylie and Joss already occupied.

“Thank God you’re here!” Kylie exclaimed, immediately grabbing Chessy’s hand and dragging her into the curved booth beside her. “Joss is practically glowing and she has that ‘I’ve got a secret’ look in her eyes, but she refused to spill until you arrived.”

Chessy plopped down, having been yanked into the seat by Kylie, and grinned at Kylie’s outrage that Joss would hold out on her until Chessy arrived. Some of her earlier ache dissolved, because how could it not when she was with her two best friends in the world? Just being in their presence lifted some of the sadness that seemed to have become a permanent fixture in her life lately.

“Ah okay, I see what Kylie’s talking about now, Joss,” Chessy said, studying her friend. “You’ve got a definite ‘cat who got the cream’ smug look on your face and you are positively glowing. So spill. The sisterhood is together and accounted for. Don’t make me hurt you, because I can guarantee Kylie will be with me on this. Poor girl has already had to wait for me to get here. We’ll sit on you if we have to, so spill already!”

Kylie nodded fervently and all eyes were glued to Joss’s radiant smile that spread over her face, lighting up every delicate feature. It was a sucker punch to Chessy’s stomach. Joss did look radiant. And so happy that it almost hurt Chessy to look at her. But there was no freaking way she’d ruin her friend’s moment in the sun by allowing even a hint of her own unhappiness to cloud the gathering of best friends.

“Dash and I are pregnant,” Joss said with unconcealed joy. “I’m pregnant,” she amended, her face softening, eyes glowing with love and happiness. “We’re having a baby!”

Kylie squealed and immediately threw her arms around Joss, hugging her tightly, ignoring startled looks from other restaurant patrons seated in close proximity to the women’s booth.

Chessy immediately rose, though her stomach had plummeted, and rushed around since Kylie separated Joss and Chessy. She slid in on the other side of Joss and tugged her away from Kylie’s fierce grasp.

“I’m so happy for you,” Chessy whispered so she didn’t have to choke the words out around the lump forming in her throat.

Joss hugged her back and then pulled away, her gaze piercing as she studied Chessy.

“Thank you,” Joss said quietly. “Now perhaps you can tell us what’s going on with you and why you look so unhappy. Is it Tate? Have things gotten worse?”

Chessy’s heart sank. She should have known of all people she couldn’t fool her best friends. And now that Joss was basking in the glow of her news—glorious news—and the realization of a long-time wish come true, the very last thing Chessy wanted to do was dampen the celebration.

She reached down, grasping Joss’s hand and squeezing. “This is your moment to shine, girlfriend. We can talk about my woes another time. Right now we need to be toasting the mother-to-be and planning all the fun stuff like baby clothes and possible names! Oh my gosh, Kylie, you and I have to plan a kick-ass baby shower for Joss. The likes of which no one has ever seen. And we’re so making the guys get involved. No wimping out because it’s a girly activity.”

Kylie and Joss exchanged looks, as they often did when they didn’t think Chessy could see, and Chessy inwardly winced that she was evidently the cause of so much worry for her friends.

“Do you honestly think for one moment that I would be so wrapped up in the wonderful news of my

pregnancy that it would override everything else?" Joss asked, clear reprimand in her tone, though it was the gentlest of reprimands.

Joss was hardly the kind of woman who ever came across bitchy or mean-spirited. She simply didn't have it in her. She was kindness personified and had the biggest, most forgiving heart of anyone Chessy had ever known in her life.

Chessy held up her hands. "I know, hon. I know. Believe me, I do. I'd just rather not rehash it all on a day we should be celebrating. It's not like anything has changed. It's just the same old story and I'm just being a whiny, needy baby. Things will get better."

Joss lowered her voice, her eyes filling with love, so much love, for her best friend that it nearly brought tears to Chessy's eyes.

"I know it had to be hard to hear that I'm pregnant," Joss said gently. "I know you've wanted children. That it was once what you and Tate both wanted and that you still do but he's the one wanting to hold off now. And now you've even questioned the motives for wanting a child now. We've had that discussion recently and agreed that until you and Tate get beyond this current rough patch that a baby would only complicate matters."

Chessy wasn't going to lie to the women she loved most in the world. Her best friends. Her sisters. Her rocks.

"I won't say it doesn't sting a little. Okay, a lot," she amended when she caught sight of the look Kylie shot her. One that said you aren't fooling anyone, girlfriend. "It's no secret that I've wanted children. A big family. I want what I was never given as a child. I want a brood of little ones that are secure in the fact that they are loved and wanted with every single part of my heart and soul."

"You want for them what your parents never gave you," Kylie said softly.

Chessy shot her a look of understanding. Chessy and Kylie had one thing in common as far as childhoods went. They were both unwanted, but the similarities ended there. Kylie had suffered a horrific, abusive childhood at the hands of the monster that was her father.

Chessy could never say she was abused, physically or verbally. She simply didn't . . . exist. Not to her parents. Chessy had been a very unplanned child to parents who'd never intended to have children. And as such, they didn't change their lives to adjust to having a child. They simply went on as before, Chessy being an unwanted nuisance. Her childhood had been one of neglect, not abuse, but then some would argue that neglect was indeed a form of abuse. Chessy hadn't been physically harmed, but emotionally? Definitely.

Tate knew of Chessy's childhood, her memories of being lonely and overlooked. It had infuriated him and he'd vowed she'd never feel that way with him. Until . . . now. He'd always made it his priority to put her first. Her wants, her needs, her desires, some of which she expressed, but mostly Tate intuitively understood and satisfied them for her without prompting. He often fulfilled needs she hadn't even realized she had at the time. He'd always gone above and beyond to give her all the things she'd lacked as a child.

God, she wanted that back. She wanted her husband back. Wanted for things to be the way they had been before he'd branched out on his own, forming his own financial planning company with a partner who'd then bailed, leaving him to meet the needs of all their clients.

And in her heart, she knew that Tate was still acting on his desire to see to her every need. He never wanted

her to lack for anything he could provide. Financially. She knew his heart was in the right place, but money wasn't what Chessy wanted most. Financial security was all well and fine, but at the expense of her marriage? She just wanted her husband back. The one who saw to her emotional needs above all else. Not her financial needs. Because money was no substitute for love, no substitute for the man she adored beyond reason. How could she get him to understand that without causing a rift between them? One that may not be able to be repaired. And she simply couldn't countenance that. Nothing was worth losing Tate over. Certainly not her ridiculous insecurities and needy, clingy demands that seemed insignificant in the larger picture. Most women would be grateful for a husband who busted his ass every single day to provide for his wife. How to explain that material things meant nothing to her if they came at the expense of her marriage and the broadening gap forming between them?

"Sweetie, what is going on with you and Tate?" Joss asked, concern creasing her forehead. "We've discussed this so many times and yet I keep getting the feeling that you aren't telling us the whole truth. That you're holding back at least a part of what you're feeling and experiencing. Are you still worried he's cheating on you?"

Chessy sucked in her breath. The very thought, however fleeting it may be, that Tate would ever cheat on her filled her with such agony that she couldn't dwell on it for the pain it caused her. She truly regretted that moment of weakness when she'd shared that fear with her best friends, no matter how little she truly believed it.

"I know he loves me," Chessy said firmly. "I know he wouldn't cheat. He has too much honor. If he wanted another woman, I know he'd be forthright with me and just ask for a divorce."

God, the word divorce sent waves of agony through her heart and soul even though she knew it wouldn't come to that. But panic quaked through her at the very idea of her marriage truly ending. It wasn't a thought she could even linger over because of the devastation it caused her.

"But love isn't about causing pain for the person you care about," Kylie quietly inserted.

Lord knew Kylie recently had become very acquainted with pain and love and her own brush with the end of a relationship. If she hadn't kicked Jensen's ass for ending things with Kylie "for her own good" they'd probably still be apart and absolutely miserable without one another.

"He doesn't know he's hurting me because I haven't told him," Chessy said softly. "That's on me. He can't be expected to fix something if he doesn't know the problem or the solution. I admit I'm being a coward. A part of me wants to just beg him to stop focusing on business, tell him that I don't care about having a lot of money in the bank, while the other part of me thinks that if I just suck it up and ride it out a little longer things will resolve themselves and I'll have my husband back and everything will go back to the way it used to be."

Joss and Kylie both sighed in resignation. It wasn't as if they hadn't discussed this subject a half a dozen times already. Chessy knew that neither agreed with her thinking or approach to the problem but they loved her and supported her unconditionally. And for that she loved them beyond reason.

Part of her recognized that they had a right to be frustrated with her. They listened to her whine about a problem she herself wasn't willing to address, much less try to fix. Chessy knew she had her head firmly in the sand and was in denial over the state of her marriage, but to even contemplate any other alternative meant she had to admit that her marriage was in trouble. And she wasn't prepared to do that. Yet.

"Our anniversary is this Friday," Chessy said, purposely brightening her tone in an effort to relieve the

somber turn of the conversation. “Tate has promised me an intimate dinner at the restaurant where we always have our anniversary dinner. No cell phones. No business. He plans to take off early and he said the entire weekend is ours. And,” she said, drawing out the word, “he says he has very distinct plans for after dinner, so I can hardly wait. I think having this, one weekend where it’s just us, will do wonders for my insecurities and silliness. I never should have let it get to this point. I recognize that I’m at fault for not communicating better with Tate, for not telling him of my unhappiness. But this weekend, when it’s just the two of us and our focus is solely on us, I absolutely plan to talk to him about . . . everything.”

Kylie and Joss both wore identical looks of relief.

“That’s wonderful, sweetie,” Joss said.

“I’m so glad you’re taking this step,” Kylie said. “I agree with you. A weekend with just the two of you is probably exactly what you need to feel better about everything. And talking to him and opening up about the way you’ve been feeling is a huge step in the right direction. I can’t imagine Tate not moving heaven and earth to make you happy again. But as you said yourself, he has to know about the problem if he’s going to be able to fix it.”

Chessy smiled, her heart lightening and some of the ache slipping away as she soaked in the healing balm of her girlfriends’ unfettered, unconditional love. God only knew Chessy was usually the one freely dispensing advice and threatening to kick Joss and Kylie’s asses over certain matters when it came to their happiness. It made her a flaming hypocrite that she wasn’t taking a dose of the same medicine she dished out to her friends. And that she was quick to tell them what they should do but then shrugged off their advice. Sound advice to boot.

Ah well, no more. She was resolving to have the best anniversary weekend ever. She and Tate would rediscover the love she knew they still shared. They’d spend a wonderful weekend together loving and laughing and she would talk to him about her growing unhappiness. It was time for her to stop being a spineless guppy and take a stand when it came to her own life and relationship with a man she loved with all her heart and soul.

TWO

THAT Friday, Chessy sat at the table Tate had reserved at the restaurant for their anniversary dinner, resisting the urge to look at her watch. There were a million reasons Tate could be late. Traffic. Difficulty in breaking free from work. She didn’t mind any of it as long as he showed up and their weekend began, just as he’d promised her.

In the beginning of their five-year marriage, Tate had always gone the extra mile to make it a special day for her. One year, they’d eaten here and then he’d taken her home, told her to pack a bag, that they were going to the Bora Bora for an entire week.

She still smiled over the memory of that. Her bubbly excitement over Tate arranging such a wonderful surprise for her. He’d taken her on a reenactment of their honeymoon. Same bungalow set out over the water. Same honeymoon bed. They’d spent most of that entire week in bed, only venturing out to eat or to play in the water.

But in the last two years there’d been no time for such frivolities. They still ate at the same restaurant, but on Monday morning it had been off to work for him as usual.

She glanced at her watch again, breathing a small sigh of relief. He wasn’t late. She was merely a few

minutes early. Deciding she'd take a quick trip to the ladies room to double check her appearance, she rose and hurried to the bathroom.

She'd paid extra attention to her makeup and hair and had donned a sexy, slinky dress she knew would get a rise out of Tate. With any luck he wouldn't be able to take his eyes off her during the entire meal and his gaze would smolder with all the things he'd do to her once they arrived home.

She shivered in delight as she retouched her lip gloss and patted her upswept hair. Little curly tendrils floated carelessly down her neck and against her cheek. She knew without false modesty that she looked her absolute best.

Hoping that Tate would be at the table when she returned, she closed her clutch and rushed back, her heart sinking when she saw his chair still unoccupied. She slowly retook her seat, scanning the interior to see if he was arriving.

She'd just let out a heavy sigh when her cell phone vibrated. Hoping it was Tate, she opened her clutch and lunged for it. As she glanced at the incoming name she saw it was indeed Tate.

"Tate? Where are you?" she asked breathlessly, trying to keep an accusing note from her voice.

"I'm sorry, my girl." His deep-timbered voice slid like silk over her ears and she got a delicious thrill every time he called her "my girl." "I just got caught up in a last-minute client call but I'm on my way out the door. Give me twenty depending on traffic and I'll meet you there. If you like go ahead and order for us. You know my preference. By the time the food is served, I'll be there."

Chessy couldn't help the frown that curved her lips downward. That wasn't the way things worked in their relationship. Not at all. Tate was her Dominant. Not just her Dominant but her lover, her husband, the man she adored—and trusted—with all her heart.

He always made the decisions. He always ordered her food. Her heart gave a guilty twinge. She was acting like a petulant, pouty two-year-old. He merely didn't want to hold up their dinner, but still, there was a small part of her that registered that lately, with recurring frequency, he'd drifted away from the dominance he'd always held over her. More and more she was forced to act on her own. Make the decisions that Tate always made.

It sounded silly to anyone looking in from the outside. Like she wasn't capable of making her own decisions and was some helpless twit, lost without her husband. But she willingly ceded power to Tate in their relationship. He made her feel safe. Cherished. Utterly adored because he took care of her every need. Or at least he used to.

Their relationship—their lifestyle—was her choice. Perhaps the biggest choice of her life. She was an intelligent, smart woman. She had no reservations when it came to knowing what she was capable of. But she chose to give up power to her Dominant, and submissiveness wasn't for the weak. Not at all. She knew she wielded every bit as much power in her marriage to Tate as he did. Just in a different way.

"I'll take care of it," she said softly. "Drive safe. I can't wait to see you so we can kick off our anniversary and have an entire weekend to ourselves. It's been so long, Tate. I can't tell you how much I need this. How much I need you."

There was a lengthy pause and she cursed herself for already putting a damper on the evening before it ever began. It was as if he had no idea what to say in response to what amounted to a plea.

“I love you. See you in a minute,” she said brightly, to cover up the awkwardness caused by her passionate, needy sounding outburst. And, well, the words were truth. She did need him. She needed her husband back, even if it was only for one weekend before things went back to the same day-to-day routine.

“I love my girl too,” he said gruffly. “Be there as quick as I can.”

When she ended the call, her stomach felt as though it had lead in it. And she didn't understand why. He was only going to be twenty minutes late. Thank God he was making it at all. When the phone had vibrated, she'd fully expected him to tell her he couldn't make it. That something had come up and he was cancelling. On their anniversary of all nights.

Was this what their marriage had come to? Her always expecting the worst? But in her defense, that's precisely what she'd gotten over the last two years. Ever since his partner had bowed out and Tate had to take over the entire client load, Tate had been determined to step up and not lose a single client.

To date, he'd only lost one and he wanted to keep it that way. Which meant being called out at all hours of the day. Clients wanting to meet with him. Or calling him in panic after a bad day in the stock market. It seemed to never end.

In the beginning, Tate had wanted Chessy to accompany him to his dinners with his clients. Had wanted her to play the consummate hostess. They'd even had small dinner parties at their house that Chessy had arranged with Joss's help since Joss was such an amazing cook.

But lately? He hadn't asked her to accompany him for anything. He'd made an offhand remark that it was becoming too much for her and that he didn't want his job to consume them both. At the time Chessy had taken it as a sign of his caring. That he wanted to take care of her and not put her in high-pressure situations. But marriage was all about partnership, wasn't it?

She didn't think she'd ever failed Tate or embarrassed him, but now that paranoid side of her wondered just that. If he was somehow ashamed of her, that she was too outgoing, too bubbly for the staid, moneyed clients he catered to. His not wanting her to be a part of him courting and wining and dining his clients had ended up being yet another rejection, one that at the time hadn't bothered her, but in retrospect made her heart clench. Was Tate growing tired of their marriage? Did she no longer satisfy him? Had she done something to cause him to lose faith in her? Their relationship? The not knowing was eating her up on the inside and it was growing harder and harder to cover up her growing unhappiness with a bright smile and words of understanding. She was lying to her friends, even though she knew they saw right through her façade. But the simple fact that she was lying, keeping so much locked inside her, made her feel like the ultimate fraud.

She swallowed the quick knot in her throat, determined she would not cry tonight and ruin her carefully applied makeup. Joss and Kylie had both come over to lend advice and help her prepare for her anniversary night. She'd needed their support because she was starting to doubt herself and she hated that.

Just because she chose to surrender her submission to Tate didn't make her a brainless twit unable to perform the simplest task unless he was there to direct her. But him always being there, taking care of her, cherishing her, had become her safety net. She knew she'd never fall without him there to catch her. There was comfort in that knowledge. It gave her a sense of security that she'd come to rely on. And lately? She felt like she was operating without that safety net. It was a sad testament of her marriage that she saw more of Kylie and Joss and was more in tune with their relationships than she was with her own!

She motioned for the waiter after studying the menu. The truth was she wasn't that hungry and her nerves were on edge because she absolutely planned to address her growing unhappiness with Tate this weekend

and she had no idea how that would go over.

One part of her thought he'd be horrified that he wasn't providing what she needed. Another part of her feared he'd be angry with her for not "understanding" the sacrifices he was making in order to make them financially secure. It was a coin flip and it saddened her that she was so out of touch with Tate's thought processes that she had no idea which way he'd go. She liked to think that he would be understanding and make the effort to spend more time with her. But the not knowing was killing her.

The waiter promptly appeared at her table, and in a low voice barely above cracking, she placed hers and Tate's orders and asked for a bottle of their favorite wine. A sparkling white they drank every year on their anniversary. They'd discovered it on their honeymoon and had vowed to commemorate each year by toasting to an even better next year.

So why did she feel the weight of the world on her shoulders and feel so fatalistic? Why did the last two years of toasting to a "better year to come" make her feel like it had been a dismal failure, because the ensuing year wasn't better. It had only grown progressively worse.

She'd never be so stupid as to say it couldn't get any worse, because it could. What if Tate reacted to her addressing her own unhappiness by saying he was equally unhappy and that he wanted out of their marriage? That was the ultimate worst that could happen, so things could most certainly get worse, though at this point she wondered if they were even truly married in their hearts anymore.

Married people didn't operate like they did. At least not the marriages she was acquainted with. Or rather the relationships. Were Joss and Dash and Kylie and Jensen the exceptions to the rule? Or were they the norm? Because Chessy's marriage didn't even come close to resembling the adoring, tight-knit couples she was friends with. And she'd never really looked beyond them because . . . well . . . she was afraid to. Because she was afraid of what she might discover. So she'd adopted a head-in-the-sand approach and that wasn't getting her anywhere at all. It was only making her more miserable.

She refused to look at her watch. Instead she drank in the occupants of the room and played her favorite people-watching game, trying to guess the status of the people enjoying their meals.

She picked out one argument that appeared to be in full swing. Their voices rose before the woman loudly shushed her significant other and then looked around in embarrassment to make sure they weren't being observed. Chessy quickly averted her gaze, not wanting to add to the poor woman's obvious discomfort.

A smile softened her face when she took in an elderly couple holding hands, their arms resting on the table as they toasted one another with their free hands. Then the older man leaned in to kiss his wife and Chessy's heart squeezed.

It wasn't until the food arrived at the table that Chessy realized so much time had gone by. She hastily glanced at her watch to realize that over thirty minutes had passed. She'd purposely waited a bit before placing the order, hoping beyond hope that Tate would arrive before the food got there.

The waiter gave her a look of sympathy that nearly sent Chessy right over the edge. She smiled brightly. "My husband will be here in a few minutes. Before the food gets cold for sure."

The waiter shrugged as if it didn't matter to him one way or another. He set her plate in front of her and then arranged Tate's across the table. As soon as he left, Chessy reached over and pulled the plate to the chair sitting catty corner to her.

She and Tate always sat next to one another. Never across the table where they couldn't touch, couldn't speak intimately without fear of being overheard.

She sat, feeling conspicuous because the food was in front of her, the smell wafting tantalizingly through her nostrils. Where was Tate?

She pulled out her phone, checking for texts since she'd silenced it once she entered the restaurant. She could very well have missed the vibration signaling an incoming call or text.

There was nothing. Taking a deep breath, she dialed his number and waited as it rang. She frowned when he didn't immediately pick up. Then her gut clenched when it went to voice mail.

Had something horrible happened? Had he been in an accident? He never let her calls go to voice mail. Not that she called him much during the day. She knew how busy he was and she didn't want to appear clingy or needy. Even if she was just that. Needing. She needed her husband back.

Her anxiety level reached epic proportions while she watched the food grow colder as more time passed. She should just eat. Let him eat alone if and when he got there. She refused to believe that he could be hurt somewhere, needing help, and she was here waiting for him.

When an hour passed, the waiter hovered, obviously waiting for her to vacate. This was a popular restaurant and they were always full on reservations. An hour was more than enough time to eat and even enjoy dessert and yet her husband wasn't here and two plates of food, wasted, sat in front of her and her stomach was too tied up in knots to even take one bite. She feared if she even tasted the entrée that she'd have to bolt for the bathroom and heave into the toilet.

Tears stung her eyes. Worry warred with anger. The only excuse for being over an hour late when he had said twenty minutes at the most was that he had been in an accident or something equally horrible.

She dug into her clutch, counting out the cash she had, praying she had enough. She didn't have time nor did she want to wait on the waiter to collect her credit card and have to spend precious minutes swiping and then signing the bill.

To her relief she had the cash and even enough for a tip, though the waiter had done little but deliver their food. Uneaten food. She tossed the cash down on the table and strode rapidly to the door, tears pooling in her eyes at Tate's betrayal.

Then she felt guilty because he could have been in an accident. He could be in a hospital somewhere, but why wouldn't she have received a call?

She nearly tripped when the elegant carpet turned into slick marble that led past the upscale bar and to the exit. She was almost to the door when something caught her attention out of the corner of her eye.

She stopped in absolute shock, her mouth open as she stared—at Tate. In the bar with a woman, having a drink and smiling broadly at her. And the woman was stunning. Tall, thin, elegant. Obviously of money, and she was touching Chessy's husband, her hand lightly resting on his arm in a distinctly intimate fashion.

God, he was with a woman in the same restaurant that he was supposed to be having his anniversary dinner with his wife. How dare he flaunt this woman in this restaurant, their restaurant.

Tears flooded her eyes. She was about to turn to flee when Tate looked up, his expression one of shock. Not guilt. It was remorse. She could see him curse, his lips moving as he picked up his wrist to check his watch.

Then he started toward her and she finally made her legs move, momentarily paralyzed by grief and humiliation. She all but ran for the exit, not caring that she'd taken a taxi to the restaurant because she'd planned to ride home with Tate. She had a set of his keys. He could walk for all she cared.

Fury enveloped her even as tears poured down her face, clouding her vision. She hit the parking lot at a dead run, bolting past the attendant. She could see his Escalade in the roped-off area of the valet parking.

"Chessy!"

She flinched when Tate roared her name. But she kept running, thanking God she'd worn a strappy pair of sandals instead of high heels or she'd make an ass of herself and face-plant right in the parking lot.

"Chessy! Godamnit, stop! You can't drive in your condition. Please, just stop and listen to me, please!"

Chessy made it to his vehicle, hitting the automatic door unlock on the key chain. She made it to the door and flung it open, only to have Tate grab the door and reach for her arm.

She whirled, tears streaming down her face. Tate always hated to see her cry. In the past it would have slayed him to ever see her cry. But tonight he looked desperate, and sincere regret lined his face. But at this point, it was too late for regret. He'd pushed her to her limit and there was no going back. She was done.

"Get away from me," she choked out.

She'd never given orders to Tate. Ever. That was his role. She was the submissive. He was the Dominant. But now she felt the stirrings of a power exchange. She was taking charge and to hell with what he wanted.

She tried to slide into the driver's seat but Tate pulled her out, cradling her carefully in his arms, as if he expected her to fight. But she had enough pride that she wasn't going to cause more of a scene in a public parking lot than she already had. She went stiff as a board, refusing to meet his gaze as he walked around to the passenger side and deposited her into the seat, pulling the seat belt over her and securing it with quick, brusque movements. Then he looked her directly in the eyes, his gaze hard and unyielding. A look she would have died for, one she'd craved for such a long time. Why did he have to finally haul out his dominance when he'd royally fucked up and she no longer cared?

"Don't you dare move," he growled.

Usually such a tone would have Chessy quivering in anticipation. It was a tone he used when he was commanding her. Owning her. Using her body as his own. His possession. To do with as he liked. But now? She was just pissed enough to tell him to shove it up his ass.

She stared woodenly through the windshield as Tate carefully disengaged the keys from her hand and then closed her door. In a matter of seconds he was in the driver's seat starting the engine, almost as if he were afraid she'd leap from the car. And she'd given it serious consideration, but then she'd have to figure out a way home, which meant having the restaurant call her a cab, or she could call Joss or Kylie. Either would come at a moment's notice.

But then she would be faced with the humiliating fact that her best friends would know her anniversary had been a complete disaster. Hell, for that matter they may have suspected it would be a cluster fuck from the very start. It wasn't as if they hadn't expressed enough concern over Chessy's faltering relationship with her husband.

Tate pulled out of the parking lot.

“Please don’t cry, Chessy,” he said softly. “I’m so damn sorry. Time got away from me.”

“Who was she?” Chessy asked coldly, ignoring his words and his apology. Words meant nothing at this point. Actions spoke far more clearly than words, and his actions had been reprehensible in her mind.

Tate gave her a startled look. “She’s a potential client. A very important potential client, one I’d like to get on board as quickly as possible. She wanted to meet face-to-face, and I arranged to meet her at the bar of the restaurant so that when we finished I could have dinner with you.”

“Yes, well, dinner was delivered and perfectly cold and you were an hour late,” Chessy said in an icy tone.

“What’s going on with my girl?” Tate asked softly. “You’ve been different lately.”

She gave him her best “duh” look and then pinned him with a piercing stare. “Wow. Observant of you, Tate. I’ve been different for an entire year and you just now notice? At a time you missed our anniversary dinner because you were schmoozing some rich floozy in the bar of the restaurant we were supposed to have dinner in. Think about that for a moment, Tate, and imagine if the roles were reversed and you were sitting there over cold entrees and then you saw me in the bar of the same restaurant with another man.”

His gaze grew hard and he nearly growled. “I’ll never let another man touch you unless I command it.”

Chessy wanted to weep at what they’d lost. That he’d bring up a kink they both enjoyed and hadn’t participated in for two years. Two long years. And in the last year, he’d given up any semblance of dominance. It was like an alien had invaded his body and her Tate was gone.

“I’m not happy,” she said, finally getting to the heart of the matter. “I haven’t been happy for a long time.”

Tate looked shocked. Genuinely and utterly shocked. “What are you saying?” he asked hoarsely. “Are you telling me you want out of our marriage?”

He looked so horrified that for a brief moment she had hope, but then she remembered all the missed dates, him leaving early at gatherings of their friends because someone had called. And he’d missed his anniversary dinner because he was wining and courting a potential client.

Potential client her ass. That woman was on the prowl and Chessy damn well knew it. She was a woman and she clearly recognized the signals the woman was giving off. And Tate had done nothing to ward her off. Hadn’t avoid her touch. Tate would lose his shit if another man took such liberties with her unless Tate commanded him to do so. To pleasure her while he watched. Always in control. She couldn’t even remember the last time they’d been to The House.

The House was a place where people could indulge in any hedonistic fantasy. No judgment. No condemnation. Damon Roche, a very wealthy businessman, owned The House and he was very discerning when it came to membership. Hell, for all Chessy knew their membership had expired or they’d been taken off the guest list since they hadn’t been in two years.

She took in a deep breath. Damn it, this was not how she’d envisioned having this talk with Tate. She’d wanted to have a wonderful anniversary dinner followed by a night of lovemaking. At this point she wouldn’t have even cared if it involved dominance. She just wanted that intimate connection to her husband back.

And then, after a wonderful weekend, with no cell phones, business shit or anything else, she’d wanted to very carefully broach the subject of her growing unhappiness.

Damn him for forcing her hand after the debacle that was their anniversary.

“I don’t want out of our marriage, Tate. I want our marriage to change,” she said firmly, proud that she was able to lay it out without faltering or breaking down into tears.

Tate gave her another look filled with utter confusion and then swore when he nearly veered into the other lane. He yanked the wheel, righting them and avoiding a collision—barely.

“Just drive,” she said wearily. “This isn’t something we should be discussing in a damn car. We’ll talk about it when we get home.”

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