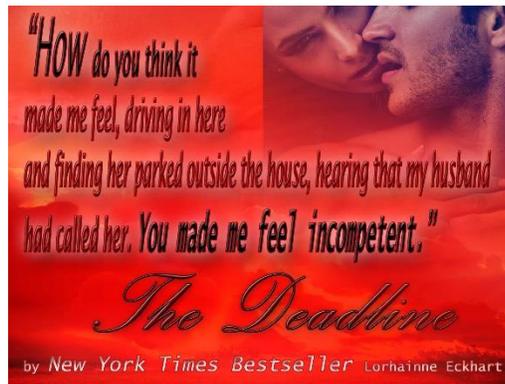


The Deadline Excerpt



“Everything’s loaded up,” Andy said as he strode into the hotel room. Laura was bundling up the babies and buckling them into the carrier. Gabriel was still lying on the bed, bundled in his coat, his pajamas on underneath. He still hadn’t shaken off the flu bug, but hopefully he’d start to feel better once they were settled in the house. “You ready yet?” Andy said. “I want to get there while it’s still early enough to do something.”

He realized it had come out a little sharp, as Laura flinched and hesitated before setting the buckle in place over the twins. Andy ran his hand over his face a couple times to try to ground himself.

“Why are you so irritated this morning? Did I do something?” Laura asked, sounding genuinely hurt.

Andy groaned. He really didn’t want to get into this right now. “You’ve been really tired lately,” he said.

“Yes, of course I have. I feel like a damn dairy cow. How many times am I up at night, feeding the babies—and during the day? If they woke up at the same time, I would be getting more sleep. But right now, I get one down and the other one wakes up. I’m sorry, Andy. I’m doing the best I can,” she said.

Well, now he felt like crap. Laura was all but falling over with exhaustion, and it didn’t help that he wanted to paw at her like some randy teenager. If he didn’t do something about this soon, the tension between them would ramp up and the distance between them would grow. The fact was that he needed her. “Okay,” he said, holding up his hand as if letting her know he’d decided what they needed to do. “First things first, we get settled in the house. Then, I’m going to hire help for the kids.”

Laura’s expression took on a hurt he hadn’t seen in a long time. Along with being tired—she was misunderstanding everything he said. “I’m not irresponsible, Andy,” she snapped. “I’m capable of looking after my own children.”

Yeah, she had definitely taken it the wrong way. He took a step closer to her, then another step, until he had backed her against the wall. He traced his thumb over her lip, her cheek, sliding his hand into her hair, taking in her startled green eyes. The weariness that had been there a second ago was now replaced with surprise, and he stepped closer still, pressing into her with all his hardness. Her breath caught. He rubbed his nose against hers, his warm breath fluttered across her lips, and her tongue flicked out and over her lower lip. He was so close to her, almost touching her, that she wrapped her arms around his neck, trying to pull herself closer. He started to lift her and was about to strip her right there when the baby squealed. He nearly dropped her, stepping back quickly and glancing at Gabriel, who was still asleep on the bed, his back to them.

“Oh my God. What the hell was I thinking?” he said.

Laura was standing there, dazed, and he wondered if the hint of pink on her cheeks was the start of a blush. She slid her hands through her short hair but didn't say a word as she stared at him, licking her lower lip again. Did she have no idea what she did to him when she looked at him like that? His eyes went instantly to her lush tongue, and his thoughts went running to images of his own tongue over her sweet lips, tasting her. Her eyes widened as she took in his arousal. He couldn't hide it, which only added to his agony.

“Andy, the kids...” she started.

“We're hiring help for the kids so you can get some rest,” he began, stepping toward her again, closer. He knew she understood his meaning. “If I don't get my wife back soon, well, let me be clear—my mood is unlikely to improve. I want you willing, rested, and an active participant when I have you under me again.” He set his hand around her chin and pulled her closer, nipping her lower lip between his teeth and kissing her deeply before stepping away. “Understand?”

She was out of breath. She swallowed, her cheeks flushed. “Yes.”

“Good,” he said.