

Taking Chloe

Chapter One

She couldn't have stopped the tears even if she'd wanted to. Seeing their honeymoon pictures had pushed her over the edge. They'd been so happy on the trip to Hawaii. Everything had felt right, blissful. Two years now and she still didn't understand how things had gone so wrong. Chloe grabbed a tissue from the box next to the bed and dabbed at her eyes. Damn it, why couldn't she be stronger? Just smack Merrick upside his thick skull and force him to see what he was doing to their marriage? To her!

The eye-opener had come a month ago to the day. She'd woken up and rolled over and he'd been gone. At work on a Sunday morning. She'd known then that her life had slipped right on by and her husband was a ghost. A shell. She'd spent that awful day remembering every moment of the past two years and she'd come to a heartbreaking conclusion. She was married in name only.

Merrick's entire life revolved around his business. The success of Vaughn's Business Solutions mattered more than anything. She'd stupidly thought marriage would change him. Make him slow down. She'd been wearing some serious rose-colored glasses when she'd imagined them tying the knot and him working less. She'd had visions of the two of them spending more time enjoying life, enjoying each other. Maybe even talking about having kids. She'd deluded herself into believing she could sit him down and have a conversation, straighten things out. He'd listened, sure, but then he'd gotten a call on his cell and the discussion had come to an abrupt stop. He'd kissed her and promised to talk about it later. She'd waited and waited, but later never came.

A full thirty days later, here she sat, clutching her resume in her hand and wishing her husband would spend his Sunday with her instead of with client files. Chloe swiped at her eyes and threw the damp tissue across the room. It was time to take action. No way around it now. She'd used the day to pack and cry. When Merrick had hurried out the door right after breakfast, she'd begun making plans. Hearing him explain that there were things that needed his immediate attention, swearing to come home early, had been the last straw. Enough already. The past several months had proved to be quite an eye opener. Merrick would never slow down. She'd had her wake up call, now it was time to get a backbone and deal with the prospect of spending the rest of her life without him.

Chloe stood and looked around the bedroom. Their bed, their dresser, their closet, she'd be leaving it all behind. And because she worked at his company, she'd be forced to get a new job as well. Unless by some miracle he'd come home and see what she was doing and talk her out of it.

"There you go again," she muttered. "Ever the optimist."

Chloe sighed and tucked the resume into her suitcase, then zipped it shut. She wheeled it out to the living room and placed it by the front door. Now all she had to do was sit and wait for Merrick.

She went to the refrigerator and poured a glass of water. Just as she brought it to her lips, she heard the squeaky motor of the automatic garage door. Oh, God, I don't have the strength!

The firm bang of Merrick's car door had her heart beating erratically. Chloe set her glass on the counter and watched, waited.

Merrick slipped quietly into the kitchen, exhausted as always, a frown marring his handsome features. He caught sight of her and smiled. "Hey, babe," he whispered as he kissed her on the cheek, "you didn't have to wait up."

Her stomach fluttered. "I wanted to talk to you about something."

He pushed a hand through his shiny dark hair. "Sure, let's talk in bed, though, I'm beat."

She knew that tone. As soon as his head hit the pillow, he'd be out like a light. She could forget about a conversation after that because he wouldn't remember any of it in the morning.

"I'd rather talk now, Merrick."

Merrick took a sip of her water before patting her on the back. "Okay, just let me go change out of this monkey suit."

Chloe sighed. "Sure."

After waiting a full ten minutes, she searched him out. It was no surprise to find him sprawled across the bed in his boxers, sound asleep. Tears sprang to her eyes. Grabbing the throw blanket at the end of the bed, she covered him up before turning out the light. She walked softly to the office and picked up a pen and notepad from the desk, then scrawled out a note. She took it to the kitchen and placed it in front of the coffee pot where he'd be sure to see it in the morning.

As she took her keys off the hook by the door, Chloe allowed herself one last wistful look around the house. It felt empty, lonely. In the beginning, they'd made love on nearly every surface. They'd laughed in the kitchen as they'd debated who was the worst cook. They'd chatted about silly things and argued over which movie to watch on Friday nights. Now, nothing. Just a house and a man who'd given his soul to his job.

Chloe closed the door and locked it, then got in her car and drove slowly down the street. This time the tears didn't come. Sadness and an overwhelming sense of finality filled her. Once Merrick saw the note, there'd be a talk, but in the end he'd choose his job. He always did.

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"You really did it? You're sitting in a hotel right now alone?"

"Yeah," Chloe mumbled. "I just couldn't take another second, Lace. I can't sit around and watch him work himself into an early grave. I just can't do it."

"I understand, but I wish you would've come here. Nick's house is plenty big enough, sweetie."

So she could watch the two of them hold each other and kiss and do all the romantic things she wished Merrick would do with her? She loved Lacey like a sister, but there was no way she could handle seeing that type of love right now. “No, I don’t want to intrude. I’ll be fine here for now.”

“Okay, but have you considered who you’re dealing with here?”

“What do you mean?” Chloe held the phone between her shoulder and ear and clutched at the pillow. It wasn’t Merrick’s pillow. She couldn’t smell his scent. Her stomach suddenly felt hollow. Oh, God, she already missed him.

“I know my brother. He won’t just let you walk away. That’s not how this is going to play out. You know that, right?”

Lacey saw her brother in a different light. She couldn’t really blame Lacey, either. Chloe had no siblings, but she could understand that type of relationship. One of the things she loved about the Vaughns was how close they all were. A divorce would mean leaving them all behind, not just Merrick. It made her sick just thinking about it.

Unlike the large, close-knit Vaughn family, Chloe had only her father now that her mother was gone, and they weren’t at all close. He kept to his work as a financial advisor and they talked a few times a month. She’d never wished for more because she’d had her mother to fill the void. After ovarian cancer had taken her from them five years ago, Chloe had grieved the loss of not only her mother, but her best friend. Chloe had never dreamed she’d marry into such a rowdy, loving bunch as the Vaughns. She’d been so blessed to have a mother-in-law as open and accepting as Marie. The thought of losing not only Merrick, but his family as well...it was simply too much to contemplate.

“Chloe?”

Chloe snapped back to the here and now. “I don’t think you realize how dedicated your brother is to the business. He’s become obsessed, Lacey. I can’t get through to him.”

Chloe heard a shuffling sound, then a male voice in the background. Lacey’s fiancé Nick. They’d been engaged for a while, driving the family crazy by not setting a date for the wedding. Nick was so in love with Lacey. It was sweet and beautiful, but sometimes Chloe felt a pang of jealousy for Merrick’s baby sister. After all, Lacey had a man who loved her and spent time with her.

“He’s become a workaholic, I know,” Lacey agreed. “But I also know how much he loves you. It took the dunce awhile to realize he cared about you as more than a good worker and a friend. Once he admitted to himself that you were the woman for him there was no going back. He’s not going to let you walk off into the sunset, not without him right beside you, anyway.”

Frustration started to set in as she listened to Lacey’s gentle words. “I didn’t want any of this either. When he proposed, I thought it was for life. I’m the happy-ever-after kind of woman. My

parents were so happy before Mom died. I think if cancer hadn't taken her, they'd still be spending endless amounts of time together." She took a breath, then said, "But living with Merrick has become impossible. He works constantly. Lacey, he's well beyond reasoning. I tried! What am I supposed to do? Sit around and hope he comes to his senses?"

"Of course not, that's not what I meant. Heck, I'm proud of you for sticking to your guns. Merrick didn't marry a spineless wuss. He married an intelligent woman with a backbone. But you need to understand he isn't exactly the silent type. He'll come to his senses damn quick. When he does, he's going to do everything in his power to get you back. You've seen how hard he's worked to make Vaughn's Business Solutions a success. He pours every ounce of himself into a project. When he wakes up and realizes you've moved out, he's going to get angry at first, then he'll start thinking, planning. He loves you, and a man in love can be very creative when he sets his mind to it. I should know."

"You're beginning to scare me." Merrick would never hurt her, but he would attempt to break down her defenses. Lacey was right about that.

"Merrick's a very driven man. The question is, how hard do you want to fight and how far are you willing to run before you let him catch you?" That piqued her ire. "This isn't a game. This isn't a stunt to gain his attention. This is the real thing."

She heard Lacey laugh. "I hear you, but I also know how much you love my annoying, pigheaded, sometimes blind brother. And I don't think you're quite ready to contemplate divorce."

"I saw an attorney."

"Yeah, you saw an attorney. And?"

Chloe gritted her teeth. Score one for Lacey. Chloe had visited with an attorney, but she hadn't gone back. After the initial consultation, Chloe had gone to work in tears. When Merrick had caught her at her desk, dabbing at her eyes, she'd told him it was PMS. He'd let it go.

"You're right. I'm not ready for a divorce. But Merrick isn't leaving me much choice, is he? And I updated my resume, too. I'll have to find another job, a new place to live."

"We'll see."

For the first time in days, Chloe felt a measure of hope. Maybe all wasn't lost. Maybe Merrick would come to his senses. If it was one thing she knew about Merrick Vaughn, the man could be as tenacious as a pit bull. Dangling fresh meat in front of him could prove seriously dangerous.

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