



Hating him is easy. Loving him is hard.

Derrick Hoffman never quite got over not having a relationship with his biological father. The woman he was seeing is pregnant, and there's no way he's going to let her raise his child without him—even if it means coercing her into marriage.

Eva Jacob made the mistake of falling in love with Derrick, a man she knows is incapable of love. After their breakup, she discovers she's pregnant. When she agrees to a loveless marriage, she tries to shield her heart from further pain. But she soon discovers that the heart wants what the heart wants, and her heart wants Derrick's love.

# *A Hard Man to Love*

by Delaney Diamond

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## Chapter One

As Eva Jacob left the house to go to work, she said a silent prayer of thanks that she hadn't thrown up her breakfast of buttered toast and ginger tea this morning. At almost four months pregnant, she was finally getting a bit of relief. Less than a month ago, she could hardly keep down any of her food.

Before her passing, her mother had told her stories about her own pregnancy with Eva, and she had worried she'd find her pregnancy equally as difficult. She was relieved her doctor's prediction she would feel better soon had finally panned out.

The drive to the clothing and accessories store in Pier Village on St. Simons Island, the largest of the Golden Isles off the coast of Georgia, took ten minutes. The village was the central location for cultural activities and commercial businesses on the island. Antique stores, souvenir shops, clothing stores, and restaurants lined the main street and the waterfront.

As Eva entered the store, the manager, Ms. Elsie, greeted her with a smile.

"How are you feeling today?" the older woman asked.

Eva started working for Ms. Elsie in February, after the hotel chain she'd worked for laid her off at the beginning of the year. As regional events coordinator, Eva had overseen all their special events in the southern part of the state of Georgia. Now she earned a fraction of her previous salary, and because she worked part-time, she didn't have any benefits. Ms. Elsie wanted to bring her on full-time, but the business didn't support such a move.

Eva walked behind the display case and placed her purse under the counter. "Better than usual. I think I might actually keep food in my stomach this morning. That's three days in a row."

"Bless your heart. It'll get better, sugar." Her sympathetic gaze lowered to Eva's stomach.

"She's not making it easy on me, that's for sure." Eva rubbed her belly, which didn't show any signs of her pregnancy.

Ms. Elsie laughed. "They never do. Just think, this is only the beginning. You still have the toddler stage, puberty, and the dreaded teen years to look forward to."

Her exaggerated shudder brought a smile to Eva's lips. "Don't rush me. I already have my hands full."

They chatted amicably as they went through their morning routine, preparing for the annual end-of-summer sale. Eva was in the midst of writing sale signs in a neat script to place throughout the store when the wind chime on the door tinkled an alert that a customer had entered.

She noticed the shift immediately as an intangible force stirred the air. The next stroke of the black marker in her hand remained suspended as she lifted her eyes toward the direction of the sound. A tall male figure stood in the doorway.

Derrick Hoffman.

She became a bundle of nerves as soon as she saw him.

Ridiculously beautiful, he had full lips and deep-set eyes that didn't miss a thing, and that *je ne sais quoi* all men wanted but most lacked. It oozed from his pores and had the ability to surmount the halfhearted objections of any woman. Make her forget her upbringing and drop her panties without a second thought and deal with the consequences later. She'd been one of those women.

The smoky blue-gray of his eyes, inherited from his white mother, found her brown ones. After putting down the marker, she rested her hands on the glass of the display case and asked, "What are you doing here?" at the same time Ms. Elsie inquired, "May I help you?"

For a moment, his eyes shifted to the older woman several feet away, but they slid back to Eva almost immediately. "You know why I'm here."

Eva willed her trembling fingers to remain still as she squared off against him behind the safety of the case. "No, I don't. Even if I did, right now isn't a good time. I'm working. Can we talk later?"

Eva could feel her manager's gaze and wondered what she thought. If Ms. Elsie guessed this was the father of her child, then she was correct. The last conversation with Derrick hadn't gone well, and she could only imagine why he'd decided to show up unannounced.

Derrick walked further into the store, his stride confident and sure. He planted himself in the middle of the dark carpet, feet set apart, as if he owned the place. He looked polished, elegant, and wore one of his pricey suits from London's famous Savile Row, hand-stitched to fit his muscle-packed body. The light complexion of his skin contrasted sharply against the black curls on his head.

His sharp eyes remained on her. "This is important. I'm sure your supervisor won't mind if you step out for a few minutes before the store gets busy."

His luscious mouth curved upward into a disarming smile, exposing a set of flawless white teeth. She knew from experience his warm smile concealed a cold heart, a point her quivering belly had forgotten. It only remembered how those same lips had kissed a path from her navel and lower, how for hours at a time he could make her forget the outside world and live only for the moments in his arms.

“I have no problem with it at all,” Ms. Elsie confirmed. Her admiring glance remained riveted on Derrick’s profile. Even Ms. Elsie had easily fallen under his spell.

Eva swallowed. “I’ll only be a few minutes,” she said to her boss, though the words were more for him than Ms. Elsie. She wanted him to know she had no intention of wasting a lot of time talking to him. They’d said everything they needed to on the phone.

She rounded the display case and self-consciously smoothed both hands down her dress. Derrick’s eyes followed the movement, but his face remained expressionless. He was a master at the art of concealing his thoughts.

They last saw each other in May, when he came into town for his sister’s wedding. He hadn’t invited her to go, and the lack of invitation made her realize she had to accept the true nature of their relationship, no matter how much she longed for more. They would never have the kind of relationship she wanted, because Derrick didn’t want a serious one. Even now the pain tore through her, the same as it had when she realized his feelings were nowhere near the extent of hers, and she’d made the foolish mistake of falling in love with him.

Eva swept past him, holding her head high and getting a good dose of expensive cologne. The citrus scent hurtled her back to more pleasurable times they’d spent together holed up in a villa on the beach during his visits to town. What a fool she’d been, holding on to the thought that somehow she was special, when she wasn’t even worthy enough to meet his family when they visited the island. He’d kept her hidden, like some kind of terrible secret. It was her own fault for agreeing to a nonexclusive relationship, but it still hurt like hell.

The town hadn’t fully stirred awake yet. Some of the shops were open, but most would remain closed for at least another hour. Eva stepped in front of the closed store next door so her boss couldn’t see them as they talked.

Derrick squinted down at her. “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine.”

“You don’t look fine.”

“Thank you.”

As if she didn’t feel bad enough, he had to insult her. She ran her fingers over her slicked-back hair. Her go-to hairstyle nowadays was a ponytail. It made life easier since she no longer had any disposable income to go to a hairdresser regularly. Had she known he would be coming today, she may have tried to look more presentable by fixing her hair and putting on a more attractive outfit.

“I didn’t mean it as an insult. You . . . Are you taking care of yourself?”

“Of course I am.” She stared out at the street and did her best to harden her heart because the sound of his voice did strange things to her insides, filling her with a raw, basic need that always surfaced whenever he came within ten feet of her. His concern tugged at her heart, and she felt weak, but she didn’t want to feel weak because Derrick was strong, and she needed all her strength to handle him. Whatever had brought him here, it couldn’t be good for her. “It’s been hard, that’s all.”

“Hard how?”

“I haven’t been able to keep down much food for the past couple of months. I actually lost weight.”

He made a noncommittal sound of frustration. “You need to take care of yourself. You’re pregnant.”

“I’m shocked at your concern.” She leveled an angry glare up at him. Her head came only to his shoulder. “I didn’t know you cared since you didn’t even believe I’m carrying your baby. The first words out of your mouth when I told you were ‘Whose baby is it?’ Followed up by my favorite, ‘So I’m supposed to believe it’s mine?’”

He rolled his neck, something he did whenever he wanted to alleviate tension. “It’s not the first time a woman’s tried to pin a baby on me, Eva. It comes with the territory when you have money.”

“Oh, poor Derrick. Is this the part where I feel sorry for you because you’ve been victimized by my gender? Well, I don’t. If you think everybody’s out to get you, that’s your problem, not mine.” She clenched her fingers into a fist. “What do you want? You must want something because like I told you over the phone, I never wanted to see you again, and I don’t want anything from you. My baby and I will be fine.”

“It’s my baby, too.” He spoke quietly, but his thinned lips showed his aggravation.

“And when did you come to that conclusion?”

He didn’t answer right away. “Once I had time to think, about you, about us.”

Us. Her short nails curled into her palm, shutting down the pain of her lost dreams. She’d learned the hard way the kind of pain loving a man like Derrick could cause.

“I realized you’re not the kind of person who would try to pass off another man’s baby as mine.”

“Lucky me, more than two weeks after you insulted me, you came to the realization that I told the truth. What took you so long?”

A sorrowful look entered his eyes. Within seconds, it disappeared. “I had to bury my father.”

Eva’s fingers flew to her mouth. “Phineas?” His father was the only member of his family she’d ever met. She’d met him once when she visited Derrick in Atlanta. He’d told her how Phineas had adopted him and raised him as his own after he married his mother, a woman thirty years younger than him. “I’m sorry.” The mumbled words seemed inadequate, especially when she wanted to reach out and put her arms around him in a comforting gesture.

He would never accept it anyway. In fact, the day after he’d told her the whole sordid story about Phineas, his mother, and his biological father, she tried to broach the subject again. He’d shut her down swiftly, letting her know the topic was off-limits, erecting the invisible walls again.

“That’s why I’m here,” Derrick continued.

Confused, Eva stared at him. “I don’t understand.”

“The past couple of weeks have been crazy since his death, but I finally feel like I’m getting my head above water. One lesson his passing has taught me is that life’s too short. I don’t want my child out there in the world, not knowing how much I want them.”

“Derrick, I would never keep the two of you apart,” Eva said in an earnest voice. “I told you as soon as I knew I was pregnant.”

Eva had thought she couldn’t have children, and coupled with irregular periods since puberty, she didn’t even suspect she was pregnant for the first three months. Only after she went to the doctor, complaining about tiredness and nausea, did she learn she was having a baby.

“Good, I’m glad to hear it. So you shouldn’t have any problem with my suggestion.” He stepped closer, eyes filled with purpose. Eva inhaled sharply, overwhelmed by his commanding presence. “I want my child to be with me at all times. I want us to get married right away.”

She gaped at him, thinking her hearing must be going bad. If she didn’t know better, she’d say he just asked her to marry him, but that would be ludicrous. A chuckle of disbelief broke past her lips, and she clamped her hand over her mouth when his face hardened.

“Did I say something funny?”

“I’m sorry, I could have sworn you asked me to marry you—sort of.”

“I did.” His solemn expression swiped the smile from her face.

“You—you can’t be serious. People don’t get married nowadays because they’re having a baby.”

“In case you didn’t notice, I’m not ‘people.’ No kid of mine is going to grow up without knowing me.”

“I agree, but I don’t see why we have to get married to ensure it.”

“Because I’m not satisfied with occasional visits. I want my son or daughter in my house, and I want to see them every day—not when it’s convenient for you.”

Eva stepped back, putting her hands up in a defensive motion against him. “Wait a minute. You’re serious about this?”

“I’ve had plenty of time to think, and it could work.”

“No, it can’t!” She swallowed to calm her frayed nerves. She sounded hysterical, while he remained as cool as a tall glass of iced tea. Before she would have welcomed a proposal—such that it was—but a wedding because of her pregnancy was the last option she’d ever considered.

Lowering her voice, she said, “We don’t have to get married. Besides, we don’t even—” She stopped, finding it difficult to say the words, but managing to muddle through. “We don’t love each other. We were already broken up when I told you I was pregnant. I don’t want to marry you, and you don’t want to marry me. Having a baby is not a good enough reason.” She took a deep breath and gradually released it. “We need to come to another arrangement.”

“All right,” he said, which only unsettled her nerves even more. She had a feeling she wouldn’t like his next words. “Then would you be willing to let me have the baby after it’s born?”

Her eyes widened, and she recoiled from him. “You really are insane, aren’t you?”

“What’s so insane about a man wanting his child?”

“Nothing, but—”

“Let me guess, a father’s not as important as a mother, right?”

“I never said that. I know how you feel because I never knew my father, either.” A common thread between the two of them, but whereas she’d seen it as a pain they could share, he never wanted to discuss it. “But a child needs its mother.”

“*And its father.*”

His implacable expression worried her, and she tried to mollify him. “And you’ll have all the access you want.”

“I don’t want *access.*”

“Well, if you think I’m going to hand my daughter over to you after she’s born, you are sadly mistaken.”

He froze, staring at her. “Daughter? You know for sure it’s a girl?”

Eva paused and nodded. “Yes. This week I found out I’m having a girl.” She’d chosen to get a 3-D ultrasound done to determine the gender of the baby.

His gaze lowered to her stomach. “A girl.”

He seemed stunned, as if hearing the sex of the baby really brought home the fact that a life was growing inside her. He ran his hand down the back of his head, across the black silk of his hair—hair she’d lovingly caressed with her own fingertips. She could almost feel the texture of it.

Eva’s voice gentled. “Derrick, I know why you’re saying these things, but you never have to worry about me cutting you out of your daughter’s life. She’ll know you love her. The relationship you didn’t have with your biological father has no bearing on your relationship with our daughter.”

He lifted his cool gaze to her face. “How much?” He pulled out his phone.

She frowned. “How much what?”

“How much will it take for you to give her up once she’s born? I can be very generous. I have my accountant on speed dial, and with one phone call, I can have any dollar amount you request transferred into the account you choose within minutes.”

He couldn’t be serious. “Wait, *what?*” Eva shook her head in confusion. “Did I hear you correctly? Did you just offer to *buy* my baby?”