



THE
NEXT
WIFE

"Equally smart and savage, this is a lightning fast read."
—MARY KUBICA, *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

KAIRA ROUDA

PRAISE FOR KAIRA ROUDA

The Next Wife

“In *The Next Wife*, two women go ruthlessly head-to-head. Kaira Rouda knows how to create the perfect diabolical characters that we love to hate. Equally smart and savage, this is a lightning-fast read.”

—Mary Kubica, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Other Mrs.*

“Rouda’s talent for making readers question everything and everyone shines through on every page of her propulsive new thriller *The Next Wife*. Her narrators are sharp and unpredictable, each one with a tangle of secrets to unravel. *The Next Wife* will leave you tense and gasping, with a chilling twist you won’t see coming.”

—Julie Clark, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Last Flight*

“One of the most insidious, compulsive books I’ve read recently. Kaira Rouda has a way of drawing you in with great characters, fast-paced writing, and a story that won’t let you go. Brilliant, dark, and dazzling.”

—Samantha Downing, *USA Today* bestselling author of *My Lovely Wife* and *He Started It*

“One man. Two wives. Kaira Rouda has masterfully created cunning twists and sharp narration that take you on an unexpected and delicious journey and will leave you with a gasp. Devious and fun, *The Next Wife* should be the next book you read!”

—Wendy Walker, bestselling author of *Don’t Look for Me*

“I absolutely inhaled *The Next Wife*. Nail-biting suspense, dark humor, and family intrigue. I savored every page and now have the worst book hangover. Loved it!”

—Michele Campbell, internationally bestselling author of *The Wife Who Knew Too Much*

The Favorite Daughter

“Kaira Rouda’s husband, Harley, may have recently been elected to Congress, but she isn’t looking to make a name for herself just as a politician’s wife . . . The *Gone Girl*-style domestic suspense novel follows Jane, a narcissistic perfectionist dealing with the death of her daughter.”

—*Washington Post*

“[An] exceptional psychological thriller . . . suspense fans will be amply rewarded.”

—*Publishers Weekly*, starred review

“Will hit you right in the heart.”

—Bustle

“Rouda delivers a wickedly perfect thriller with *The Favorite Daughter*.”

—*Good Life Family Magazine*

“Delightfully wicked fun!”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

“Involving psychological suspense that reveals the cracks in what seems like a perfect life.”

—*Booklist*

“B. A. Paris and Shari Lapena fans will fall head over heels for this suspenseful psychological thriller set in an upscale Southern California community.”

—POPSUGAR

“In *The Favorite Daughter*, Kaira Rouda . . . provides a front-row seat to the riveting unraveling of an unhinged narcissist who will do anything to regain a picture-perfect image . . . Rouda’s portrayal of Jane is fabulously compelling and darkly hilarious, detailing her self-obsession and conceit . . . This amplifies the discomfort of witnessing Jane coming unwound, but it’s impossible to look away from the wreckage. The resolution is satisfying, but the ride is so diabolically twisted and entertaining that readers will be sorry when it comes to a stop.”

—Shelf Awareness

“Intense, creepy, and classic Rouda. A chilling story, told so well. Don’t miss it!”

—J. T. Ellison, *New York Times* bestselling author

“Leaves you wanting more.”

—Liv Constantine, bestselling author of *The Last Mrs. Parrish*

“A smart, wickedly plotted psychological thriller brimming with dark surprises.”

—Heather Gudenkauf, *New York Times* bestselling author

“Compulsively readable and deeply satisfying psychological suspense.”

—Christina Alger, *USA Today* bestselling author of *The Banker’s Wife*

“Alfred Hitchcock meets Patricia Highsmith in this masterful novel of psychological suspense. Quietly horrifying, tightly wound, and diabolical, *The Favorite Daughter* is a stunning page-turner.”

—A. J. Banner, *USA Today*, *Publishers Weekly*, and #1 Amazon bestselling author

“Crafty, unsparing, and gloriously Hitchcockian—a masterful glimpse into a world of privilege and appearance with a nasty edge.”

—Emily Carpenter, bestselling author of *Burying the Honeysuckle Girls* and *Every Single Secret*

“Both compelling and addictive, *The Favorite Daughter* is a roller coaster of a ride that will have you twisting and turning.”

—Liz Fenton and Lisa Steinke, bestselling authors of *Girls’ Night Out*

Best Day Ever

“A tensely written, shocking book that will hold readers on the edge of their seats to the very last page.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“This latest psychological thriller from bestselling Rouda is destined to fly off the shelves, enticing readers to ride along as this multifaceted day in the life of the Stroms unfolds.”

—*Library Journal*, starred review

“Darkly funny, scandalous, and utterly satisfying.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

“Rouda keeps the pace taut, the action spare, and the characters intense as she takes readers on an hour-by-hour recounting of a couple’s fateful getaway.”

—*Booklist*

“This uncomfortably creepy thriller from Kaira Rouda (*The Goodbye Year*) capitalizes on the current buzz about the prevalence of narcissists and psychopaths, and will surely leave readers wondering how well they really know their loved ones . . . adventurous thriller lovers and fans of Lee Irby’s *Unreliable* will find *Best Day Ever* a similarly mind-twisting walk on the sinister side.”

—Shelf Awareness

“It’s clear from the beginning that something sinister is going on in this novel, which will cost you sleep as you race through its pages. Chilling, satisfying suspense.”

—*Good Housekeeping*

“*Best Day Ever* is filled with suspense and mystery and is a fast-paced page-turner. You’re in for a treat with this new one from Kaira Rouda.”

—*Huffington Post*

“*Best Day Ever* by Kaira Rouda asks us just how well we know those who are closest to us.”

—Hypable

THE
NEXT
WIFE

OTHER TITLES 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

Her Forbidden Love

Nonfiction

Real You Incorporated: 8 Essentials for Women Entrepreneurs

THE
NEXT
WIFE
KAIRA ROUDA

 THOMAS & MERCER

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organizations, places, events, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

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

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PART 1:
TISH AND JOHN

CHAPTER 1

TISH

Despite popular notions to the contrary, it isn't easy being the next 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 opportunity 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 are both slim with shiny brown hair and big smiles. She is simply older by more than twenty years, a 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 voilà—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 keep our men, and some, well, they just don't. I will hang on. There will not be another wife.

Kate and I make eye contact, and I grin, reveling in the fact that 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 then 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 blonde 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 already is.

The conference room door opens again and in walks Lance Steel—our COO—bald, brilliant, and gorgeous. 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 I meet his stare. I'm not sure if he's attracted to me or if it's something else. I assume 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 on the opposite end from me at the large glass table. 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 the people at the table have been here since the beginning. Their tension and excitement are 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 in red on the sleeve, 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 beaming from his blue eyes like sunlight 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 100 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, charts and dry-erase marker scribbles cover the walls of this room in various bright colors. One of my jobs used to be wiping these walls.

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 EventCo going public, it matters. It matters very much.

"Look at her go!" John exclaims. I jump before realizing he's talking about the stock. Jeez, 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 business success stock photo to be sure.

But I don't see any cameras, unfortunately, even though they should be there. This is a huge moment for EventCo. John started the company with Kate twenty 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 \$1 billion in gross ticket sales last month. Successful beyond our wildest dreams, we offer 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 toiletries. The private plane waits for us at the airport. It will be nice to have a little weekend together in the mountains.

We have so much to talk about.

CHAPTER 2

JOHN

I take a deep breath and wipe my brow. My heart pounds in my chest as I realize it's all over.

I stand in this familiar conference room and look at the team—my team—and remember all we've accomplished. I spent my best years growing this business, and now, with the IPO, it's a bittersweet moment. Going public will change everything, that's what everyone tells me. I smile at Ashlyn, who narrows her eyes and glares at Tish standing next to me. I'm now aware that Tish is talking and that I should be the one doing so. I snap out of my reverie and jump in.

"Anyway, thank you from the bottom of my heart, to each and every one of you. I hope you're happy with your stock holdings. It's too late if you aren't," I add, noticing the ripple of tension zipping around the table. You can't please all the people all the time. But I tried, I really did. "And I know you know there is a lockdown period for the next ninety days, so no selling any stock before that. I predict three months from now our employee parking lot will be filled with shiny new cars."

A wave of "wow" and "no" flows through the room, and tense expressions give way to wonder. *What does it mean for me?* each of them is thinking. I know the feeling when reality sets in. Jennifer walks around the conference table handing out the rules and regulations packet governing initial public offerings and company executives. She's such an asset.

I note with relief that Kate seems at ease, too. I never meant to hurt her, and I've tried to tell her so lately. I'm not sure she believes me, but I have been making progress in repairing the mess I made. I hope so, at least. She tucks a strand of hair behind her ear. I love that habit. And I love that white suit. I wonder if she wore it today because it was my favorite.

My heart thumps loudly in my chest again, and I clutch the conference table for support while I continue watching my ex-wife. I hope her astronomical net worth will make her happy. Soften her heart a little. I can't really count it as my penance, though, can I? We built all this together. EventCo was our baby along with Ashlyn, our greatest achievement.

I remember my promise to my daughter: dinner tonight with her friend Seth. I can't wait.

Lance raises his hand as he stands. He's been a key part of our management team. He took a leap of faith to come to work here, leaving a publicly traded firm. Now, he's about to go full circle. "Are you and Kate staying on board?"

Kate leans forward and addresses her answer to me. "Of course. I'm not going anywhere. We have more innovations to roll out. Game-changing products. Isn't that right, John?" This has been our biggest fight of late. My ex-wife begged me to release her new product before the IPO. I refused.

Kate's Forever project is innovative, but we didn't need it for the IPO. It is expensive, and, well, I guess truth be told, I didn't want to share the IPO spotlight with a product launch. Does that mean I didn't want to share the spotlight with her? Of course not, but that's how she took it. Her instincts about what our customers want are on point and have been since day one. Despite the tension my decision caused, I hope she's happy now. Look at the stock climb.

I smile at Kate. Her eyes soften, and she winks at me. My shoulders drop with relief. We're still on the same team. Lately, more than ever.

I say, "Kate, I know you aren't going anywhere. And I can't wait to roll out the Forever project. It's brilliant. Like you."

"Thank you." Kate leans back in her chair and folds her arms across her chest. "I'm in for the long haul at EventCo. At least until Forever."

A ripple of laughter cuts through the tension in the room. If Kate can joke about her product launch being pushed back, we can all relax. I'm glad she understands. She's been so kind this week.

Kate adds, "EventCo is my life's work. My other baby, so to speak." My daughter rolls her eyes. Even so, I know she's proud of her mom and dad. "I'm glad we'll launch the Forever project soon. The market and our new investors will be impressed, along with our customers." Kate smiles at me, the gorgeous grin I first fell in love with all those years ago. It was her best feature and still is.

I forgot how much that smile could make my day.

Sandra Nguyen, our HR director, raises her hand. "I just want to say I'm here to review the rules regarding IPOs if anyone needs clarification."

A sigh rolls through the room.

I jump in. "Yes, there are rules as you all know. Be careful, but enjoy yourselves."

It used to be fun coming to work, but lately, I feel like I'm slowly dying. I need air, I need out of this conference room. I stare at the glass wall separating this room from the atrium, and I feel trapped. Like I'm an animal caged at the zoo. Look at him, the model CEO. White. Middle aged. I'm a cliché in so many ways and mostly by my own doing. Look at me, wearing all black as if I'm super hip when I'm not. And Tish keeps touching me, reaching for my hand, patting my thigh. It's annoying, unprofessional. The black leather bracelet she gave me feels like a handcuff.

Maybe her actions are especially annoying because it's a reminder of just how unprofessional I've been myself. I know she's doing it to anger Kate and Ashlyn. I used to return the affection, even in the office, in front of my family. I'm ashamed of myself.

My daughter stands by my side, a scowl on her face. I can't help but sigh.

"Dad, what did Tish mean about taking you away this weekend? We have dinner plans tonight, remember? With Seth? My back-to-college dinner?" Ashlyn says.

"Of course, honey. I'm not going anywhere. When did she say that?" I ask. Maybe I missed something. I haven't been myself this week. Stress does strange things.

"She just did. Here in the conference room. She was standing right next to you."

"I must have tuned her out," I say. "Look, Ash, I'll fix it."

My daughter's expression tells me she doesn't believe me.

I clap Lance on the back and say, "Let's join the rest of the employees for a drink. We're not going to get any work done around here for a few days." I walk out of the conference room, wiping beads of sweat from my brow.

In my daydream, I just keep walking and disappear.

CHAPTER 3

TISH

Rude.

John departs the conference room with Lance, abandoning me—and Kate and Ashlyn, for that matter—to walk out to the party. Once the baggage leaves, too, I hang back, watching the scene. Unfortunately, now I'm stuck alone with Sandra in the conference room.

“So much change,” Sandra says as she finally pushes away from the table.

“I know. I just want this to be over. Next phase and all.” I smile at her and flip my ponytail. I guess that's nerves. I also know she hates it. If I had a piece of gum, I'd pop it in my mouth and crack it. I know how to do that, learned as a kid. The problem is Sandra doesn't have to be nice to me when John isn't around. And she's not.

“Next phase? What would that be, exactly?” Sandra folds her arms across her chest. A smirk spreads across her face. Why does she always wear brown? She leans toward me and whispers, “Seems like you should be satisfied with this phase.”

Really, Sandra? John and I have been married for three years now. I'm not in the mood for this. She's on my last nerve. So many people are today.

I lean toward her. “What is that supposed to mean?” Although I've asked the question, I know what she thinks: I am an opportunist. The beautiful, winning, young second-wife type. And she's right for the most part. Except John seduced me. He did. Although it seems nobody around here believes that. Sandra and the rest of them all think I worked some sort of magic on John, took advantage of the poor man, yanked him away from his family. I did not make that first move. He did.

But as I said, it's not all fun and games being in my position. Nobody likes you, nobody believes you. I stare at my huge wedding ring, move my wrist so it sparkles at her. “You don't know anything about me.”

Sandra embraces her inner Sheryl Sandberg and leans in, too. I take a step forward. She says, “I know all about you.”

“No, you don't. I mean sure, you're the one who hired me to be John's assistant. So, thanks for that.” I'm tired of her and her insinuations. I've dealt with them since I started at the company five years ago.