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Editorial Review

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Hilton Head Island, South Carolina—

Two months ago:

Sebastian Landis had been in courthouses more times than any hardened criminal. He was one of South Carolina's most successful lawyers, after all. But today he'd landed a front-row seat for how it felt to have attorneys hold complete power over *his* life.

He didn't like it one damn bit.

Of course getting divorced ranked dead last on his "things I like to do" list. He just wanted to plow through all the paperwork and litigation so the judge could make it official.

Gathering files off the table in one of the courthouse conference rooms, he barely registered his goodbyes to his attorney and polite handshakes with Marianna's counsel. Power ahead. Eyes on the finish line. Clipping his BlackBerry to his belt again, he kept his eyes off his wife, the only woman who'd ever been able to rattle his cool—his calm under fire being a renowned trait of his around courthouse circles.

At least they'd completed the bulk of the paperwork with their lawyers on this overcast summer day, leaving only the final court date. The settlement was fair, no easy feat given his family's fortune and her thriving interior decorating career. They hadn't even fought over the dissolution of their multimillion dollar assets—probably the first time they hadn't argued.

The only wrinkle had come in deciding what to do with their two dogs. Neither wanted to lose Buddy and Holly, or split the sibling pups up. Ultimately, though, they had each taken one of the Boston terrier/pug/mystery parent mutts they'd rescued from the shelter.

What would they have done if he and Marianna actually had children?

He backed the hell away from that open wound fast. Not going there today, no way, no how, because even a brief detour down that path kicked a hole in his restraint on one helluva crap day.

Which left him checking on Marianna in spite of his better judgment.

She rose from the leather chair, too damn beautiful for her own good, but then she always had been. With dark eyes and even darker long hair, she'd been every guy's exotic fantasy when they'd met on a graduation cruise to the Caribbean.

Thinking about that sex-slicked summer would only pitch him into a world of distraction. Scooping up his briefcase, he put his mind on what he could accomplish back at his office with the remainder of the afternoon. Of course he could also work into the evening. It wasn't like he had anything to go home to now, living in a suite at his family's compound. He reached the exit right in step with Marianna.

He held the door open, her Chanel perfume tempting his nose. Yeah, he knew a lot about his soon-to-be ex, like what scents she chose. Her favorite morning-after foods. Her preferred lingerie labels. He knew everything.

Except how to make her happy.

"Thank you, Sebastian." She didn't even meet his gaze, her lightweight suit skirt barely brushing against him as she strode past and away.

That was it? Just a thank-you?

Apparently he could still feel something besides attraction for her after all, because right now he was ticked off. He didn't expect they would celebrate with a champagne dinner, but for heaven's sake, they should at least be able to exchange a civil farewell. Not that civility had ever been one of his volatile wife's strong points. She'd never been one to run from a potentially contentious moment.

So why was she making tracks to the elevator, her designer pumps clicking a sprinter's pace? God, she made heels look good with her mile-long legs. She'd always been a shoe hound, not that he'd minded since she modeled her purchases for him.

Naked.

Damn it all, how long would it take for the flashes of life with Marianna to leave his head? He wanted his polite goodbye. He needed to end on a composed note, needed to end this marriage. Period.

Sebastian made it to the elevator just before it slid closed. He hammered both hands against the part in the doors until they rebounded open. Marianna's eyes went wide for an instant and he thought, oh yeah, now she'll snap back. Toss a few heated words around and maybe even the leather portfolio she gripped against her chest.

Then boom. Her gaze shot straight down and away, looking anywhere but at him.

He tucked into place beside her, the two of them alone in the elevator chiming down floors. "How's Buddy?"

"Fine." Her clipped answer interrupted the canned music for a whole second.

"Holly chewed up the grip on Matthew's nine iron yesterday."

His brother had pushed him to play eighteen holes of golf and unwind. Sebastian had won. He always won. But unwinding didn't make it anywhere on the scorecard. "Luckily, Matthew's in a good mood these days with his new fiancée and the senatorial race. So Holly's safe from his wrath for now."

She didn't even seem to be listening. Strange. Because while she'd stopped loving him, she still loved those dogs.

He normally wasn't one for confrontation outside the courtroom, but he'd seen enough divorce cases to know if they didn't settle this now, they were only delaying a mammoth blow up later. "You can't expect we'll never talk to each other again. Aside from having the final court date to deal with, Hilton Head is a relatively small community. We're going to run into each other."

She chewed her full bottom lip, and just that fast he could all but feel that same mouth working over his body until he broke into a sweat.

He thumbed away a bead of perspiration popping on his brow, irritation spiking higher than her do-me-honey heels. "Seems we should have spelled out the rules for communication in that agreement. Let me make sure I get the gist of this right. We aren't speaking anymore except for hello and goodbye. But is a nod okay if

we're both walking the dogs on the beach? Or should we section off areas so we don't cross paths?"

Her fingers tightened around her leather portfolio, her gaze glued to the elevator numbers.

"Don't pick a fight with me, Sebastian. Not today."

What the hell?

He never picked fights. She did. *He* was the calm one, at least on the outside. So what was going on with her? Or with him, for that matter? "Was there something with the lawyers that didn't go the way you hoped?"

She chuckled, dark and low, a sad echo of the uninhibited laughter that used to roll freely from her. She sagged back against the brass rail. "Nobody wins, Sebastian. Isn't that what you always say about divorce cases?"

She had him there.

Sebastian planted a hand beside her head. Sure he was crowding her but they only had one more floor left for him to get his answer. "What do you want?"

Marianna raised her eyes, finally. That dusky dark gaze sucker punched him with the last thing he expected to find, especially after they'd spent six months sleeping apart. And he saw the one thing he absolutely could not resist taking when it came to this woman. Marianna's eyes smoked with flaming hot...

Desire.

Her marriage began and ended in the backseat of a car.

Marianna had eloped with Sebastian Landis at eighteen. They hadn't made it to a hotel before hormones got the better of them, and they pulled off on a side road. Now, after the final appointment with their lawyers, hormones—and emotions—once again blindsided her.

And all because of a fleeting moment of regret in his eyes when they put it in writing about splitting up Buddy and Holly. That hint of vulnerability from her stoic-to-a-fault husband had turned her inside out.

Then turned her on.

She'd tried to haul buggy out of the conference room before she did something stupid, like jump him. No such luck. They'd barely cleared the elevator with their clothes on before sprinting through the rain to his car. He'd peeled rubber out of the lot and pulled off at the nearest side road for isolated parking.

Frantic to ease the ache between her legs if not the one in her heart, Marianna hooked her arms around Sebastian's broad shoulders as he angled her over the reclined seat and into the back. The tinted windows offered additional privacy in their wooded hideaway. Spanish moss trailed from the marshy trees like sooty bridal veils, at once both beautiful and sad.

Raindrops pounded the roof in time with her blood gushing through her veins. Lips locked, she tumbled and twisted until they settled into the lengthy backseat, Sebastian's Beemer roomier than the Mustang convertible he'd driven as a teen.

They also didn't have an unplanned pregnancy confining their moves this time.

Sebastian looped his tie around her neck and tugged her toward him. Melting into the familiar feel of him, Marianna inhaled the spicy scent of his Armani aftershave, rich with whispers of how often she'd inhaled the same smell as it rode the steam of his morning shower. Greedy with the need to take all she could this one last time, hungry after months without his body, she explored Sebastian's mouth with her tongue as fully as her hands roved his shoulders, back, taut butt in pin-striped pants.

"Marianna, if you want to stop, say so now." A damp strand of brown hair fell over his brow in a downright blaring statement of rioting emotions from a man reputed to be the most ruthless litigator in the state of South Carolina.

"Don't talk, please." They would only start fighting. About his interminable hours at the law office. About her temper as flamboyant as some of the homes she decorated.

About how they had absolutely nothing in common except physical attraction and the precious babies they'd lost.

Thunder growled and he cupped her face in his hands, electric-blue eyes snapping sparks through her, echoing the snap of lightning overhead. "I need to hear you say it, that you want me inside you as damn much as I want to be there." His low growl spoke of his own strained control. "We have enough regrets without adding one more to the pile."

"I only know this is a heartbreaking day and I have to have *this*." She couldn't bring herself to say she wanted him, not after all the times she'd needed even just his presence only to spend another solitary evening on their balcony with only...

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