

HIGH RISE NOVELLA FOUR

*Close
Enough*



Harper Bliss

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CLOSE ENOUGH

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Preview

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Warning: This title contains graphic language and f/f sex.

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ISABELLA

Isabella did not have a good feeling about this. She cradled the bag with two of Nat's favourite egg sandwiches from The Bean in one hand and stabbed the elevator button with the other. She'd stayed at the after-party at Volt following Nat's book launch until two a.m. before giving in to fatigue and, frankly, the overwhelming feeling that Nat didn't want her there. She'd ended up going home alone, leaving Nat with a slew of giggling admirers.

She had wanted to be the bigger person, a mature woman immune to bouts of jealousy. She had wanted to act her age—a wise almost fifty—but she'd had enough. And it had hurt like hell. Still, she felt as if she had to make up for it now.

She pushed the button for the forty-second floor while her heart thundered in her chest. Knowing Nat, she'd probably ignore the fact that Isabella fled her party, shoot her a crooked smile and gather her in her arms. Nat was really good at pretending things never happened. Isabella was starting to get the hang of it as well, despite it not being a quality she wanted to possess. No matter Nat's state of undress or the seductiveness of her glance, Isabella had to stand her ground. They had to talk.

She rang the bell, but nothing happened. Immediately, Isabella suspected that Nat hadn't come home. It was almost noon. That must have been quite a night. Anguish tightened Isabella's chest. She pressed the buzzer again and its piercing ding-dong caused her stomach to contract. Isabella turned on her heels and made for the elevator. Just as she pushed the button, the door to Nat's flat flew open.

"Where's the fire?" Nat looked like death warmed up. Her complexion was so pale it nearly blended in with the white walls of the hallway. She wore nothing but a long t-shirt barely covering her privates. If she was happy to see Isabella at all, there was no trace of that on her face.

"I brought you lunch." Isabella stepped closer and the smell of digesting booze hit her nostrils. She handed the bag of sandwiches to Nat, who accepted it with a look of bewilderment in her eyes.

They stood there for a few seconds like half-strangers, not a whiff of romance between them. Isabella couldn't help but wonder what the hell she was doing with the likes of Nat.

"Thanks." Nat shifted her weight from one bare foot to the other. "I'd invite you in, but the place is a mess. Why don't I come up later—"

The sound of footsteps behind her startled Nat. Isabella peered inside, believing it was Alex. Nat shut the door behind her as much as possible without locking herself out, but Isabella had seen enough. The woman inside Nat's flat was Asian, but it certainly wasn't Alex.

Anger flashed through Isabella's bones. She inched closer to Nat, ignored the stale smell on her breath, and stared her straight in the eyes. "If you don't want this to work, it won't." She spun on her heels and marched toward the elevator bank. She jabbed the button frantically. Of course both elevators had to make their way up from the ground floor.

"Wait." Nat pulled the t-shirt down as she followed Isabella, but it was too short to hide anything. Isabella could hardly stand to look at her. Did she really love this person? Was this what her life had become?

“Don’t bother.” She shot Nat an icy glare. “I know what you’re going to say and I’m not interested.”

Thankful to live in a new building with speedy elevators, Isabella ignored Nat’s defeated face and slipped inside the steel cabin as soon as its doors opened. As the doors slid shut, Nat slipped out of view.

Isabella blamed herself mostly. Nat had turned to her in her darkest moments and what had Isabella done? She had given in. While Nat wasn’t a client and, technically as well as ethically, Isabella had done nothing wrong, this whole outcome had been so predictable.

It’s not as if Isabella didn’t know that Nat was doing the very thing she’d just witnessed. It’s not as if, in the weeks they’d been seeing each other, Isabella hadn’t counted the ways in which their affair was doomed.

She entered her flat and glanced at the clock. Her only appointment today was at five p.m. so she had plenty of time to compose herself. And beat herself up about what had just happened.

NAT

The first thing Nat did after Isabella left was kick Cindy out. She couldn’t stand to be around her corny smile and Hello Kitty ways one second longer. After taking a shower, she stared at the egg sandwiches Isabella had brought her as if they held the answers to all her prayers.

She knew she’d gone too far. She’d hurt the one person who had truly understood her, the one woman who’d had the nerve to call her on her bullshit. Excuses and half-assed explanations wouldn’t work, but maybe a massive and long overdue mea culpa would. Either way, losing Isabella was not an option.

Nat made her way up to the penthouse and, heart hammering furiously in her throat, rang Isabella’s bell. Her heart nearly stopped when she heard Isabella’s heels approach, the click-clacking sound making her palms sweat and her blood pressure spike.

Isabella opened the door without saying anything. She spread it wide and walked to the sofa, where she sat down and waited for Nat to enter. She always looked so well put together, her make-up applied immaculately, her hair brushed to perfection and her skirts expensive.

Despite the shower and the clean jeans and t-shirt she’d put on, Nat felt scruffy, dirty even.

Nat closed the door and chose an armchair across from Isabella. She couldn’t look her in the eye just yet. What would she say? I’m sorry? And how could that ever be enough?

“I’m sorry,” she said, “that you had to see that.”

“Tell me something, please. Because I’m dying to know.” All compassion had drained from Isabella’s voice. The compassion Nat had craved so much. “I waited for you last night, for hours I stood by your side, which should have made it pretty clear that I wanted to end the night with you.”

“I know. I—” Nat pleaded.

“Let me finish, please.” Isabella crossed one leg over the other. “How long did it take you before you went home with that girl?”

“I don’t remember, really. But that’s not the point.” Nat squirmed in her seat.

Isabella shook her head. “I know we are very different and I’m fully aware that some things

have become second nature to you. I also know that you are scared out of your mind because of how you feel about me, but I won't be disrespected like that. No matter your motivations."

"If you want us to be exclusive, we can talk about that." Nat felt like a right douche-bag for saying that. Frankly, she had no idea what to say. It was so much easier to spend the night with a girl who barely spoke her language and didn't have the words to question her integrity.

"Exclusive?" Isabella puffed some air through her nostrils. "Give me a break." She uncrossed her legs and leaned her elbows on her knees. "Do you think I've been running around with other women since we started dating?" She stared Nat straight in the face. "Do you?"

"No." All Nat could do was shake her head.

"Let me break this down for you." Isabella sighed, but still wore her poker face. Nat had hoped to see a little bit more devastation. "This thing between us has absolutely no way of working. You're not ready by a long shot and I should never have confused my desire to help you with..." She paused. "With whatever it is I'm feeling for you." She glared at Nat and she looked achingly beautiful. "And in case you're wondering... Yes, you hurt me. And that's what we'll end up doing to each other if we don't end this now."

"Can I say something?" Hearing the word *end* stirred something in Nat's gut. "I'm well aware of my flaws and I fully realise I'm not an easy person to be with. I'm not making excuses for what I did and I'm sorry that I hurt and disrespected you. I really am." Nat hesitated. "But, damn it, we are good together and I won't give up on you so easily." Nat debated getting out of her chair and moving closer so she could at least touch Isabella, but thought better of it. "You didn't confuse your desire to help me with feelings for me. What happens when we are together is not confusion, Isabella. It's real and it's beautiful and it's the best thing that ever happened to me."

Isabella leaned back in the sofa. She swallowed hard. "Words, words, words. I know you get paid a lot of money to string them together in sentences on paper, but honestly, at this point, after what I've just seen, after I waited for hours for you to come home with me, they don't mean anything to me." Isabella's voice shot up. "I don't need any more words from you. Sure, we have good chemistry. We're good in bed together, but how dare you use that as an example when you just spent the night with someone else?" She half-shouted the last sentence.

Nat knew there was nothing else she could say. Isabella was right. The only way she could prove her love was by showing Isabella how she felt.

"I should never have let it come this far. That was my mistake." Isabella fiddled with the hem of her skirt. "Yours was to take me for granted a little bit too much." She fixed her gaze on Nat. "I'd like you to go now. There's nothing left to say."

"I'll go." Nat rose. "But this is not over, and you know it." She made her way to the door, heart racing and legs wobbly. Before leaving she cast one more glance at Isabella, whose face had gone red with fury. "There's no way I'm letting you go."

Nat sounded much more confident than she felt. She had no idea how to go about winning Isabella back, but she'd make it up as she went along. It was what she always did.

ISABELLA

Isabella watched the door Nat had walked out of. Part of her was curious to see what kind of fight Nat would put up, but mostly she felt too deflated to believe anything Nat had just said.

Nat had never made her any promises. They had certainly not rushed into their affair the way Maddie and Alex had—everything all at once. They'd both kept a certain distance. Isabella figured Nat's need for frequent nights by herself came from a place of self-preservation and fear. Isabella just deemed it normal. It wasn't even that she had expected Nat to be faithful from the get-go. It was more the glaring impossibility of it all.

Two people can feel attracted to each other and still make each other's life miserable. Isabella had seen it occur often enough. She'd spent hours listening to tales of misunderstood gestures and dashed expectations, because some people only want what they can't have. Isabella refused to be one of them. She dug her phone out of her purse and called Maddie, hoping she'd still be on her lunch break. Maddie picked up after one ring.

"Hey stranger, what was it like to party with the young all night?"

"Horrible." Isabella remembered feeling her age while she waited for Nat to wrap up one small talk session after the other. "It's over."

Silence on the other end of the line. Isabella waited for her words to register with Maddie.

"But... What?" Maddie's eloquence was the next thing to bite the dust that day.

"Nat obviously thought it much more exciting to take home Cindy from The Bean instead of me. At least I think it was her. I didn't really get a good look at her latest conquest when I brought her ladyship sandwiches for lunch."

"Jesus Christ." Silence again. "Are you all right?"

"What was I thinking, Maddie? Really? Where was my mind when I decided to hop into bed with Nathalie Orange? I've made mistakes before, but this was simply ludicrous." Isabella wasn't expecting answers. She was mostly just scolding herself. "But hey, I had my eye-opening experience and, trust me, I'm not making the same mistake again."

"What do you want to do tonight? Go out or kill a few bottles of Bordeaux at home?"

"Nothing too heavy. I'm seeing two clients before noon tomorrow." Isabella sighed. "And don't you have your regular Friday night personal training session? Now that you and Alex are all hunky-dory again?"

"Alex will understand. She will kill Nat for this, by the way. She doesn't raise her voice often, but there's nothing that gets under her skin more than infidelity. Cancel tomorrow's clients. I'm serious. And I'll bring a bottle of your favourite Scotch. We're going on a bender."

"I guess this qualifies as an emergency." Isabella wasn't sure if focusing on other people's problems would make her feel better or not. "Do send my apologies to Alex for snatching you away from her."

"Don't worry about that. She'll be too busy giving Nat a piece of her mind."

Isabella couldn't help but feel sorry for Nat. Alex didn't understand her the way she did. Isabella believed no one really did, but it was this kind of thinking that had landed her into Nat's bed in the first place. She ended the call with Maddie and rescheduled her Saturday appointments.

* * *

Isabella and Maddie sat overlooking the glowing lights of Victoria harbour from Isabella's terrace. Isabella didn't know about Maddie, but she hadn't been this wasted since the nineties.

"The sex was spectacular." She banged her empty glass onto the wooden table. "I mean, not just good, or fantastic, but unbelievably spectacular."

Maddie's mouth fell open, more in mock amazement than anything else. "Well, she's had a lot of practice."

Isabella was gone far enough to laugh hysterically at Maddie's remark.

"Listen to me, Maddie." Isabella tried to slant her body over the table in a conspiratory manner, but she just banged her chest against the edge. She ignored the pain flaring through her flesh. Nothing really hurt when you had half a bottle of Scotch diluting your blood. "Have you ever come so hard, it feels like a fountain of wetness gushes out of you?"

Maddie pondered this for a moment, before arching her eyebrows up. "You mean, you know, what's it called?"

Isabella nodded. "Yeah, exactly that." She leaned back against her chair, lost in a sea of drunken, but incredibly hot memories. "She's the only one who has ever done that to me." Isabella glanced at Maddie's perplexed face. "I had to buy extra sheets. They were drenched every other night."

Maddie started convulsing with laughter. Isabella gladly joined her, until she couldn't distinguish the tears born from laughter from the ones born from pain, frustration and disappointment.

"I've never..." Maddie sipped from her glass of Scotch. "I mean, that has never happened to me, nor to anyone who ended up in my bed." She searched for Isabella's eyes. "What's it like?"

Isabella wiped the tears from her eyes. "The first time it happened I was so shocked." She chuckled at the memory. "Of course, Nat was all cool and relaxed about it. Acting as if it was the most normal thing in the world. You know what she's like."

"Too cool for old-timers like us." Maddie clinked her glass against Isabella's.

"But once I got over the initial embarrassment of, well, spraying my wetness around, it was the most amazing feeling I've ever had. No kidding." Isabella refilled her glass. She was sure she was blushing, but it was dark and they were both plastered and it didn't matter. "On top of that, it was total surrender. I'll be fifty soon and I've seen a thing or two in my life. Then this skinny-jeaned hipster in her thirties comes along and makes me squirt all over her face. It's a very humbling experience." Isabella grabbed Maddie's hand over the table. "This is between us though, okay? Please, don't tell Alex about this."

Maddie raised two fingers. "I swear." She hesitated to ask the next question. "What's the secret? I mean, how did she... you know?"

Isabella clasped her hands together behind the back of her head. "I have absolutely no idea. And I forbid you to ask the expert."

They sat in silence for a few minutes. Isabella guessed Maddie was trying to figure out the best way to turn this new information into a treat for Alex.

"What are you going to do?" Maddie asked. "Have you closed the door on you and Nat

forever?”

“I believe she hasn’t left me much choice.” It hurt when she said it. Not because of the forthcoming absence of spectacular sex. Not even because Nat had slept with Cindy, and probably a few others since she started seeing Isabella. But because Isabella had glimpsed the good-natured, funny and kind, but ultimately helpless person hiding beneath Nathalie Orange’s brazen veneer.

NAT

Nat dragged herself to body combat class. She was tired, hungover and sad, but she figured it was the only place where she could corner Alex without getting too much of a mouthful. With lacklustre punches and half executed kicks, she made it to the end of Alex’s Friday night session. She sat wiping her brow on a bench outside the studio, when Alex approached.

Alex sank down next to her and sighed. “Oh, Nat. I really should have locked you in your room.”

“You could have tried, Pizza. I’d still have found a way to sneak a girl in. Really, you mustn’t blame yourself.” Nat shot Alex a weary grin. “Let’s go home so you can yell at me for a few hours.”

Alex put a hand on Nat’s thigh. “Don’t take this as my approval of your lewd, scandalous behaviour, roomie, but I think a talking-to is the last thing you need right now.”

“You really are a changed woman. I’m surprised we’re still on speaking terms, to be honest.” Nat curled her fingers around Alex’s hand.

“I’m not the one who got hurt. From what Maddie told me Isabella is livid, but I know that the person suffering most from the consequences of your actions is you, Nat. You don’t need a scolding. You need a plan of action.” Alex rose and pulled Nat up. “Come on, we need to get you your woman back.”

Nat stood speechless for a while before following Alex to the locker room. “Excuse me, lady in white tank top, who are you and what have you done to my self-righteous flatmate?”

“For some reason, more than three years after Claire left you, you still feel the need to sabotage anything good that comes your way. But I have eyes in my head and I know love when I see it. You’re crazy about Isabella and it looks like you need a little help aligning your actions to your feelings.”

A happy end-of-the-week buzz hung in the changing room. Several women in various states of undress greeted Alex, a few winked at Nat. She focused on getting her sweaty clothes off and hurried to the shower. She’d never expected Alex to cut her this much slack. She certainly didn’t feel as if she deserved it.

Nat cringed when they passed The Bean on their way home. “Another place I can never set foot in again.”

“Oh please, if that were an issue, you wouldn’t be able to go anywhere in this town anymore.” Alex slapped her on the shoulder. “Hey, there’s an idea.”

“Very funny.” Nat thought about what Alex had said earlier. “Do you really think I can win her back?”

Alex turned towards her. “Yes, I do. I mean, it’s not as if you’ve been trying like mad to keep

her so far.”

“Touché.” Nat hooked her arm through Alex’s.

“I know you’re not a big fan of them, but we will need some rules.” They fell in step together. Nat felt blessed to have someone as level-headed as Alex by her side. “No more girls.” Alex squeezed her arm. “Please, repeat after me.”

Nat giggled and held up two fingers. “From here on out, my goods belong to one woman only.”

“Goods? Really?” Alex shook her head. “You’re such a romantic.”

“And that banker on the forty-third floor is one lucky chick to have scored someone like you.” Nat squeezed Alex’s bicep.

“You should probably lay off the bottle for a while as well, as it tends to screw up your judgment.”

“No girls, no booze... sounds like something an esteemed doctor prescribed not too long ago.”

“Exactly, what better way to get her back than to play by her rules?”

“If only it were that simple.” Nat remembered the expression on Isabella’s face. “She was angrier than I’ve ever seen her, but more than that, she looked extremely disappointed. Disgusted even.”

They reached the entrance of The Ivy and waited for the elevator in silence. The lobby of a posh building was not a place to discuss winning back one’s lesbian lover.

“Here’s an idea,” Alex said as soon as they entered their flat. “Maddie’s at Isabella’s and they’re both hammered. Why don’t we go up there. She might be more pliable while intoxicated.”

“Are you nuts?” Nat’s heart pounded beneath her ribcage. “She kicked me out of there just a few hours ago.”

“Of course she did. She just spotted a half-naked barista thirty years her junior in your flat. What else was she going to do?” Alex put her hands on Nat’s shoulders. “Just stop by for a few minutes, show her you’re serious about getting her back. At least, she’ll know you’re not out on the town somewhere enjoying the attention of another girl.”

Words, words, words. Isabella’s outbreak still rang clearly in Nat’s ear. “Can I at least have a drink before we go up?”

Alex pouted her lips and brought her hands to her sides.

“Okay, okay.” Nat held her palms up. “The third rule is following the other two rules. Fair enough.”

“Do you have anything you can give her? Something meaningful?”

“This is why I need you, Pizza. I would never think of something like that.”

“Oh, I know. You’d just barge in, slap on a crooked smile and hope for the best. Those times have passed. This is serious. Make an effort.”

“All right, oh highly appraised Romantic Guru.” Nat looked around the flat. What could she possibly give to Isabella? It certainly couldn’t be a bottle of Scotch. Or a strap-on. She scanned the book shelves. Of course. “Hold on a second.”

Nat dashed to her office, flipped up the lid of her laptop and opened the document she’d been

working on last. After printing five pages of a work in progress no one had laid eyes on yet, she checked herself in the hallway mirror, and went to see Isabella, Alex by her side.

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