

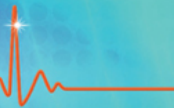


JANICE LYNN

Winter Wedding
in Vegas



**MEDICAL
ROMANCE™**



Janice Lynn

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Аннотация

Waking up married! Single mum Taylor Anderson loathes playboys. So when she wakes up in Vegas to find Dr Slade Sain, the hospital's most notorious womaniser, in her hotel room, she's horrified! And then, she spots a ring on her finger...! Marriage was never on the cards for Slade. But now he finds himself married to the most gorgeous woman he's ever laid eyes on! And when he meets her little girl, Gracie, his heart melts just a little further. Can a Christmas miracle turn this playboy extraordinaire into the perfect family man?

Dear Reader,

We've all heard that old saying: 'What happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas.' But it doesn't always ... Sometimes a girl marries the wrong man who might *just* end up being the right man!

Slade Sain is about as opposite to what Taylor Anderson wants in a man as he can possibly be. Except that he's sexy as sin, makes her feel good about herself, and he's a fantastic, compassionate oncologist. Now he's her husband. So this year all she wants for Christmas is a quickie divorce and for what happened in Vegas truly to stay in Vegas.

Slade dedicated his life to breast cancer research at the tender age of twelve, when his mother died from the horrible disease. He knows the path his life is destined to take. Getting married is a bump on that road he never intended to travel over. Sure, Taylor has always fascinated him—but he's a good-time guy, not a for ever kind of man. She's vulnerable, a single mum, and still believes in Christmas. He should have known better. Only maybe his heart has been headed in the right direction all along ...

I hope you enjoy their story, and that Santa stuffs your stockings with all the things you really want.

Merry Christmas!

Janice

Winter Wedding in Vegas

Janice Lynn



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To my favourite nurse, Joni Sain!

You rock!!!

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EPILOGUE

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CHAPTER ONE

DR. TAYLOR ANDERSON woke from the craziest dream she'd ever had. Apparently sleeping in a glitzy Las Vegas hotel stretched one's inner imagination beyond all reason.

Married. Her. To Dr. Slade Sain.

As if.

The man was such a player, she wouldn't date him, much less consider a more serious relationship with the likes of him. Sure, he was gorgeous, invaded her deepest, darkest dreams from time to time, but the man's little black book had more phone numbers than the Yellow Pages.

If and when she married, no way would she make the same relationship mistakes she had made during medical school. Never again was she walking down that painful path of inevitable unfaithfulness from a man she should have known better than to trust.

Yet her mind warned that last night hadn't been a dream, that she had married Slade.

Last night she'd drowned her awkwardness around him. She rarely drank, but she'd felt so self-conscious surrounded by Slade and her colleagues in a social setting, that she had overimbibed.

She didn't think she'd been out and out drunk, but she hadn't been herself.

These days, the real her was quiet and reserved, steady and stable. Responsible. Not the kind of woman to go to a tacky Sin City year-round Christmas-themed wedding chapel and marry a man she respected as a brilliant oncologist, had found unbelievably attractive from the moment she'd first laid eyes on him, but thought as cheesy as the Jolly Old Saint Nick who'd, apparently, also been an ordained minister. Who knew?

Mentally, she counted to ten, took a deep breath, and opened her eyes. She was in her hotel room queen-size bed and Sexy Slade Sain was nowhere in sight.

She glanced at the opposite side of the bed. The covers were so tangled, who knew if there had been anyone other than herself beneath the sheets? Just because she usually woke with the bedcovers almost as neat as when she'd crawled between them didn't mean a thing. Really.

She wasn't in denial. No way.

Neither did the fact she was in the middle of the bed, sort of diagonally, and sprawled out. Naked. What had she done with her clothes?

What had she done with her naked body?

A knock sounded on the door leading out of the room. Feeling like she was suffering a mini-heart attack, Taylor grabbed at the tangled sheets.

"Room service," a male voice called through the door.

Room service? She pulled the covers tightly around her body. She hadn't ordered room service.

The bathroom door opened and a damp, dark-haired pin-up calendar model wearing only a towel—dear sweet heaven, the man had a fine set of shoulders and six-pack!—undid the safety chain.

Slade was in her hotel room. Naked beneath the towel and he was buff. The towel riding low around his waist, covering his perfect butt, his perfect... She gulped back saliva pooling in her mouth.

Despite her desperate clinging to denial of the cold hard facts she'd been willfully repressing, she knew exactly what she'd done with her naked body. What she'd done with *his* naked body. Why her bedsheets were so tangled. The details of how she'd come to the conclusion that marrying Slade was a logical decision might be a little fuzzy, but she'd known exactly what she'd been doing when Slade's mouth had taken hers. Hot, sweaty, blow-your-mind sex, that's what she'd done. With Slade. As much as her brain was screaming *No!* her body shouted, *Encore!*

"That was quick," Mr. Multiple Orgasms praised the hotel employee pushing a cart into the room. He stopped the man just inside the doorway. "I'll take it from here."

The pressure in Taylor's head throbbed to where at any moment she was going to form and rupture an aneurysm. Slade's wife. This had to be a nightmare. Or a joke. Or a mistake they could rectify with an annulment.

Could a couple get an annulment if they'd spent the night in bed, performing exotic yoga moves with energetic bursts of pleasurable cardio?

She closed her eyes and let images from the night before wash over her, of Slade unlocking her hotel room door, sweeping her off her feet, and carrying her to the bed and stripping off her clothes. She'd giggled and kissed his neck when he'd carried her across the threshold. Then he'd kissed her. Really, deeply kissed her. Even now she could recall the feel of his lips against hers, the feel of his body against hers, his spicy male scent. Heat rose, flushing her face, ears and much more feminine parts.

They so wouldn't qualify for an annulment.

Wow at the moves the man had hidden inside that fabulous body. His hands were magic. Pure magic. His mouth? Magic. Just wow.

She cracked open an eyelid to steal a peek. He tipped the man from Room Service from his wallet on the dresser, closed the door, turned and caught her staring.

"Morning, Sleeping Beauty." He gave a lopsided, almost self-deriding grin. "Some night, eh?"

She groaned and pulled a pillow over her head to where she just peered out from behind it. "Tell me that wasn't real."

He shrugged his magnificent shoulders. "That wasn't real."

Dropping the pillow but hanging on tightly to the sheet, she let out a surprised sigh of relief.

"But if by 'that' you're referring to our wedding at the North

Pole Christmas Bliss Wedding Chapel—” the words came out with a mixture of amusement and shock, as if he couldn’t quite believe what they’d done either “—well, according to our marriage certificate, that was very real.”

Keeping the covers tucked securely around her, Taylor sat up. A wave of nausea smacked her insides. He stood there looking sexy as sin and she was going to barf. Great. Just flipping great.

“One minute we were kissing in the limo surrounded by Christmas music and that crazy peppermint spray the driver kept showering us with, the next we’re getting married so we could have sex. Great sex, by the way. You blew me away.” His blue eyes sparkling with mischievous intent, he moved toward her and she shook her head in horrified denial.

“Get back,” she warned, covers clutched to her chest with one hand and the other outstretched as if warding off an evil spirit. Sure, there was a part of her that was thrilled that he’d enjoyed their night as much as she had, but it was morning. The morning after. And they’d gotten married. “That’s crazy. We didn’t have to get married to have sex.”

Pausing, he scratched his head as if confused. “Not that I don’t agree with you, but that’s not what you said last night in the limo.”

The movement of his arm flexed muscles along his chest and abdomen and sent a wave of tingles through her body, but that wasn’t why she gulped again. She was just...thirsty? Parched. Still fighting the urge to barf. Forcing her eyes to focus on his face and not the rest of him, she blinked. The flicker of awareness in his

blue eyes warned he knew exactly what she had been looking at, what she'd been thinking, and he wasn't immune to her thoughts.

"You told me you wouldn't have sex with me unless we were married," he reminded her.

She had said that. In the midst of his hot, lust-provoking kisses she'd thrown down her gauntlet, expecting him to run or laugh in her face. "So you married me?"

He glanced down at the cheap band on his left hand and shrugged. "Obviously."

Not that he sounded any happier about it than she felt, but someone should shoot her now. She was wearing a ring, too. A simple golden band on the wedding finger of her left hand. Because she was married. To Slade.

Slade was not the man of her dreams, was not someone she'd carefully chosen to spend the rest of her life based upon well-thought-out criteria. He was exactly what she avoided even dating because men like Slade didn't jibe with her life plans. How could she have had such a huge lapse of judgement?

The metal hugging her finger tightened to painful proportions. At any moment her finger was going to turn blue and drop off from lack of blood flow. Seriously.

She went to remove the ring, but couldn't bring herself to do it. Why, she couldn't exactly say. Probably the same insanity that had had her saying "I do" to a man she should have been screaming "I don't" at. Besides, she'd probably have to buy a stick of butter before the thing would budge.

“We should talk about this.” He glanced at his watch. “But we have our presentation in just over an hour. You should eat.”

She glanced at the bedside table’s digital clock. Crap. She’d slept much later than normal. Then again, she’d stayed up much later than normal.

Nothing had been normal about the night before. It had been as if she’d been watching someone else do all the things she’d done, as if it had all been a fantasy, not real.

“You have to go to your room,” she told him, needing to be away from his watchful blue gaze.

“I’m in my room.” He shifted his weight and her attention dropped to where the towel was tucked in at his waist. His amazing, narrow waist that sported abs no doctor should boast. Abs like those belonged on sport stars and models, not white-collar professionals who saw cancer patients all day. “Last night we arranged for the hotel staff to move my things into your room while we’re in class today.”

They had stopped by the front desk and requested that. Wincing, her gaze shot to his.

“No.” She was going to throw up. Really she was. How was she going to explain this to Gracie? She grimaced. “I don’t want you in my room.”

“Understood.” He looked as if he really didn’t want to be there either. “But we’re married.”

“Married” had come out sounding much like a dirty word, like someone who’d just been given a deadly diagnosis.

Guilt hit Taylor. She had told him she wouldn't have sex with him unless they were married. But wasn't marriage a bit far for a man to go just to get laid? He had a busy revolving door to his bedroom so he couldn't have been that desperate for sex. He must have been as inebriated as she had.

"How did we end up married?" she asked, pulling the bedcovers up to her neck. The less he could see of her the better. She already felt exposed.

"You told me you wanted to have sex with me, but that you wouldn't unless we were married. Our elfish limo driver said he knew a place that could take care of a last-minute license and we happened to be right outside it. We got married and had sex. You know this. You were there."

If she'd been into one-night stands, last night would have been amazing. But she wasn't. She was a mature, professional doctor who had learned her life lessons the hard way and had a beautiful little girl she was raising by herself to prove it. She'd vowed she wouldn't have sex again without being married first. Had she foolishly believed marriage would protect her from future heartbreak?

She'd wanted Slade so much. Had possibly wanted him for months, although she'd never admitted as much to herself. When their pointy-eared three-and-a-half-foot-tall limo driver had taken them to the chapel, she'd looked at Slade, expecting him to laugh at her condition.

When she'd seen him actually seriously considering marrying

her just to have sex with her, a big chunk of the protective ice she'd frozen around her heart had melted, leaving her vulnerable and wanting what she'd seen in his eyes. Whether it had been the alcohol, the Christmas magic everywhere, or just Vegas madness, she'd wanted to marry Slade the night before. It made no logical sense, but she'd wanted him to want her enough to walk down the aisle to have her.

"We were drunk," she offered as an out. "We can get an annulment because we were drunk."

His expression pained, he narrowed his gaze. "Maybe."

His hands went to his hips and, again, she had to force her eyes upward to keep them from wandering lower than his face. The man was beautiful, she'd give him that.

"I wasn't sober," she persisted, clinging to the fact that she hadn't been in her right mind. She wasn't in her right mind now either. Her head hurt and, crazy as it was, she wanted him, but she couldn't tell him that. "Regardless, I want a divorce."

* * *

Raking his fingers through his towel-dried hair, Slade eyed Taylor grasping the covers to her beautiful body as if she expected him to rip them off and demand she succumb to his marital rights whether she wanted him or not. Did she really think so poorly of him? Despite the fact he'd not been able to say "I do" fast enough the night before, he didn't want to be married any more than she apparently did.

Probably less.

Sure, he'd been attracted from the moment he'd met her. But although he'd have sworn she felt a similar spark, she'd brushed off his attempts to further their relationship.

Until last night.

Last night she'd looked at him and he'd felt captivated, needy, as if under a spell he hadn't been able to snap out of.

He took a deep breath. "A divorce works for me. A wife is not something I planned to bring back from Vegas."

Or from anywhere. He had his future mapped out and a wife didn't fit anywhere into those plans. He'd dedicated his life to breast-cancer research and nothing more.

Marrying Taylor had been rash—the effects of alcohol and Las Vegas craziness—and wasn't at all like his normal self. Women were temporary in his life, not permanent figures. He preferred it that way.

A divorce sounded perfect. His marriage would be one of those "what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas" kind of things.

Thank goodness she didn't harbor any delusions of happily-ever-after or sappy romance. They'd chalk last night up to alcohol and a major lapse of judgment.

Maybe there really was something about Vegas that made people throw caution to the wind and act outside their norm. Or maybe it had been the smiley little elfish limo driver, who'd kept puffing peppermint spray into the car, telling them they were at the wedding chapel that had made the idea seem feasible. Had the spray been some type of drug?

“Good.” Taylor’s chin lifted a couple of notches. “Then we’re agreed this was a mistake and we can get a divorce or an annulment or whatever one does in these circumstances.”

“I’ll call my lawyer first thing Monday morning.” Relieved that she was being sensible about calling a spade a spade and correcting their mistake, he pushed the room-service cart over next to the bed and stared down at a woman who’d taken him to sexual heights he’d never experienced before. Maybe that peppermint stuff really had been some kind of aphrodisiac.

Even with her haughty expression, she was pretty with her long blond hair tumbled over her milky shoulders and her lips swollen from his kisses. Until the night before he’d never seen her hair down. He liked it. A lot.

He liked her a lot. Always had. He’d wanted her from afar for way too long. Despite the whole marriage fiasco, he still wanted her. Even more than he had prior to having kissed her addictive mouth. She’d tasted of candy canes, joy and magic. Kissing her had made him feel like a kid on Christmas morning who’d gotten exactly what he’d always wanted.

Which was saying a lot for a man who hadn’t celebrated Christmas since he was twelve years old.

“Now that that’s settled, there’s no reason we can’t enjoy the rest of the weekend. Let’s eat up before this gets cold.”

The covers still clasped to her all the way up to her neck, she crossed her arms over her chest. Her eyes were narrow green slits of annoyance. “Don’t act as if we’re suddenly friends because we

both want a divorce. We're not and we won't be enjoying the rest of the weekend. At least, not the way you mean."

"Fine. We won't enjoy the rest of the weekend." He wasn't going to argue with her. "But we're not strangers." Ignoring her I-can't-stand-you glare and his irritation at how she was treating him as if he had mange, he lifted the lid off one of the dishes he'd ordered and began buttering a slice of toast. "I've been working with you for around a year."

"You see me at work." She watched what he did with great interest. "That doesn't make us friends. Neither does last night."

She had to be starved. While satisfying one hunger, they'd worked up another. He'd ordered a little of everything because he hadn't known what she liked. Other than coffee. Often at the clinic, he saw her sipping on a mug of coffee as if the stuff were ambrosia. Funny how often he'd catch himself watching for her to take that first sip, how he'd smile at the pleasure on her face once she had. He'd put pleasure on her face the night before that had blown away anything he'd ever seen, anything he'd ever experienced.

"You make your point." He sat down on the bed and waved a piece of buttered toast in front of her, liking how her gaze followed the offering. "But as we're in agreement that we made a mistake, one we are rectifying, I don't see why we can't be friends and make the most out of a bad situation."

Scowling, she shot her gaze back to his. "You and I will never be friends."

She grabbed his toast and took a bite, closed her eyes and sighed a noise that made him want to push her back on the bed and, friends or not, taste her all over again.

Perhaps she'd prefer it if he told her how much he was enjoying how she'd just licked crumbs from her pretty pink lips? How much, now that he knew disentangling himself from their impromptu marriage wasn't going to be a problem, he was anticipating making love to her again, because for all her blustering he wasn't blind. She'd looked at him with more hunger than she had the toast. Whether she wanted to admit it or not, she was as affected by him as he was her. They had phenomenal chemistry.

She leaned toward the tray, got a knife and a packet of strawberry jam, then nodded while she spread the pink mixture on what was left of her toast. Not an easy task because she refused to let go of where she clutched the bed covers, which seemed a bit ridiculous to him since he'd seen every inch of her. Seen, touched, tasted.

Slade swallowed the lump forming in his throat and mentally ordered one not to form beneath his towel. "In case you need reminding, we had a good time last night."

"I didn't."

"Don't lie." He'd been there. She hadn't faked that, couldn't have faked her responses, and he wouldn't let her pretend she had. "Yes, you did."

"Okay," she conceded with a great deal of sarcasm. "You're

good in bed. Anyone can be good if they get lots of practice and we both know you've had lots of practice."

"Lots of practice?" He hadn't lived the life of a monk, but he didn't go around picking up random women every night either. Sure, he never committed, but the women he spent time with knew the score. He wasn't the marrying kind and avoided women who were. "You want to discuss my past sex life?"

"Not really." Her face squished, then paled. "Although I guess we should discuss diseases and such."

He arched his brow. "You have a disease?"

"No." She sounded horrified enough that he knew she was telling the truth. They should have discussed all this the night before. And birth control. Because for the first time in his life he hadn't used a condom. Because for the first time in his life he'd been making love to his *wife*.

Slade's throat tightened. He'd not only gotten married the night before but he'd had sex without a condom. How stupid could he have been?

Was that why the sex had been so good? Because they'd not had a rubber barrier between them? Because they'd been flesh to flesh? He didn't think so. There had been something more, something special about kissing Taylor.

Besides, they'd used a condom the first time. It had been their subsequent trips to heaven that had been without one. He'd only had the one condom in his wallet and they'd still been high under the Las Vegas night air—or whatever foolishness had lowered

their inhibitions.

“Do you?” she asked, sounding somewhere between terrified and hopeful his answer would be the right one.

“I haven’t specifically gone for testing recently.” There hadn’t been a need. He had never had sex without protection before her and didn’t engage in any other high-risk behaviors. “It’s been a year or so since my last checkup, but I do donate blood routinely and have always checked normal.”

His answer didn’t appease her and she eyed him suspiciously. “When was the last time you donated?”

“About two months ago.”

Relief washed over her face. “No letter telling you about any abnormal findings?”

He shook his head. “No such letter. What about you?”

Her gaze didn’t quite meet his. “I’ve only been with one man and that was years ago during medical school. I’ve been checked a couple of times since then. I’m clean.”

As unreasonable as it was since he was no saint and they were going to end their marriage as soon as possible, the thought of Taylor being with anyone else irked him. A surge of jealousy had his fingers flexing and his brain going on hiatus.

“He didn’t have to marry you to have sex with you?”

CHAPTER TWO

SLADE INSTANTLY REGRETTED his sarcastic question, especially when, with a pale face and watery eyes, Taylor glanced down at the plain gold band he’d put on her hand the night before.

“No, Kyle didn’t marry me, but I did believe he was going to spend the rest of his life loving me. Silly me.”

The fact that she’d been heartbroken by the jerk rankled Slade. Good thing she didn’t want this marriage any more than he did. He’d hate to think he’d hurt her like that fool had. Regardless of what the future held for them, he didn’t want to cause Taylor any pain. That much he knew. “What happened?”

She shrugged and the sheet slipped off one shoulder to drape mid-upper-arm. “He didn’t marry me or spend the rest of his life loving me. End of story.”

Hardly, but he wouldn’t push. Such sorrow laced her words that his chest squeezed tighter. “I’m sorry.”

“I’m not.” Masking her emotions behind an indifferent expression he suspected she’d perfected over the years since her breakup with the guy, Taylor picked up a spoon and scooped up a mouthful of eggs. “He was an arrogant jerk.”

Her lips were wrapped around the spoon and another jolt of jealousy hit him as she slowly pulled the utensil from her mouth.

She picked up a strawberry and bit into the juicy fruit. “Mmm. That’s good.”

“Speaking of good...” He watched her pop the rest of the berry into her mouth and lick the juice from her fingers, and struggled with the desire to do some licking of his own. “Last night really was spectacular, apart from the whole getting-married thing.”

She met his gaze, nodded, then deflated. “Oh, Slade, what have we done?”

Hearing her say his name caused flashbacks from the night before. Until then, he'd never heard her say his first name. He liked the sound. "We got married, but we can correct that. We will correct that. As soon as legally possible."

"It's crazy that we got married. Why did we do that? We aren't in love, barely know each other and I don't even like you."

He gave a wry grin. "All this time I just thought you were waiting on me to win you over to my way of thinking."

"Professionally maybe, but not romantically."

"Professionally, I'm a good oncologist."

"You are." She winced. "I didn't mean it like that."

"Then what did you mean?"

"Just that I always thought you were a flirt and didn't take life seriously."

"I take my job very seriously." His work was the most important thing in his life and always would be. "I care a great deal for my patients and like to think I provide them the best care possible."

"You do. It's just that..." Her voice trailed off.

"It's just what?"

"I guess I let your personal life influence how I viewed you professionally."

"What do you know of my personal life?"

Her face reddened. "Not much. Just gossip really."

"Not that you should believe gossip, but what do the gossips say?"

“That you date a lot of different women.”

“You think I shouldn’t?”

She sighed and looked somewhere between disgusted and desperate. “What I think about your personal life doesn’t matter. We’ll get a divorce and no one ever need know about any of this.”

Thankful that she was so practical about the whole thing, Slade nodded. “Agreed. We’ll figure the legalities out on Monday and end this as painlessly as possible.”

She eyed him, then gave a hopeful half smile. “Maybe we’ll get lucky and there’s some kind of ‘just kidding, I’ve changed my mind because I was stupid in Vegas clause.’”

* * *

Thank goodness Slade felt the same as she did. They’d made a horrible mistake, knew it and would make the best of a bad situation.

Not that she could believe he’d married her.

The man was gorgeous, amazing in bed, could have any woman he wanted and usually did, according to her female coworkers who loved to discuss the handsome oncologist’s love life latest. Why would he have married her? Taylor was admittedly a stick-in-the-mud, boring homebody. Her idea of fun was a good book while soaking in a bubble bath or playing with Gracie. Her ideal life would bore him to tears. No confetti and blow horns anywhere in her reality or her ideal future.

From what she knew about Slade, they couldn’t be more opposite.

Opposites attract.

She winced at the inner voice in her head playing devil's advocate. Okay, so she'd admit she wanted to rip Slade's towel off and have that encore performance. Not that she did anything more than wrap the sheet around her, grab the cup of coffee from the tray, and, head held high, strut into the bathroom to take her shower.

Of course, that only reminded her that his naked body had been under this hot stream earlier and had she wakened in time she could have joined him. Her husband.

What a joke.

But right now she had to get her act together, because they were presenting to a group of oncologists, pharmacists, marketing representatives and others on the benefits of a new cancer-fighting drug they'd been researching.

At some point today she should probably tell Slade that not only had he become a husband the night before, he'd also become the stepfather of a precious six-year-old little girl.

She winced.

Yeah, that might shock Slade enough to have him scrambling around in hopes of finding a twenty-four-hour Vegas divorce court.

Although she had a photo of Gracie on her desk at work, she doubted Slade had ever been inside the room, that he'd ever had reason to be in her personal office. Yes, they worked in the same multifloor cancer clinic. But prior to their being chosen to go to

this conference to discuss the research being done at their facility, they'd not really interacted except when he'd sent her running by asking her out.

Because she avoided men like Slade.

Had for years.

The last time she hadn't, she'd ended up pregnant and alone.

Nausea hit her. After their first time she and Slade hadn't used birth control. He'd only had the one condom, and they'd been too delirious to acknowledge the ramifications of unprotected sex.

How stupid was she? Was he?

The timing in her menstrual cycle wasn't right for pregnancy, but she wasn't so foolish as to think it wasn't possible.

Her hand went to her bare belly. Was she? Had she and Slade made a baby? Dampness covered her skin that had nothing to do with the shower water. She loved Gracie with all her heart, would do anything for her precious daughter, but she'd never planned to have more children. Not without finding a man who met all her criteria for Mr. Right, which included what kind of father he'd be to Gracie.

Then again, she'd never planned to get married to a man she barely knew either, and she'd done that.

Her parents would be so proud. Ha. Not. Her actions this weekend would just once again affirm their disappointment in her.

She finished rinsing her body, then stepped out of the shower and eyed the half-empty cup of coffee.

She picked up the cup and, with great sadness, poured the lukewarm liquid down the sink drain.

No more coffee or anything else that wasn't healthy for a pregnant woman until she knew for sure one way or the other that she and Slade hadn't created a new little life.

* * *

Slade leaned back in his chair and watched the impressive woman woo the crowd with her smiles and witty sense of humor.

Taylor went through the slide presentation she'd put together on the data their oncology clinic, Nashville Cancer Care, had collected on Interallon, a new experimental cancer-fighting drug they'd been successfully administering as part of a larger nationwide research trial. Remission rates of metastatic breast cancer had increased by 40 percent in patients who'd received the trial medication over current treatment modalities. They were hopeful FDA approval would be soon so the medication could be administered more widely.

Taylor pushed back a stray strand of pale blond hair behind her ear and pointed a laser at the current slide, referring to a particular set of data.

He'd slid his fingers through that soft, long hair last night. Not that you could tell just how long or lush her hair was with the way she had it harshly swept up. Neither could you tell how gorgeous her big green eyes were behind those ridiculous black-rimmed glasses she wore. Definitely you couldn't tell how hot and passionate her body was beneath her prim and proper gray

pantsuit and blazer.

She epitomized a professional businesswoman presenting data to a crowd of health-care professionals who couldn't possibly appreciate how amazing she was.

Slade scanned the crowd, noticing several of the men watching her with a gleam in their eyes. Well, maybe some of them did see just how amazing she was, but he pitied them. She was his. His wife.

He couldn't believe he'd gone that far.

He usually had no problems with women, but Taylor had always been different. For months he'd not been able to convince her to give him the time of day and he had tried. Repeatedly, he'd struck up conversations only to have her end them and avoid him.

She made a comment, misspoke a word and poked fun at herself, getting a laugh from their audience. Slade skimmed the crowd, noticing several of the men seemed to be further enchanted by the woman on stage.

Green slushed through his veins, clogging the oxygen flow to his brain. Had to be since he sure wasn't thinking straight because his brain—or was it just his male ego?—was screaming, *Mine. Mine. Mine.*

“Now...” She flashed another smile at the crowd, pulling them further under her spell. “I'll turn the podium over to Dr. Slade Sain to present specific case studies and then we'll field any questions together.”

They walked past each other as he took the podium and she

returned to sit in the seat next to his at a table that had been set up at the front of the auditorium. He tried to meet her gaze, to smile at her and tell her what a great job she'd done, but she kept her gaze averted, purposely not looking at him.

Which annoyed Slade.

He stewed all the way to the podium and then did something almost as stupid as slipping a golden band around a woman's finger when he had nothing to offer her but more broken dreams.

"Ladies and gentlemen, give my wife a round of applause for the great job she just did."

Taylor's face paled.

Slade's face probably did, too. What had he just done?

Several of the people in the audience who knew them gasped in surprise. A few called out their congratulations.

When their gazes met, Taylor looked annoyed, but then she pasted on a smile for the crowd.

Their colleagues and class attendees settled down and, despite the horror bubbling in his stomach that he'd just made their mistake public, Slade got serious. He believed in the benefits of Interallon and wanted others to have the opportunity to significantly benefit from the still-experimental medication. Despite whatever was going on in their personal lives, it was his and Taylor's job to educate their colleagues, to get others involved in the medication trials, as the pharmaceutical company pushed to have the FDA expedite approval.

He went over their case studies, answered questions, then

pointed to one of their colleagues whose hand was raised with a question. The doctor had started out with him and Taylor the night before, but they'd ditched him and a handful of others when they'd left in the limo.

"Sorry to change the subject off Interallon, but when did you and Dr. Anderson get married?"

"Last night." Slade glanced toward Taylor. Her green eyes flashed with anger beneath her glasses, but she kept a smile on her lovely face. No doubt he was going to get a tongue-lashing when the presentation finished. He deserved one. He wanted to scream and yell at himself for his stupid remark, too. "Next question."

The man raised his hand again and spoke before Slade could call on another person. "You and Dr. Anderson got married last night? When you left dinner, you got married?"

Taylor stood, walked over to the podium, and took the microphone. "Dr. Ryan, you'll understand if Dr. Sain and I request personal questions be saved for a later, more appropriate time. Right now, we prefer questions regarding Interallon and the success our clinic and the other clinics involved in the trials taking place are having with this phenomenal resource in our battle against a horrific disease."

Put in his place, the man nodded. Taylor immediately called on another person and fielded a question about the medication being used in conjunction with currently available treatments.

"At this time, the studies using Interallon in conjunction with

other cancer-fighting modalities are just starting to take place. Nashville Cancer Care will be heading up one of those trials early next year.”

Another flurry of questions filled the remaining time and no one brought up their nuptials again until after the class was over. Several of their colleagues shook their hands, patted their backs and gave them congratulations.

“I didn’t see that one coming,” Dr. Ryan commented, looking back and forth between them. “I didn’t even know you two were seeing each other.”

Slade narrowed his gaze at the other man. Cole Ryan had been one of the men eyeing Taylor on stage as if she was a piece of candy to be devoured. A growl gurgled in Slade’s throat, but he managed to keep it low.

Taylor closed her laptop and picked up a file folder with her notes inside. “I prefer to keep my personal life private. Obviously, Dr. Sain and I disagree on that particular issue.”

“Dr. Sain?” Ryan chuckled, then slapped Slade on the back again. “Your wife calls you Dr. Sain?”

Slade glanced at Taylor’s scowl, the stiff set to her shoulders and the tight line of her mouth. He was an idiot. He deserved her anger. He didn’t even know why he’d made the stupid announcement. Other than the fact that he’d been overcome with jealousy. “When she’s upset.”

“Trouble in paradise already. That’s a Vegas wedding for you.” The man laughed again, not realizing just how much he was

getting on Slade's nerves. Odd, as he usually liked the doctor, who also practiced in Nashville.

"Well, congrats anyway." Cole gave them a wry look. "For however long it lasts."

Slade packed up his briefcase and followed Taylor from the conference room and down the long hallway that led out into the hotel's main lobby.

Ignoring the lush Christmas decorations and colorful slot machines scattered around the huge lobby, Taylor didn't say a word directly to him until they were alone in the elevator. Then she rounded on him, opened her mouth to speak, then stopped, closed her eyes in disgust and took a deep breath. When she opened her eyes again, anger still flickered there. "How dare you make that little announcement during our presentation?"

"I shouldn't have said anything."

"You made a joke of our presentation," she accused, practically snapping at him.

"No, I didn't." He would never intentionally do anything to take away from the importance of Interallon and the results they were getting with the medication.

"Yes, you did. Rather than paying attention to what you were saying, half the people in the room were busy Tweeting that we'd gotten married."

"You're exaggerating." He hoped she was exaggerating.

"Really?" She dug in her bag and held up her phone. "This thing has been buzzing like crazy since you made your little

comment. Forget the fact that our marriage is a sham, but how dare you make a mockery of my work?"

"That's not what I was doing." Guilt hit him. She was right. They were getting a divorce as soon as it could be arranged. The fewer people who knew of their mistake the better. He'd been out of line to say anything.

"That's exactly what you were doing." She looked as if she'd like to hit him, but instead just gritted her teeth and made a sound that was somewhere between a growl and a sigh.

"You're right," he agreed with sincerity and regret. "I shouldn't have said what I did. I'm sorry, Taylor."

That seemed to take the steam out of her argument, as if she hadn't expected him to apologize. Rather than say more she just rolled her eyes upward, her long lashes brushing the lenses of her heavy-framed glasses.

The elevator beeped and the door slid open. She practically ran out. Slade followed, his eyes never leaving her as she marched to her door, dug in her bag for her room key card, then slid the card into the slot. He got there just as she pushed open the door and went inside, not waiting for him.

Slade hesitated only a second, then caught the door before it closed, and went inside to try to repair the damage he'd done.

He wasn't very good at this husband thing.

Good thing he didn't plan to be one for long.

CHAPTER THREE

TAYLOR GLANCED AROUND her hotel room and wanted

to scream. Those weren't her things.

They were Slade's things.

Her blood boiled. How could he have been so stupid as to have announced that they'd married? She'd just wanted to have a quiet quickie divorce. She had not wanted anyone to know. Now everyone knew. Right before Christmas. Ugh.

She threw her bag down on her bed, wincing when she recalled her laptop was inside. She clicked on her phone to see who the latest text was from. Her parents? No doubt they'd hear of her latest "major life mistake" soon enough.

The text was from Nina. Great. Had her friend said anything to Gracie? She prayed not. No way did she want Gracie to know what an idiot she had for a mother.

Married in Vegas to a virtual stranger. Brilliant example she was setting for her impressionable young daughter. Shame on her. No doubt her parents would remind her of that over and over.

I just read that you married Slade Sain! Is that true? Hello, girlfriend, have you been holding out on me? I didn't know you two were an item and I'm your best friend!

"We need to talk."

Clutching her phone, Taylor spun at Slade's words. "You need to get out of my room."

"This is our room."

"Get out," she repeated.

"Taylor." He raked his fingers through his hair. "I'm sorry I messed up. You're right that I shouldn't have said anything."

Unfortunately, I did and I can't take the words back."

"I didn't want anyone to know I married you!"

Something akin to hurt flickered across his face. "Not that I want to be married any more than you do, but am I such a loser that you're ashamed of me?"

Surprised that he sincerely looked offended, Taylor sank onto the foot of the bed and sighed. "This is crazy. I don't want to argue with you, Slade. I don't want to say hurtful things. I don't want you here. I don't want to be married to you. I don't want anyone to know. I don't want to face our colleagues at this dinner tonight, knowing that they're going to be watching us."

"That's a lot of 'I don't wants,'" he mused, his voice gentler than before. He knelt down on the floor in front of her. His eyes searched hers. "What is it you do want, Taylor?"

Although he wasn't touching her, his nearness made her insides tremble. Probably from disgust that she'd married him. "To forget this ever happened and to not be married to you of all people."

"Of all people? Ouch."

"I'm sorry if I'm wounding your ego, but don't pretend that it's anything more than that," she pointed out, wishing he'd move away from her. How was she supposed to not look at him when he was right there, kneeling in front of her? "Yes, we had sex together and it was good. But we aren't in love and we won't ever be. This was a mistake and what's worse is that it's now a public mistake." Oh, how she hated that anyone knew how big a mistake

she'd made. "And above all else I don't want Gracie to find out."

Confusion furrowed his brows. "Who's Gracie?"

She might as well tell him. "My daughter."

Shock registered on his face and for a moment she thought his knees were going to give way. "You have a daughter?"

"Yes, I have a daughter." She snorted. Just as well Slade wasn't the man of her dreams, because his reaction to the news of Gracie would have killed any chance he had.

Face a little blanched, he shook his head. "You don't have a kid."

He sounded so confident in his immediate response that Taylor wanted to laugh. Only she wasn't feeling very amused at the moment. She was feeling crowded with him so close to her and annoyed at his reaction.

"Sure I do." She narrowed her gaze, hoping he'd take the hint at how much she disliked him. "Perhaps you noticed the stretch marks along my hips last night when we were..." Her cheeks heated. Crazy after the things they'd done the night before that she couldn't bring herself to say the word *sex*.

But whereas she was annoyed, his expression remained shocked. "You have a beautiful body, Taylor." His tone was as gentle as it had been before, but there was a dazed look to his eyes. "And no more stretch marks than other women have with fluctuations in weight of a few pounds."

He would know.

Ugh. She hated it that her mind went to him with other

women. But, then, he did go through women just as fast as Kyle had, so why wouldn't her mind go there? He was a player. A player she had married and was going to divorce.

"Puh-lease." She didn't even attempt to hide her sarcasm. "I've given birth. I know my body changes. I don't know what game you're playing, but get real."

"You have a beautiful body, Taylor," he repeated, so matter-of-fact that something cracked deep inside even if his words only meant he hadn't really looked at her.

"The body of a woman who has had a baby. If you'd paid attention last night, you'd have realized that."

He ignored her snap, stood and paced across the room. When he turned to look at her, he didn't meet her eyes. "When?"

"Gracie is six."

The skin on his face pulled tight. His jaw worked back and forth in a slow grind. "The guy in medical school?"

She nodded and couldn't hold in her bitterness. How dared Slade look at her with accusation in his eyes? He had no right to judge her! "Give the man a prize. Of course he's Gracie's father. I told you he was the only man I'd ever been with."

"There are other ways women become mothers, Taylor," he pointed out, his voice level and patient, even though color stained his cheeks at her outburst. "A strong, successful woman like yourself may have decided to have a child and sought a fertility clinic, for all I know."

Strong, successful woman? Ha, what she really wanted to do

at the moment was curl up into a ball and cry. How strong and successful was that?

“Because, like I’ve said, you don’t know me. This just proves my point.”

His jaw flexed again. “A point I tried to correct on numerous occasions, but you didn’t want to let me know you.”

“Of course I don’t want to let you know me. You’ve ruined my life.” She was crying now. She didn’t want to cry, but from the moment he’d made his comment about his “wife” during their presentation and her phone had started vibrating in her bag, she’d wanted to cry. There was no more holding the tears back. Yep, strong and successful, that was so her. Just ask her parents.

“Please, don’t cry, Taylor.” He sounded almost as lost as she felt. “I want to make you smile, not cry.”

The last thing she wanted was to cry in front of him, but she couldn’t make the tears stop. She cried for her parents and how embarrassed they were going to be by her. Again. She cried for Gracie and how her mother’s moment of stupidity would affect her. And she cried for herself, that she’d been so easily led astray after six years of living an exemplary life.

“Tell me what I can do to make things better.”

“Go away,” she immediately informed him.

He stared at her for long moments then gave a slight nod of his head. “I’m sorry I’ve upset you, Taylor. I’ll go for now. I have a meeting at noon anyway, but I will be back later to change for dinner. I hope you’ll be ready to talk, because whether we like

it or not we are married, people do know and we need a game plan on how best to deal with this so that it has the least negative impact on both our lives.”

* * *

“I heard a rumor today.”

Slade winced. He should have known better than to answer the phone when he'd seen who was calling. “Hey, Dad.”

“Is what I'm hearing true, son?”

“Depends on what you've been hearing.”

“You married?”

How did he answer his father? The best man he'd ever known through and through. A man who cherished the bonds of marriage, a man who had lost his precious wife, Slade's mother, to cancer, and carried that bond still in his heart, despite the fact he'd remarried several years back to a good woman.

Slade couldn't lie to his father. “Guess some rumors are true.”

Silence ticked over the phone line.

“Have to admit I'm surprised,” his father said slowly. More silence. “She pregnant?”

Slade's face heated. Not that he could blame his father for asking. Everyone who really knew him knew he'd never planned to marry, that he had dedicated his life to medicine, to finding a cure for a disease he hated.

“Not that I know of. She does have a kid, though.” Hadn't that one been a shocker? Not only had he married but he'd also become an instant father. Not that it really mattered. He wasn't

likely to meet Taylor's daughter. They'd divorce, pretend as if none of this had ever happened, and that would be the end of their Vegas mistake.

Which was exactly what needed to happen, so why did the image of Taylor's tears flash through his mind and make him wish life was different? That he was different?

Then again, hadn't he learned at twelve years old that wishes didn't come true? If they did, his mother would still be alive because he'd wished more than any kid had ever wished. He was sure of it.

More silence.

"For a man who just got married, you don't sound very happy. You okay, son?"

Okay? Again, the image of Taylor's tear-streaked face popped into his mind. No, he wasn't okay. He'd married a woman he wanted physically, cared for as a person and whom he didn't want to damage emotionally. "I'm fine."

"You're not in some kind of trouble, are you?" Worry weighed heavily in his father's words. "This is just so unexpected."

Slade could almost laugh. "I'm not in trouble, Dad."

At least, not the kind his father meant.

"Well, then, congratulations."

Congratulations. Because he'd gotten married. And become a father. Why did his tie feel as if it was strangling him?

He couldn't even respond to his father's comment.

"She must be something special," his dad continued.

Images from the night before flashed through Slade's mind, images of sharing laughter with Taylor, of holding her hand as they'd climbed into the limo to leave the hotel, of kissing her in the back of the limo, of how his heart had pounded in his chest as he'd slid a ring onto her finger and promised to have and hold her forever...

Maybe he was in trouble, because as much as he didn't want to be married, didn't want to think about the fact she was a mother, he did want Taylor in his life.

If only she weren't so complicated. If only they hadn't gotten married.

"Taylor is special," he admitted, then realized just how much he'd revealed in his three softly spoken words.

"I'm glad to hear that. After your mother died you avoided getting close to anyone. I'm glad you've met someone worth the risk."

Slade's ribs threatened to crush the contents of his chest they constricted so tightly. He hadn't avoided getting close to anyone. He'd just made a conscious decision to dedicate his life to finding a cure for breast cancer. His father didn't understand that. Maybe no one could. But to Slade, doing all he could to prevent others from going through what his family had was his number-one life priority.

"Dad, I hate to cut you short." Not really a lie. He loved his father, enjoyed talking to him normally, just not today, not when he was reeling from the past twenty-four hours, from the fact he'd

woken up with a wife and a kid. “But I’m on my way to my dream job interview with Grandview Pharmaceuticals.” A dream job that would give him every opportunity of achieving his number-one life priority. “I’ll give you a call next week when I’m back in Nashville.”

* * *

“Hello, my darling, how was school today?” Taylor said into the phone to her daughter. The first rays of happiness were shining that day.

“Good,” the most precious voice in the world answered. “Aunt Nina said I was very smart.”

Although she was no blood relation, Gracie had called Taylor’s best friend “Aunt” for as long as Taylor could remember.

“Aunt Nina is right. You are a smart girl. And a very pretty one.”

Gracie giggled. “You always say that.”

“Because it’s true.”

“I miss you, Mommy.” Gracie’s voice sounded somewhere between sad and pouty. Taylor could just picture her daughter’s expression, see the sadness in the green eyes that were so similar to her own.

“I miss you, too.” More than words could convey.

“When are you coming home?” Gracie demanded.

“I’ll be flying home tomorrow evening. You and Aunt Nina are picking me up from the airport.”

“Are you bringing me a prize? Aunt Nina said if I was good

while you were gone that I'd get a present."

"Aunt Nina said that, did she? So close to Christmas? Well, I'm sure if she said that, then she's right."

Gracie talked to her a few minutes more, then handed the phone to Nina.

"She's something else, isn't she?" Nina immediately said into the phone.

"I hope she's not been too much trouble," Taylor told her best friend.

"Are you kidding me? I've loved having her here. She's helped me decorate my house and you know me, I'm one of those who never has things done the week after Thanksgiving. This year, I'm way ahead of the game, and she and I have had a blast getting everything done."

Taylor understood. Gracie was a blast and loved Christmas almost as much as her mother did. No doubt the little girl had garlands and lights strung all over Nina's apartment.

"Good. When they told me I would be going on this trip, my first thoughts were what I'd do about Gracie. I've never left her before."

"Are you sure your first thoughts weren't about getting an early Christmas package from a certain sexy oncologist? Or perhaps the two of you just got carried away beneath some Vegas mistletoe?"

Taylor sighed. She had known Nina would ask about Slade. Especially since she hadn't answered a single text message from

Nina or any of her other friends and colleagues. What was she supposed to say? *Yes, I messed up again. It's what I'm good at when it comes to the opposite sex.*

"You might as well tell me, because you know you're going to. Best friend, remember?"

"I remember."

"So what's up with you becoming Mrs. Dr. Sexy?"

Taylor winced. "Please tell me you didn't ask me that in front of Gracie."

"She's watching her favorite television program and is totally oblivious to what I'm saying."

"Don't count on it. She picks up on a lot more than people give her credit for."

"Fine, I'll walk into the kitchen." There was a short pause. "Now, tell me if what I read was true."

"It's true."

Nina squealed. "You and Dr. Sain got married? How romantic! Tell me everything."

"There wasn't anything romantic about it." Which wasn't exactly true. Drunk or not, he'd been sweet when he'd slid the wedding ring onto her finger, had lifted her hand and placed a kiss over the gold band. Just the memory goose-bumped her skin.

"You got married to the sexiest man we know and there wasn't anything romantic about it?"

She sank her teeth into her lower lip. "Not really."

"Which means there was at least something romantic going

on,” Nina concluded. “Hubba-hubba. This is huge. You got married. I can’t believe it.”

“That makes two of us.”

“This is so unlike you. You’re, like, never spontaneous. I just...” Nina paused and Taylor could just imagine her friend shaking her head while she tried to make sense of what was being said. “So, tell me the details. How in the world did you and Dr. Sain get married?”

“A bunch of us had dinner, went to watch a Christmas show and then I ended up in a limo with Slade. We drove to a cheesy year-round Christmas wedding chapel and exchanged vows. Alcohol was involved.”

Nina moaned. “Please tell me it wasn’t a drive-through ceremony.”

“It wasn’t.” Although if it had been, would it really have mattered? “Santa Claus married us.”

“Santa?”

“An impersonator, but, yes, Santa. There were even elves snapping pictures and throwing fake snow at us.” Ugh. Taylor rubbed her temple. “What am I going to do, Nina? I got married last night.”

“Celebrate the fact that you married the hottest guy around and will be the envy of every female at the clinic?”

“I’m serious.”

“Me, too. So, how was he?”

“Nina!”

“That good, huh?”

“That good,” Taylor agreed, unable to lie. “Better than any man should be.” Better than she’d thought any man could be. He’d set her body aflame and made her ache for more. “But I can’t stay married to him.”

“Why not?”

“We never should have gotten married in the first place. We were under the influence and made a huge mistake. Besides, he is about as opposite from what I want in a man as possible.”

“You want ugly, not sexy and not good in bed?”

“You know what I mean.” Would her temple please stop throbbing?

“Fine. I know what you mean, but you did get married. Show a little more enthusiasm, please. Didn’t you joke last year after Christmas that you should have asked Santa for a man? Well, girl, you must have been at the top of the nice list this year for Santa to have delivered Slade Sain.”

She did recall joking with Nina that she should have asked Santa for a man. She didn’t want to be alone, raising Gracie without a father. But she’d much rather that than to have let the wrong man into her life. She sighed.

“We’re going to get a divorce just as soon as it can be arranged.” She twisted the gold band on her left hand. Why hadn’t she taken it off? Why did it feel seared to her very being?

“Too bad.”

Taylor pulled back her phone to stare at it. “I can’t believe you

said that. I made a horrible mistake last night. Can you imagine what my parents are going to say?”

“Who cares what they say, Taylor? You can’t keep trying to make up for disappointing them by getting pregnant out of wedlock. These are modern times. Women have kids without being married. You finished school and have made a great life for you and Gracie. If your parents can’t see what a wonderful woman you are, then phooey on them.”

In theory, Taylor knew her friend was right. In her heart, she hated to disappoint her parents again. They were devoutly religious, had the perfect marriage, couldn’t understand how she’d let herself become pregnant out of wedlock and although they loved Gracie, they’d never let Taylor forget how disappointed they’d been.

“I know you, Taylor,” Nina continued. “I’m not sure how you and Slade ended up married. There must have been some major Christmas magic in the air last night. But quit stressing and enjoy the rest of your honeymoon before planning your divorce. Reality will set in soon enough.”

“I’m not on a honeymoon and reality set in first thing this morning.”

“Technically, you are on your honeymoon,” Nina pointed out. “You got married last night.”

Taylor dropped backward onto the bed. “Crap. You’re right. I’m so stupid.”

“You’re the least stupid person I know.”

Taylor just groaned.

“Obviously, there was something between you two last night that triggered the ‘I do’s,’” Nina pointed out in her ever-optimistic way. “You married a superhot guy who you had really great sex with and now he’s your husband. Why not quit worrying about the details and the pending legal ‘I don’t’s and just enjoy your honeymoon?”

If only life were that easy. “You don’t mean that.”

“Why wouldn’t I? You never do anything for yourself, Taylor. You’re always working or doing things for Gracie. For the next twenty-four hours don’t worry about anyone but yourself. The act is done. You’re married and on your honeymoon with a hunk. Take advantage of that, of him and his skills. What’s going to happen in the future is going to happen regardless of whether or not you grasp hold of what life’s presented to you on a silver platter. Or, in this case, what Santa’s wrapped up in a pretty bow. I say go for it, work off some long-overdue steam, and make some memories before going your separate ways.”

Ugh. Her friend almost made sense. Almost. “You’re not helping.”

“Sure I am. I’m just not saying what your determined-to-be-a-prude ears want to hear.”

“I hate it when you’re right.”

Nina squealed again. “So, you’re going to do it? You’re going to let your hair down and rock Dr. Sain’s world?”

She wasn’t so sure she could rock his world, but he had seemed

to enjoy the night before. They had been hot.

“I’m not sure I know how to let loose anymore,” she admitted, positive it was true. She enjoyed life, but all her free time did revolve around Gracie. “And I didn’t say you were right that I should let my hair down. Just that what you were saying wasn’t what I wanted to hear.”

“You want me to tell you that you should hightail it back home and file for divorce without indulging in some fun with your husband first?”

File for divorce. Pressure squeezed her heart. People in her family didn’t divorce. They didn’t get pregnant out of wedlock and they didn’t marry virtual strangers in Vegas and they didn’t divorce. That was her family.

But she would be three for three because she would be filing for divorce. To pretend otherwise was ridiculous. She and Slade had suffered lapses of judgement, clouded by lust and alcohol. That much she could admit to. She’d wanted him last night. When he’d kissed her, she’d melted and forgotten everything but him.

“I’m waiting for an answer.”

Taylor’s grip on her cell phone tightened. “I’m a mother, Nina. Regardless of what I want, I can’t just go around indulging in fun whenever I want to. It’s not that I don’t want to indulge in fun, because I do.” Oh, how she wanted to imbibe more of Slade. “He was amazing. An affair with him would be amazing, but I need to end this without doing anything that might complicate things.”

“Too late. Things are already complicated.”

Taylor’s gaze shot to the open hotel room door and the man who stood there. Crap. When had he opened the door and how much had he overheard?

“Sorry, Nina, but I’ve got to go.” Her gaze latched on to Slade’s and she refused to look away even when that’s what she wanted to do. How was it he made her feel so on edge with just a look? “My husband just walked in.”

CHAPTER FOUR

FRUSTRATED, SLADE STARED at the woman lying on the bed. Clicking off her phone, Taylor slowly rose to a sitting position. Which was exactly where he’d left her.

She’d left the hotel room, though. He’d gone to a presentation, had sensed her sneaking into the meeting room and had turned to catch her sliding into a seat in the back of the auditorium. When the meeting had ended, he’d glanced her way. She’d been gone.

He’d forced himself to go to all the programs he’d marked on his agenda, even though he’d had a difficult time staying focused on what the presenters had been saying. At noon, he’d had an interview with Grandview Pharmaceuticals, the company that owned Interallon and that was renowned for their headway in the fight against cancer.

John Cordova, the older man who’d interviewed him, had commented on how they needed someone dependable, someone able to make long-term commitments, to see things through, to fill the position. The man had then congratulated him on his

recent marriage.

Slade had withheld the fact that his marriage wasn't a long-term commitment but a mistake. He'd gotten the impression that a divorce so quickly following his marriage wouldn't have won him any brownie points in Cordova's eyes.

His phone call with his father played through his head. His father was going to be so disappointed in him when he told him the truth.

His temple throbbed ever so slightly. He found himself wishing he could lie on the bed beside Taylor, talk to her about the interview, about his goals and dreams, about his mother and how much he missed her, about the concern in his father's voice and how he hadn't had the heart to tell him that his marriage was over before it even started either. He wanted to talk with her the way they had the night before because talking to her, being with her, had felt so right.

Too bad Taylor was staring at him as if he were a serial killer.

Last night had been different. When she'd looked at him, he'd seen something more. That something more had triggered some kind of insanity. She'd wanted to have sex with him, and that knowledge had shot madness into his veins. She'd challenged him with her condition about marriage and, gazing into her eyes, he'd lost his mind and the ability to walk away from the temptation she'd offered.

He had the feeling that before all was said and done, his insanity was going to cost him a lot more than he'd bargained for.

She cleared her throat, reminding him that he had been staring at her for way too long.

“I need to change for the dinner program.”

A semiformal conference farewell that was more socializing than anything else.

“That’s fine.” She watched him from behind her big glasses, which he’d really like to lift off her face so he could better read her expression.

“Not really, but I guess for the next day we don’t have a choice. The hotel is sold out and I don’t plan to move to another hotel.”

She nodded as if she’d already known. Perhaps she’d called the front desk and asked.

Slade had never been an awkward kind of person. Usually, he could come up with something funny to say, something to smooth over any situation. This wasn’t any ordinary situation, though. This was him standing in a hotel room with his wife, whom he didn’t want to be his wife and neither did she want to be his wife.

He raked his fingers through his hair then, shrugged.

“I’ll just grab my suit and change.” He opened the closet door and removed a garment bag. “I’ll hurry in the bathroom so I won’t interfere with you getting ready. If you’re going, that is.”

“I’m going.”

He nodded and turned toward the bathroom.

“With you.”

He paused, but didn’t turn around. “Why?”

“As far as the world is concerned, we’re happy newlyweds. If

we go separately, we'll have to answer too many questions. I don't know about you, but I've dealt with enough questions about our marriage already today."

Slade looked up at the ceiling, counted to ten, then turned. "That's my fault. I'm sorry. You're right. I prefer not to raise questions, but even if we're together, people are going to be curious."

"You're right, but at least if we're together we can keep our story straight."

"I won't lie to anyone who asks about us."

"You're going to tell people that you married me so you could have sex with me?"

When she said it out loud, he agreed the reason sounded ridiculous. Still...

"Isn't that why most men get married?" he said, fighting to keep his tone light. "Because they want to have sex with the woman they are marrying? I definitely want to have sex with you, Taylor."

"I suppose so," she responded, ignoring his last comment. "Or we could just tell them that we were drunk and didn't realize what we were doing."

He certainly hadn't been thinking clearly, but he distinctly recalled exchanging vows with her, promising to care for her forever, to cherish her and yet they were planning to end things before they'd even got started.

He stared at her, wishing he could read whatever was running

through that sharp mind of hers. "Shall we tell them we married because we were drunk or because we wanted to have sex?"

Her gaze darted about the room as if seeking the answer somewhere within the four walls. Finally, she shrugged. "Take your pick. Both are true."

* * *

Taylor pulled her dress out of the closet. Her gaze settled on Slade's clothes hanging next to hers.

Other than her father, she'd never lived with a man, so seeing the mix of Slade's belongings with hers had her pausing, had her eyes watering up again.

What an emotional roller coaster she rode.

Her safe, secure world felt as if it was crumbling around her.

She'd quit taking chances years ago. Had quit living in some ways. Oh, she lived through Gracie, but what about for herself? Nina was right. She didn't do anything for herself, just lived in a nice controlled environment where she planned for all contingencies.

Too bad she hadn't had a backup plan for an unexpected Vegas Christmas wedding.

While Slade was in the bathroom, she changed into her dress, took her hair down from its tight pin-back and pulled it up into a looser hold. She had her contacts in her purse, but wasn't sure what it would say if she put them in when she almost always wore her glasses.

How ridiculous was she being? What did it matter what she

looked like?

Still, she dug in her purse and put in her contacts. She was just blinking them into place when Slade stepped out of the bathroom.

Wearing only his suit pants.

Taylor's body responded to his bare chest like a Pavlov dog to its stimulus. The man was beautiful.

And hers.

Not for long, but at this moment Slade Sain was hers more than any other man had ever been.

Just as she was his more than any other woman had ever been his.

Maybe.

She frowned because she really didn't know that to be true. "Have you been married before?"

Her question obviously caught him off guard. "No. Why? Have you? Never mind, silly question with that one-guy thing. You haven't."

"No, I haven't," she agreed, averting her gaze from his intense blue one. "I just wondered if you had."

Despite the tension between them, he grinned with wry humor. "Wondering if I make marrying a habit?"

Exactly. "Something like that."

He slipped his crisp blue shirt on one arm at a time, then buttoned his cuffs. "I've never been married before." He paused, stared at her with a serious look. "I've never even contemplated

marriage.”

Her feet wanted to shuffle but she somehow kept them still. “Why not?”

Smoothing out his shirt, he shrugged. “I have other plans for my life besides a wife, two point five kids and a white picket fence.”

Her chest spasmed at just how different they really were, because once upon a time she’d dreamed of being a wife with kids and that proverbial white picket fence. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. We’re human and made a mistake. People do it all the time.”

He wasn’t telling her anything she didn’t know. So why did his words shoot arrows into her chest? “Not me. Not like this.” She winced. “I mean, obviously I have made mistakes before, but I thought I’d learned better than to make this kind.”

“Marrying me makes you realize you haven’t evolved as far as you’d hoped?”

“Something like that. We were practically strangers and got married.” Sighing, she closed her eyes. “Before last night you probably didn’t even know my eye color.”

“I knew.”

His answer was so quick, so confident, that she couldn’t question the truth of his response.

Staring at him, she asked, “How?”

He shoved his hands in his pants pockets. “I know more about you than you seem to think.”

“Like what?”

“Like how much you love coffee.”

She rolled her eyes. “Lots of people love coffee, so that’s just a generic assumption that could be said about a high percentage of the population.”

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