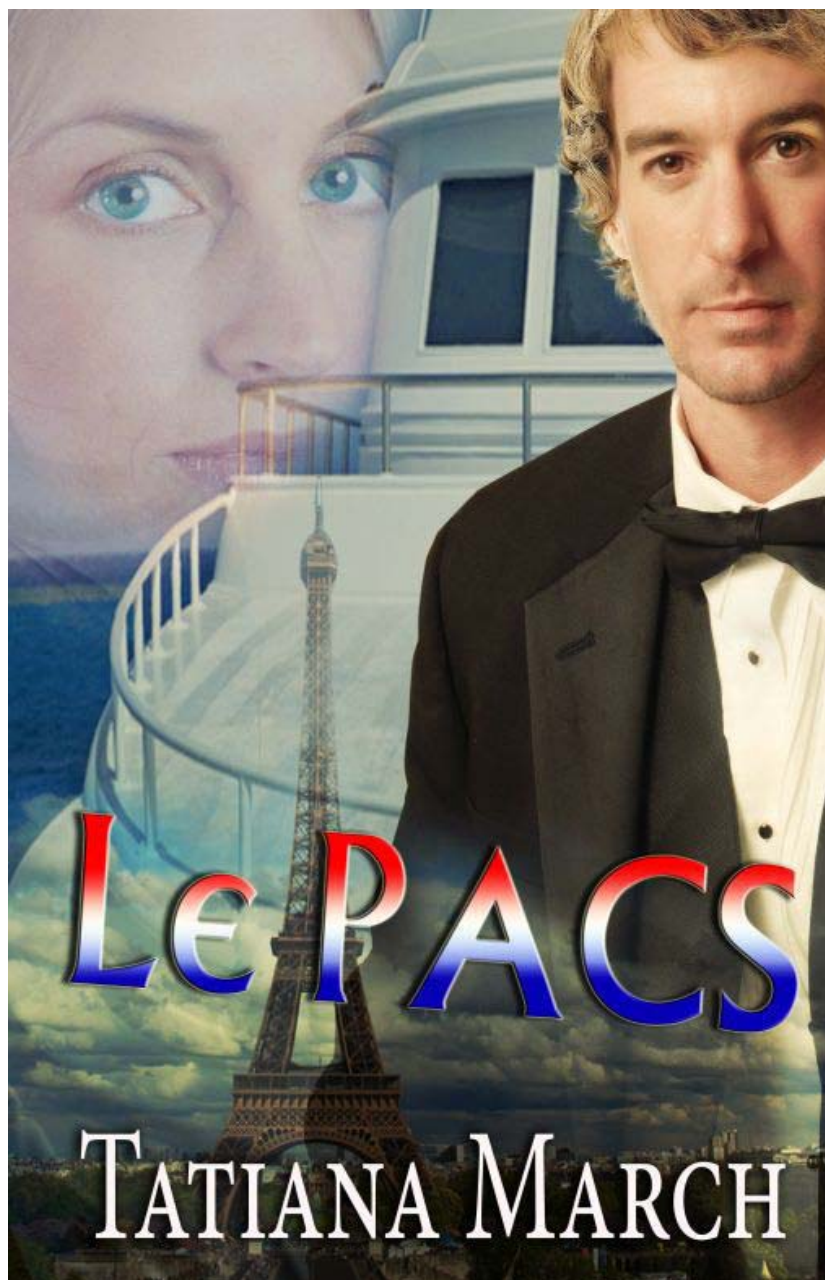


Le PACS
Tatiana March



Chapter One

Sundown had painted the sky pink and gilded the Cannes harbor across the gently rippling Mediterranean Sea. Stephanie Forssell stood on the deck of an enormous white yacht, clutching a chilled champagne flute in her trembling fingers. Around her, conversation drifted in the warm October breeze as gentlemen in their middle years flirted with young women dressed in revealing cocktail dresses.

How *could* she have thought she'd feel comfortable in a crowd of strangers? She shouldn't have agreed when Marie asked her to stand in for the girl who dropped out at the last minute. No one would believe she was a model, and what demon had possessed her to wear the electric blue scrap of silk that hardly covered anything at all?

Trying to keep the gesture unobtrusive, Stephanie tugged at the neckline of the skimpy dress in an attempt to cover up her breasts. As she raised her eyes, she met the amused grin of a broad-shouldered man who stood at the stern, slightly apart from the others. His unruly tawny hair and tanned skin gave him a healthy outdoor look that reminded Stephanie of the farmers and fishermen in her native Sweden.

Acting on impulse, she took a step toward him.

His grin vanished, replaced by a dismissive sneer.

Startled, Stephanie halted. To disguise her embarrassment, she raised her glass and gulped another frantic sip of champagne.

Their host, a swarthy Middle Eastern gentleman whose name she kept forgetting, stalked across the gleaming deck. "You're supposed to entertain my guests," he growled behind a jovial smile. "Get to it." With a curt nod, he hurried away to instruct the uniformed waiters to keep the champagne flowing.

Alarmed, Stephanie searched the crowd, but couldn't find Marie.

The tawny man leaned against the railing, watching her with a bored expression on his handsome face. Stephanie gritted her teeth and set off toward him. There was something about him that drew her in. If she had to talk to a stranger, despite his lack of welcome, he was the best candidate.

"Hello. I'm Stephanie Forssell."

The man didn't reciprocate the introduction. He swirled a tumbler full of amber liquid in one hand and jammed his free hand in the pocket of his immaculate evening trousers, making it clear that he had no wish to touch her—not even to shake hands. His posture grew rigid beneath the black jacket that fell in a perfect cut over his muscled shoulders.

"Do you have a name?" Stephanie asked, keeping her voice light, although a spark of temper ignited inside her.

"Yes."

"I see." Her fingers tightened around the champagne glass. "But you worry it might wear out from too much use."

The man's hazel eyes narrowed to angry slits. "That ought to be your worry, not mine."

"What do you mean?" Puzzled, Stephanie frowned at him.

"That you might wear out from too much use." He threw her a look laced with disgust and stormed off without bothering to offer his excuses.

Stephanie blinked to hold back the tears of humiliation. When a gaunt gentleman with mottled skin walked over, she smiled at him in relief. For the next hour, she made small talk with strangers, who all appeared to be inspecting her with bold eyes that sent a shiver of distaste down her spine.

Several times she felt her skin prickle, and when she glanced around, she saw the tawny man quickly look away. He appeared to be in his mid thirties, younger than most other male guests on the yacht, and from his lazy drawl, Stephanie had recognized the easy confidence typical of so many successful Americans.

A while later, she spotted him talking to their host. Sharp tentacles of alarm curled in her stomach when both turned to stare at her. The tawny man appeared to be asking a question. Their host gave an eager nod, and then he beckoned her over with an urgent wave of his hand.

Stephanie mumbled an apology to the people clustered around her and set off across the deck. Their host melted away, leaving her alone with the tawny man.

"I don't normally do this, but it's been a hard week, and I'm in need of recreation." His words came out harsh. "Stateroom Two. I'll be down in five minutes. I want you in bed, with your clothes off. I don't want to take too long over it."

"Excuse me?" Stephanie stammered, her back snapping rigid with indignation.

The tawny man raked his eyes over her. "Don't act coy. Fayad assures me you've been paid, so we can skip the awkward haggling. I want you below deck, naked, and ready to do your job."

"My job?" Inside her, fury leapt to life, mixed with a hard edge of dread.

"That's right. Your job." The tawny man gave her one final look of scorn and eased away from her. "Five minutes," he said as he strode off.

Gritting her teeth, Stephanie surveyed the crowd until she spotted Marie. The vixen stood between two men. One of them had his hand curled over her buttocks, where his fingers boldly kneaded her flesh. Marie listened with an air of rapture as the man spoke, and then she threw her head back and roared with laughter.

Stephanie sauntered over, cursing the spindly heels that hampered her progress. "Marie, I need to talk to you."

"Why don't you talk to Claude?" Marie nodded at the man in front of her, at the same time wiggling her bottom against the burrowing fingers of the other man. "Claude owns half Marseille."

"The better half," Claude said in a thick French accent. He eyed Stephanie up and down and sent her a predatory grin. "What's a pretty girl like you doing all alone?" He flung his arm around her and hauled her to his side.

Paying the man scant attention, Stephanie shoved against his hold and pulled away. "Now, Marie. Please. We need to talk."

"Oh, all right," Marie agreed petulantly. She bent to peck a kiss on the cheek of the short heavyset man who'd been fondling her buttocks. "I'll be back in a minute."

Stephanie grabbed Marie's elbow and dragged her into the shelter of the nearest lifeboat. "The truth," she demanded. "Why are we here? What's the deal? Have we been paid, and if so, for what?"

Marie fidgeted with the straps of her dress and released an irritable sigh. "Oh, all right. We've been paid. Five thousand Euros each."

"What have we been paid for?" Stephanie asked, her tone icy.

"Well..." Marie began to twist around the dress ring with a big yellow stone on her right hand. "Sometimes, if a guest fancies a girl, and wants some company..."

"Prostitutes," Stephanie said through clenched teeth. "We've been supplied as hookers to sleep with any of these men. All they need is to snap their fingers, and we're supposed to spread our legs and show enthusiasm."

"It's not like that," Marie protested. "Most of these men are really nice, and sometimes they take on a girl for weeks."

"A mistress?" Stephanie glared at her friend, questioning once again the sanity of sharing an apartment with someone whose values differed so drastically from hers. "In addition to being a hooker for the night, I'm supposed to be auditioning to become some horny old goat's mistress."

"Don't be angry, Steffi," Marie whined. "I was hoping that nobody would ask to sleep with you, and then you'd never find out. It's just that I'd already been paid for two girls, and I'd spent the money."

Stephanie sucked in an angry breath. The conversation they had in their tiny Paris apartment echoed through her mind. *Come on, Steffi, you'll enjoy it. A free trip to the Riviera on a private plane. You're not a model, but you're a classic long-legged Swedish blonde with blue eyes and an upturned nose. And, anyway, it's not modeling. It's just some trashy billionaire throwing a party on his yacht in Cannes. He's invited a few girls to improve the scenery.*

She ought to have known better, but she'd brushed aside her doubts. She'd worked so hard on her studies at the *École des Hautes Études Commerciales*, and she hadn't been able to afford a vacation in two years...not since Anders got sick. Marie had fooled her into thinking she could get something for nothing, and now the time had come to pay for her gullibility.

Not sparing Marie another glance, Stephanie turned on her high heels and marched across the deck to the staircase that led down to the cabins. Rage roiled in her gut, sending a bitter taste into her mouth. As she clipped down the steep steps, her feet stomping in mutiny against the shiny timber, her fury was directed equally at Marie, their host, and the tawny man.

* * * *

Grant Buchanan curled his hands over the mahogany railing on the deck and swore under his breath. Normally, once he made a decision, he buried his scruples. Now, frustration and uncertainty seethed inside him in equal measure.

Damn Fayad and his inclination to provide a team of hookers in the lavish parties he threw on his yacht. When Grant first saw the slim blonde, looking lost as she struggled to yank up the revealing neckline of her gown, something lurched inside his chest. He thought she was an innocent who'd accepted an invitation to a sunset cruise and a few drinks, unaware that Fayad ran his parties as floating brothels for his business associates.

Like a fool, he'd felt an urge to protect her from the predatory crowd.

And then she made her move, and he realized that the girl with short flaxen hair and enchanting smile was part of the paid entertainment. An inexplicable sense of fury had surged inside him. For an hour, he had struggled against the lure of her long legs and glowing skin.

Then he gave in.

Grant glanced at the bulky diving watch on his left wrist. Two more minutes. Then he'd go down into the cabin and get rid of the tension that had ruined his relaxed mood. As he turned to face the stairs, a slender figure in a bright blue bathing suit emerged through the revolving doors. In front of her, she hauled a black trash bag tied with string at the top. As she strode past, she gave him only a cursory glance.

Hello. I'm Stephanie Forsell. Her greeting echoed in Grant's ears, the husky timbre of her voice as vivid as if she'd spoken again.

His brow knotted into a frown of disbelief as he watched the girl stride to the edge of the boat, where she paused to adjust her grip on the plastic bag. Clutching the tied top, she swung the bag over the side. Then she climbed on top of the railing, and performed a neat dive into the cool blue waters of the Mediterranean Sea.

"I'll be damned," Grant muttered.

Several other curious guests crowded at the railing beside him. In fascination, they all watched as the girl cut through the water with a smooth breaststroke. The sack, which contained enough air to remain afloat, bobbed like a big beach ball along the rippling waves as she pushed her floating luggage before her.

When she reached the shore, she scaled the steps, rising like a mermaid out of the dark sea. She yanked the plastic bag out of the water and carried it to the concrete pier. Oblivious to the curious stares around her, she untied the string at the top, pulled out a towel, and dried her skin.

Then, with awkward contortions, she shielded her body with the towel while she dressed in a pair of jeans and a pink long sleeved top that hugged her lean figure. Socks and sneakers followed. When she was fully clothed, she lifted a leather travel bag from the sack and inspected it carefully for water damage. Satisfied, she lowered the bag to the ground, turned the empty refuse sack inside out, wrapped the wet towel in it, and shoved the bundle into the bag.

Then she slung the bag over her shoulder and walked off without looking back.

Chapter Two

Grant Buchanan slammed the receiver back in the cradle and stared at the telephone. Was the whole world suddenly populated by incompetent jerks? He picked up the phone again, pressed zero, and roared a complaint at the hotel switchboard about the slow room service, ignoring the comment that he should have dialed another extension for catering.

He tried to concentrate on the reports before him, but gave up and flung them down on the desk, a growl of frustration rising in his chest. What the hell was he doing at the Paris Ritz? After the unavoidable socializing with his Middle Eastern associates, he was meant to push off to Aberdeen and visit a North Sea oil rig for an inspection of the housing module his company had supplied.

Instead, he remained in Paris. Because that's where she was.

Hello. I'm Stephanie Forsell. The husky voice kept him awake at night. He knew it wasn't simply physical appeal—the world was full of women far more alluring than the slim blonde with a boy's haircut and freckled skin. What twisted in his gut like a hook jammed into a fish was the knowledge that she'd walked away from him.

In his experience, every woman could be bought. It disturbed his view of the world that Stephanie Forsell had acted contrary to his expectations. She had ignored him, unimpressed by his wealth. And deep down, although he refused to admit it to himself, it grated that she hadn't found him attractive enough to be tempted by his offer.

With an angry sigh, Grant yanked his wallet out of his pocket. He retrieved the scrap of paper the English girl on Fayad's yacht had given him and studied the telephone number scrawled along the edge. . For two days, it had burned a hole in his pocket. Clenching his jaws in fury at his lack of self-discipline, he pulled the telephone closer.

He'd better do something about the problem.

Otherwise, he'd be stuck in Paris for days, unable to shake her from his mind.

The girl answered with a murmured, "Stephanie."

Grant clutched the receiver in silence. Normally, he had no problem telling people what he wanted from them, but with a rueful twist of his lips, he admitted that the situation between them wasn't exactly normal.

"Hello," he said. "This is Grant Buchanan."

"I don't know anyone by that name."

Irritation exploded like a firework in his gut. Her frosty tone had underscored the lie. She knew damn well who he was, and that had triggered her cool response.

"We met in Cannes last weekend," he said, and cursed himself for not simply hanging up.

"Oh yes. The obnoxious American."

Grant cleared his throat. "I guess I might owe you an apology."

"No," she said after a long pause. "No apology needed. It wasn't an unreasonable misunderstanding...under the circumstances."

"I'd like to make it up to you. Could I buy you dinner tonight? I'm in Paris for a few days."

"No," she said.

Grant gritted his teeth. No excuse. Not 'I'm busy' or 'I have to wash my hair'. Just 'No'.

"Why not?" he asked, despite himself.

"Why should I?"

"At the very least, you would get a good meal out of it. Who knows, you might even enjoy my company."

"I very much doubt it. Goodbye, Mr. Grant. I appreciate your offer to apologize."

Grant heard the click as the line went dead. The final insult of mixing up his first and last names made him mad as hell, particularly since he suspected the barb had been delivered on purpose.

He stared at the silent telephone. Then he pressed zero again, and asked the girl at the reception to call him a taxi.

* * * *

The jostle through the congested city streets didn't improve Grant's mood, and Paris failed to weave its magic around him. The Seine looked like any other polluted river, and the Eiffel Tower resembled a heap of scrap iron.

When he reached his destination on the Left Bank, Grant got out, paid the driver, and scaled the worn granite staircase of the ancient building that lacked the Parisian institute of a busybody concierge. The apartment was tucked away in the attic. Stale cooking smells replaced the traffic noise as he made his way upward in the dim light that filtered in through the windows that grew smaller on each floor.

He couldn't find a doorbell, so he knocked instead.

Stephanie opened the door. In deference to the autumn chill, she wore a thick sweater with her jeans. The smoky blue, with an ethnic pattern around the neckline, matched the color of her eyes, and her short golden hair added to the impression of a fairytale elf.

Grant felt his loins tighten at the fresh beauty that filled the doorway before him.

She tried to give him a cool look, but he could see the blush that crept up to her cheeks and the sudden flicker of her lids as she tried to hide her agitation. He recalled the tug he'd felt when their glances met across the crowded deck on Fayad's yacht, and he knew that a surge of attraction so potent and primitive couldn't be entirely one-sided.

She found him attractive.

The realization caused an odd sense of fullness in his chest.

"Can I come in?" he asked, his voice rough.

Her mouth tightened with indecision, but a moment later, she stepped aside and allowed him inside. There was no hall. The front door opened directly into a living room furnished with a collection of odd pieces he assumed had been found in flea markets. Apart from a sagging sofa, the only seating was three beanbags scattered on the floor. Stephanie gestured at the sofa. He followed her cue and sat down, sinking deep into the cushions.

"Can I offer you a cup of coffee or tea?" she asked.

Grant almost refused, but realized that he could use the drink to make sure she wouldn't throw him out before he had finished saying what he'd come to say. "Coffee would be great," he replied.

She disappeared through a narrow door, which she left open. It would have been easy to carry on a conversation through the open doorway, but she made no effort to talk. Grant sat on the sofa, his muscles taut as he waited for her to return. In the kitchen, the clang of cupboard doors opening and closing was followed by a brief burst of cascading water.

Then silence.

He studied the posters tacked to the walls. Nordic scenes of forests and lakes and snow-covered mountains. They reminded him of her, the elfin quality she possessed.

Elfin? Grant let out a silent groan. Was he going mad? He leaned back against the cushions and closed his eyes, trying to collect his thoughts as the soft thud of footsteps announced her return and sent his blood pressure soaring again.

"There you go," she said as she handed him a delicate china cup balanced on a saucer, and placed an identical set on the floor next to a beanbag. Crossing her legs, she sank down with the grace of a ballet dancer.

"I'm sorry to barge in like this," Grant said.

"It's not an inconvenience," she told him. "I wasn't doing anything that can't be interrupted." She motioned at a silver laptop open on a rickety table in the corner. The computer seemed the only item in the room not purchased secondhand.

"Is your friend around?" he asked.

Stephanie shook her head. "She's on a photo shoot in Morocco." She took a sip from her cup, then continued, her eyes not meeting his. "It's a good arrangement for both of us. I'm mostly out during the day, and Marie is out in the evenings. We don't get in each other's way." Her eyes flickered up at him. "Just in case you haven't understood, I don't...move in the same circles as Marie. I had no idea what the arrangement was when I joined the party on that boat."

He nodded to confirm he understood, but before he had a chance to reply, Stephanie launched into another comment, the corners of her mouth tugging down in a wry smile. "Of course, I should have known. You don't get a free weekend in Cannes for just standing around and smiling."

Grant studied the girl. Her sudden talkativeness puzzled him at first, until he realized it was a burst of nerves. He wondered why she had invited him inside. She could have slammed the door in his face. And yet, there he was, sitting in her living room and drinking her coffee, listening to her husky voice.

Curiosity, he concluded. She felt secure enough in herself not to feel threatened by him, and had decided it might be amusing to find out what he wanted, and how he would go about trying to achieve his aim.

"I know you're not a hooker," he said bluntly. "You damn near drowned in order to make the point."

A smile lit up her face. "Water is my element. I learned to swim almost as soon as I could walk. My main worry was that I would ruin my leather bag. It was a gift from my mother when I came to Paris."

Grant hesitated. He enjoyed talking to her, and he suspected that his direct approach might create another unpleasant situation between them, but he forged on, regardless. He had no time to spare, and he preferred getting straight to the point. "I wanted to sleep with you on the boat," he told her, the words spilling harshly out of him.

"I know," she muttered into her cup, her eyes downcast.

"Now that I've got the thought in my head, it's not letting go."

"I know," she said softly, with another quick glance up at him.

Heat filled her cornflower blue eyes, and Grant realized she'd been thinking of him, just like he'd been thinking of her. Blood rushed into his groin, and he shifted in the uncomfortable seat to ease the pressure in his cock. "I could take you out to dinner and woo you. Do all the things a man's supposed to do to attract a woman, but there's a problem."

"I see," she murmured.

"I need to leave Paris. First to Scotland, and then back to Texas. I don't have the time for all that."

"I see."

Her evasive replies stirred an unfamiliar awkwardness inside Grant. He folded up one leg, propping his ankle on the opposite knee. The fragile cup rattled on the saucer between his hands as he fought to keep the coffee from spilling.

"Would you come with me?" he asked. "I'll find some time to show you around, and you needn't worry about the expense. I'll take care of everything. If you want to buy something to wear, or a trinket or two, that's not a problem."

"I see," she said. "You think you can buy me, provided you're a little more subtle about it."

"I'm not trying to buy you," he countered, his words deliberate, although he knew Stephanie was right. That was exactly what he was trying to do. Prove that she could be bought, so he could bury the annoying doubts her defiance had triggered in his mind, making him question the validity of his sweeping condemnation of all women. "I was merely pointing out that you needn't worry about the cost if you agree to come with me."

"You're proposing to use your wealth to get me into your bed, without investing any of your time to do the things a man usually has to do to attract a woman. I'd call that trying to buy me."

"Every woman can be bought," Grant replied in a bitter tone. "I should know. My own mother married my father for money, and then screwed every willing male for miles around."

"I'm sorry to hear that." Stephanie peered at him between her long sooty lashes. "But it is unfortunate if you've allowed her actions to ruin your opinion of the entire womankind."

"However pure and principled, a woman will always be tempted by wealth," Grant said, and believed he was telling the truth.

Stephanie uttered a little dismissive sound that stung upon his nerves.

"Every woman has her price," he insisted.

"And you thought mine was five thousand Euros." Stephanie pursed her mouth, appearing amused.

Anger surged through Grant at the realization that she was mocking his bumbling efforts to lure her into his bed. How the hell had he ended up in this crazy situation? He knew he ought to get up and walk away, but now a pinch of pride had been stirred into the pot of frustrated lust. He could no longer give up, without appearing to have lost the battle of wills between them.

"So, what is it then?" he asked. "Your price," he added when Stephanie arched her brows in question.

"It certainly wouldn't be five thousand Euros. More like five hundred thousand."

His eyes narrowed. "A hundred times the usual price for a night. That should mean a hundred times the usual number of nights."

"Good. You can count." Stephanie floated gracefully up to her feet. "I need to get back to work now. I'll see you out."

"I haven't finished my coffee," Grant pointed out.

Her mouth pressed to a firm line, and he couldn't tell if she was angry, or tempted by his wealth and fighting to resist. Masculine ire at her lack of response flared inside him, strengthening his determination to prove that she was no different from all other women he'd known.

"All right," he said. "A hundred nights. That's just over three months. Payment at the end, but we'll keep it simple and count in dollars. I'll cover your travel expenses, but you'll buy your own clothes and trinkets."

"The joke is over." Stephanie reached out to collect his cup and saucer.

Grant passed them to her, annoyed by the rattling sounds that suggested that his hands might be unsteady. "No joke," he said. He dug in his pocket and pulled out a business card. When she made no effort to accept it, he dropped the card on the table at the end of the sofa. "I'll be at the Ritz for a couple of more days. Call me when you've decided."

She offered no comment while he stood up, merely contemplated him with a cautious expression in her blue eyes. Then she leaned down to place his cup and saucer on the floor beside her own and followed him to the door, making Grant feel as though she was chasing him out of the apartment.

On the landing, he turned to look at her over his shoulder. "Call me when you've decided."

"Don't wait by the telephone." Her parting words hung between them as she closed the door, and the open amusement in her voice crawled like insects on his skin.

Grant stormed down the stairs, his hands clenched into fists. Confusing thoughts jostled through his head, but the message that radiated from his groin was clear—for whatever reason, he wanted Stephanie Forssell, and what Grant Buchanan wanted, he made sure he got.

* * * *

Stephanie stood in the middle of the room and stared at the dent in the cushions on the sofa where Grant Buchanan had sat. Why had she let him in? She crouched to pick up his discarded coffee, her fingers curling protectively over the delicate china cup as she admitted the truth to herself.

After his telephone call, she had sat at her computer, unable to work, as edgy as a canary waiting for the cat to return. Instinct had told her that he would soon appear pounding on her door, and she had held her breath in anticipation.

She had offered him a cup of coffee out of politeness, but after he settled on the sofa, it had seemed terribly important to convince him that she wasn't like Marie—that she'd been duped, even if it created an implication of stupidity.

And she'd welcomed the opportunity to get another look at him, hoping to prove that the memories of his tanned features and broad shoulders that spoiled her concentration on her studies were nothing but fragments of her imagination.

They were not.

He was every bit as rugged as she remembered, as full of masculine appeal as the images that popped into her mind at the most inconvenient moments.

She had invited him inside, enjoying the pulse of attraction that reverberated between them. And then, he had ruined everything by talking about how he could buy any woman he chose—including her.

With a sigh, Stephanie collected the second cup and saucer from the floor and carefully carried both sets into the kitchen. She ought to be grateful that he had insulted her with his degrading offer. If he had used his charm to coax her into going with him, she might have been tempted to say yes.

Chapter Three

Stephanie lowered the receiver, tears streaming down her face in hot rivulets that contrasted with the cold tide of despair that rose inside her. The chemotherapy had failed to halt the progress of the disease that ate at the frail bones of a twelve-year-old boy. Her mother had sobbed her grief down the telephone, and Stephanie couldn't even go home to provide support without sacrificing her funding. The conditions of her scholarship didn't allow her to transfer to a university in Sweden.

She closed her eyes and thought about her little stepbrother, saw the pale face of a sickly child who would never grow up to meet girls, who would never drive a car, never celebrate another midsummer, or taste another crop of wild strawberries that grew along the edge of the home meadow.

With a resolute swipe of the back of her hand, Stephanie brushed away her tears. This was not the time to give up. She settled at the table in the corner of the living room and turned on her laptop.

There had to be something more they could try.

Perhaps they could make another attempt at finding a compatible bone marrow donor. Raise the money to seek private treatment, try options not covered by health insurance. Visit one of the specialist clinics in Switzerland or America.

As she accessed the internet, Stephanie began to search for a miracle.

Miracles didn't come free.

A terse voice echoed in her mind. *Every woman has her price.*

The information she found on the computer might reveal what *her* price would be.

* * * *

Stephanie settled down on the sofa and picked up the telephone with trembling hands. Three days had passed since the arrogant American visited her. Maybe the man was no longer at the Ritz. Maybe he had changed his mind. *Maybe she had lost hers.* Stephanie swallowed the lump of doubt that clogged her throat and dialed.

"Buchanan," he answered in his slow drawl.

"It's Stephanie Forssell."

"I see," he said.

Stephanie bit her lip as she understood that he was mimicking her earlier reticence. "I would like to accept your offer," she told him, her posture stiff.

"I see."

"There's a catch."

"Fire away."

She plunged ahead, knowing that her next words might ignite a spark of temper. "How do I know that you'll pay up at the end?"

The silence lasted a full minute.

Grant finally spoke in a carefully controlled tone. "I'm not going to take insult in that, although I might have. If you like, we can put something in writing."

"I don't want this episode to ruin my life. I don't want someone twenty years from now confronting me with evidence that I sold my body for money."

"We can call it something else. Business services."

"That would be taxable income, and I don't want to break the law."

An irritable sigh rustled down the telephone line. "How do you propose we solve the problem?"

"Easy." She drew a deep breath. "We get married. Then we get divorced, and you'll pay the money to me as a divorce settlement."

"What?" The single word exploded in Stephanie's ear.

"Married, and then divorced. It will work perfectly. I'll have a guarantee that you'll pay when it's over, I avoid social stigma, and there'll be no tax problem."

"Lady, you're out of your mind." Grant had hung up before the echo of his growling words faded.

Stephanie stared at the silent telephone. An odd mixture of emotions churned inside her, sending her into a tired slump against the sofa cushions.

Relief.

Disappointment.

For a long time, she remained there, the image of Grant Buchanan filling her mind. With the best of her honest assessment, she couldn't tell which of those two emotions weighed more heavily in her troubled heart.

* * * *

A week later, Stephanie replayed the message on her answering machine for the third time.

"I'm sure you already know, but it seems in France they have this thing they call *Le PACS*. Not marriage, but a civil partnership with the force of law. If that's good enough for you, go to the American Embassy. They have my details, and someone will help you pull together the required paperwork. Fix up somewhere to get it done. Email me where and when. The address is on my business card."

Stephanie rolled her eyes as she pressed a button to erase the message. The man certainly didn't feel compelled to infuse the situation with romance. She'd follow his lead. She'd play her part, and three months later, she'd walk away with a cool five hundred thousand dollars and erase the episode from her memory.

Her patient trawl through medical databases had yielded no solution, but something new could be discovered in the next three months. When the miracle became available, she'd have the money to buy it for Anders.

The strands of apprehension inside Stephanie tightened to a knot of resolve as she settled at her computer and began to research *Le PACS*. She discovered that faking a marriage attracted severe penalties under the French law, but no such scruples attached to *Le PACS*. Contracts without a true intent were particularly popular among teachers, who used them as a means to arrange a transfer into a sunnier part of the country.

Her mind reeled at what she had agreed to do. In accepting Grant's offer, she would cast aside a lifetime of principles, but she told herself it was a noble sacrifice. Helping Anders justified the lowering of her moral standards.

She ignored the little whispers in the back of her head that questioned how easily she had embraced the situation. Nervous excitement clawed in her stomach every time her thoughts strayed to Grant, but instead of admitting that she was attracted to him and yearned to be sexually awakened, she gave other explanations to the fevered signals her mind sent through her body.

It was natural to feel apprehensive about the situation.

Her unease had nothing to do with the confused emotions he evoked inside her.

He had made it clear what he wanted from her.

Their relationship would be a business transaction, nothing more.

But at night, when she struggled to fall asleep, images of Grant filled her mind. However hard she tried, she couldn't forget how his hair glinted in the sun, how his amber eyes crinkled at the corners when he smiled. How broad his shoulders were, how deep his voice.

Or how fierce his determination.

That final thought caused a flutter of panic inside her.

* * * *

To and fro, corner to corner. Stephanie paced the waiting room of the Small Claims Court in the City Hall of her *arrondissement* in Paris. She had taken the first available appointment to finalize the legal process, and had emailed the time and place to Grant.

She had discovered that the *pacte civil de solidarité*—*Le PACS*—required a stack of paperwork, including residence permits and birth certificates, a property agreement, and a signed confirmation that the couple intended to continue living in the same *arrondissement*.

She had alerted Grant to the strict demands of the French bureaucracy. He had replied with a terse message. *Don't go to the US embassy. I'll arrange the papers myself.*

Yesterday, not having heard from him in six days, she had fired off another email, demanding him to confirm if he intended to go ahead with the arrangement and appear at the City Hall on the appointed hour.

And what had he replied?

Be there.

Nothing more. A little like calling a dog to heel.

The storm of indignation inside Stephanie choked her chest, and suddenly she wanted to weep. What was she doing? Nothing would help her stepbrother. Anders would die, and she would ruin her life. Already, she had disrupted her studies, arranging an extended leave of absence over the Christmas vacation due to a sick relative. It didn't really matter whether she attended the lectures or not, but unless she completed and submitted her assignments on schedule, she might lose her scholarship.

When Grant turned up, *if* he turned up, she would end this nonsense by telling him that he could go to hell, and take his money with him.

Behind her, a door banged, and a steady trail of footsteps thudded across the linoleum floor. A rush of relief eased her rigid shoulders. *He had come.* Stephanie closed her eyes. How did she know it was him? And why did the knowledge make her feel as if the sun had just broken through the clouds?

Slowly, she turned around. Grant stood before her, wearing a long overcoat in thick grey wool. The white scarf around his neck emphasized his tanned skin, and the wintry gusts of wind had tousled up his dark blond hair and brought a ruddy glow to his cheeks.

"Are you ready?" he asked.

"Hello." Her startled reply came out on a whisper, as if she couldn't quite find her voice.

Grant had already turned away, ignoring her. A thin bespectacled man sitting in one of the plastic chairs along the wall leapt to his feet and sauntered over.

"Is this everything?" Grant asked as he accepted the thick brown envelope the man was holding out to him.

The man nodded. "Full documentation, including a letter to confirm that the mayor has waived the residence requirement. There's a red sticker to mark each page where you need to sign."

Thanking the man, Grant took Stephanie by the elbow and led her to the counter, where, as if by magic, a stout woman in her fifties had just returned from her coffee break. With efficient moves, Grant tore open the envelope and scrawled his signature to each indicated spot.

"You need to hand in your documents," he pointed out as he worked his way through the bundle.

"Yes." Flustered, Stephanie reached into the tote bag dangling from her shoulder. She took out the roll of documents held together with a rubber band and handed them to the woman across the counter.

While the official checked everything, Stephanie's eyes lingered on Grant. He signed each form without pausing to read the contents, except for the last one, which he studied carefully, and then added his signature before passing the document to her.

"The property settlement," he explained. "We both need to sign."

Numb, Stephanie took the printed pages. The words danced before her eyes, and she knew that despite her studies in economics, her fraught mind wouldn't make sense of the legal jargon. Without even trying to understand the long paragraphs, she added her signature.

Grant watched her, his brows rising in surprise.

"I'll read it later," Stephanie told him. "I expect you'll have a copy for me."

"Sure." A thoughtful expression lingered on his face, as if her lack of interest in the financial contract puzzled and even somehow annoyed him.

Satisfied with her findings, the woman behind the desk handed out a pair of forms and told them to proceed to the Clerk of the Court.

In the next room through the double doors, another woman, a stately blonde with frosted hair and immaculate makeup, completed the legal process by applying her signature to the documents. Then she presented each of them with the *PACS* certificate, shook their hands, and offered her congratulations on behalf of the French Republic.

Dazed, Stephanie followed Grant outside, where he ushered her into the chauffeured silver Mercedes waiting at the curb.

How had it happened? Stephanie shook her head to clear her thoughts as the car merged into the dense traffic. At what point had his stronger will conquered hers? Or had her own body with its secret desires tricked her into forgetting her reluctance?

She had planned to tell him to go to hell.

Instead, they were now *pacsé*.

* * * *

Stephanie declined the offer of champagne and asked the American Airlines stewardess for mineral water. Grant grunted his refusal for anything to drink and continued to flick through the papers he'd pulled out of his briefcase.

A sense of unreal enveloped Stephanie as she stole a glance at the rugged profile of the man beside her. The events had unfolded too fast. After they concluded their legal arrangement at the City Hall, the chauffeured car drove them to her apartment. Engrossed in his Blackberry, Grant didn't speak to her, except to tell her that he'd drop her off and return exactly one hour later. She was to pack a suitcase and be prepared to fly to New York immediately. *Carry-on baggage only*, he'd ordered, not lifting his eyes from the email messages he was scrolling through. *I never travel with checked luggage.*

With a sigh, Stephanie gave up analyzing the events of the day and burrowed deeper into the first class seat that curved like a cocoon around her. At least the order to travel light gave her an excuse for not having suitable clothes to fit in his world of wealth and privilege.

Grant's deep voice drew her from her thoughts. "I'd like to ask you a question."

Stephanie jerked around to face the adjoining seat.

"Of course." She gave him a quick nod and looked away. He had continued to ignore her during the drive to the airport and the wait in the first class lounge. In the end, his silence had coiled her nerves so tight that she'd nearly torn off the pages in the magazine she'd been flicking through.

She wondered if he was doing it on purpose, leaving her alone with her thoughts. It certainly worked. Her mind was going round and round, trying to block out the knowledge of the obligation to fill her side of the bargain, and yet unable to focus on anything else.

"Why did you decide to do this?" he asked.

Stephanie fiddled with the buttons on the entertainment system. "Does it matter?"

"I guess not. But I'm curious about the sudden leap from spurning my advances to welcoming them."

"It's a lot of money."

"You've given me the impression that money isn't what motivates you."

She met his eyes, not quite understanding why it appeared so important not to let him know the pull of attraction that drew her to him. "Let's say I have a little brother who needs an operation to save his life," she said, sarcasm edging her words.

Grant gave a resigned chuckle and shook his head. "Have it your way." He paused and continued in a tone that sounded light but held a warning. "My only requirement is that you come to me with a willing mind. I'm sure you'll enjoy yourself in the next three months, and we'll part with good memories of our time together."

Stephanie made a non-committal sound. She pressed a button on the control pad and stared blindly at the video screen that leapt to life in front of her. She didn't want to part with good memories. She wanted to part hating him. It was the best way to protect her heart against a man who had managed to confuse her so thoroughly that she no longer knew right from wrong.

* * * *

Grant hailed a yellow cab from Wall Street to the Plaza after he finished his business meetings in New York. He had already sent Stephanie ahead directly from the airport. He had dropped an envelope stuffed with cash into her lap with a casual comment that she could entertain herself with

shopping if she got bored. Their agreement didn't extend to him buying her gifts, but he considered it worth the expense to test how far she'd dare to push his generosity.

Grant Buchanan took pride in being self-aware. On the rare occasions he did something spontaneous, he paused to figure out the reason. He understood that Stephanie had got to him with her defiant show of independence and integrity. It was his firm belief that all women were shallow creatures, whose main goal was to live in idle luxury that a man with money could provide for them.

Stephanie had undermined that belief, creating confusion in his mind. The best way to get her out of his system was to enjoy her for a few months, while at the same time proving that she was no different from all other beautiful women who used their charms for financial gain.

At the Plaza, he found Stephanie in the hotel suite, sitting at the desk, her laptop open in front of her. She was dressed in the same jeans and soft white angora sweater she'd worn on the plane, but the pink glow in her cheeks told him she'd been outside. Grant tossed his briefcase on a chair and walked up to the bar in the corner of the living room to pour himself a drink.

"Did you go shopping?" he asked.

"Yeah," she muttered, her eyes not leaving the computer screen. "I walked up and down Fifth Avenue."

"What did you buy?"

"An adaptor plug for my laptop and a couple of postcards. I want to get a pay-as-you-go cell phone, but I'll read the brochures first to decide which network to go with."

"Nothing else?"

"No." She glanced up at him. "I put your money in the safe."

Grant took a sip of whiskey, trying to ignore the irritation that niggled in his gut. So, she hadn't gone crazy with his money at the shops, but it had to be simply because she was smart enough to wait until the stakes got higher. She'd prove him right before the week was out. He'd bet every cent of his fortune on it.

"There's something we need to talk about," Stephanie said, still immersed in whatever she was studying on her laptop. Grant edged closer, easing between the pair of plump green sofas that flanked the marble coffee table. When he was only a few steps away, with a rapid click of the keys, Stephanie changed the display into a galaxy of whizzing white stars that hid the information she'd been looking at.

"Would you like something to drink?" Grant asked with a belated sense of courtesy.

Stephanie pointed at the large bottle of club soda on the table. "I have mineral water. I bought some in a deli down the street. The hotel prices are ridiculous."

"I can afford them."

"I'm sure you can, but that doesn't stop them from being poor value for money." She switched off the laptop and turned to face him. "My hours."

"Your hours?"

“We should agree what hours I need to be available.”

“This is *not* the kind of conversation I want to be having at the end of a tiring day.”

“I propose to be available from nine pm to nine am. That’s twelve hours a night. I assume you’ll be at work during the day. I expect to be free to come and go as I wish when I’m not on duty.”

“And at the weekend?” Grant bit out the words, anger surging inside him.

“The weekends?” Her eyes flashed in defiance. “Oh, yes. The male fondness for sex in the morning. I guess I could stretch it to ten o’clock on Saturdays and Sundays.”

“Don’t bother.” Grant yanked his tie loose and headed for the shower. “I’ll make sure to wake up early if I want you in the morning.”

His body pulsed with frustration as he strode across the room. How in hell did Stephanie have the audacity to suggest that sleeping with him, or even just sharing his company, would be some kind of an ordeal?

Was she pretending, hoping to rattle his nerves?

No. With a shudder Grant accepted that those must be her true feelings. An outrage of masculine pride added to his fury. His hand closed around one end of the dangling tie and pulled the strip of silk down so hard the loop around his neck nearly strangled him.

He’d simply have to prove her wrong.

Chapter Four

Grant let the stream of hot water soothe his aching muscles as he attempted to bring his terse mood under control. He soaped his skin with absent moves, planning a slow seduction for the night. Even though he had paid for Stephanie's company, it seemed important to conquer her, to make her admit that she enjoyed sex with him.

Fiercely competitive, his pride had been bruised when Stephanie had so easily rejected his advances during their first encounters. Hell, she'd *laughed* at him. He wanted to leave her wanting more of him at the end of their three months. Only when he emerged the winner in their battle of wills would he be able to truly dislodge her from where she seemed to be stuck beneath his skin.

He had deliberately avoided talking to her since the ceremony that tied them together with legal bonds. Experienced in business negotiations, he had acquired the skills to mentally unsettle an opponent, and silence was the most effective weapon. And yet, every time he believed he'd made a winning move, Stephanie would contemplate him with those innocent blue eyes, and somehow the ground beneath him would shift.

The biggest danger to a man's dignity came in the form of a beautiful woman with a scheming mind. The marriage of his parents proved that. Perhaps he had acted unwisely, exposing himself to a risk of getting in deeper than it made sense.

Grant turned off the taps and wondered if the safest course of action would be to simply forget the whole crazy contract. He could write Stephanie a check right now for the agreed amount and send her on her way. That would allow him to have their *PACS* dissolved at once. He raked his hands through his damp hair. *Yes*. That's what he would do. End the complication here and now, and get his life back under control.

He jerked a towel from the rack and rubbed his skin dry with a few efficient sweeps. Then he strode into the bedroom. The dim bedside light left the corners of the room shrouded in darkness, but he could see the pair of jeans and the white angora sweater folded into a neat stack on the chair beside the door. In the bed, a golden head pressed into the pillows, and the covers draped in soft contours over the slim body beneath.

She had to be feigning.

Stephanie couldn't possibly have already fallen asleep, not with the anticipation of him making love to her going through her mind.

Maybe she didn't care.

Maybe yet another man to roam his hands over her skin, to penetrate her body, to spurt his seed into her was such a common occurrence it left her indifferent.

Grant eased back to the chair and rifled through the bundle of clothing. A simple cotton bra and a pair of panties nestled between the folds of the angora sweater. An ache settled in his groin when he realized she might be naked under the covers.

His muscles tensed at the acceptance that he needed to make love to her tonight. Just this once. He couldn't let her leave without possessing her first, without knowing what it felt like to sink deep inside her. He wanted to replace that cool look in her eyes with a sensual heat, make those soft lips fall open in a cry of ecstasy.

Then he'd protect his peace of mind by paying her off and sending her packing.

"Stephanie?" He spoke in a low voice, ill at ease, his composure shaken by the way she made a point of ignoring his presence.

No reaction from the bed. Not even the tiniest stirring.

Grant crossed the floor to the bedside with a few resolute steps. "Time to get to work," he growled as he yanked away the covers that hid Stephanie from his gaze.

Irritation surged inside him at his inability to resist her, as well as her lack of welcome. Although their arrangement might be practical in nature, women normally found him attractive. He had expected a willing bedmate, but Stephanie lay curled on her side, her slim figure like a marble sculpture against the white sheet beneath.

The taut lines of her rigid body confirmed her sleep as nothing but pretense. He could see the rapid rise and fall of her chest beneath her crossed forearms that shielded her breasts. A pulse throbbed at her throat, and her eyes were shut unnaturally tight. The normally soft curve of her mouth had a pinched set to it that hinted she'd rather be somewhere else...or with someone else.

An alien sense of possessiveness filled Grant, accompanied by an inexplicable resentment at any other man who had touched her before him. A need roared through him to wipe out any lingering memories of them, to stamp his own scent and imprint on her, to make her his so thoroughly that when he sent her away in the morning, she'd beg to stay.

He clasped the curve of her shoulder and rolled her onto her back. Still she wouldn't look at him. Heaving a sigh of defeat, Grant climbed up on the bed and lowered his body on top of hers. Stephanie's aloofness sent another wave of anger through him, and the agitation rendered his movements awkward, robbing him of his usual athletic grace.

He waited an instant, but when her eyes remained stubbornly shut, he dipped his head and closed his mouth over hers. She flinched, but didn't attempt to twist away. After a few seconds, her lips parted in a tentative response, and the tension in her body eased, molding her contours against his muscled frame.

That tiniest of invitations sent a shudder of need down Grant's spine. He nudged her legs apart and settled into the cradle of her thighs. With a muffled whimper, she wriggled beneath him. Her long legs wrapped around his hips, and her hands crept up to cling to his shoulders. The mental image of her slender body coiled around him tore the strenuous bond Grant had been holding on his lust. Heat flared inside him, burning to ashes the plans he had made for a slow seduction that would leave her hungry for more.

Blindly, he swept one hand past her narrow waist and reached between her legs. A harsh growl tore from his chest as his fingers met her feminine core, moist and ready. Not pausing, he positioned his shaft against her opening, flexed his hips, and thrust into her in one powerful stroke—and froze when he tore through the resistance in her narrow passage and realized he had just roughly taken a virgin.

"Christ, Stephanie." Aghast, equally furious with himself and with her, and yet filled with a strange elation that he attempted to push out of his mind, Grant locked his weight on his elbows and remained poised above her, using every shred of control he possessed to deny the natural urge of his body to continue the invasion.

"Why didn't you tell me?" he asked.

"Nothing to tell," she replied in a fragile voice that quivered with unshed tears.

Guilt and shame jostled down Grant's spine and reached between his legs, where they mercifully blunted the raw edge of his lust.

"You were a virgin, and you thought there was nothing to tell?"

"You were buying and I was selling, and that's all there was to it. Now, can you please get on with it?" As Stephanie choked out the words, a single tear broke loose and painted a shiny line down her pale cheek.

Her distress, and the valiant effort she made to hide it from him, broke through the bitterness Grant had used all his life to shield himself from predatory females. Sure, he had shattered his share of hearts, but those women had set out to win him, had tried to catch him and failed. It wasn't his fault if they, during their quest to trap his wealth, fell victim to emotions that left them hurt when the relationship ended.

But this time, through his own scornful actions, he had deliberately caused a woman physical pain, as well as emotional distress.

"Hush, sweetheart." As gently as he could, Grant withdrew from inside her and rolled onto his side. He gathered Stephanie into his arms and cradled her against his chest. "It's all right to cry. I know you're hurting."

Tears began to pour, as though his words had broken a dam. Stephanie pressed her face into the crook of his neck. Disconsolate sobs racked her body. Grant ran his hand in soothing strokes up and down her back, murmuring words of consolation. And all the while, his mind reeled at the incongruity that she clung to him, seeking comfort from him, despite the fact that his callousness was the source of her suffering.

"It's all right," he murmured. A strange mixture of guilt and elation stirred through him at the thought that there had been no other men before him. Thoroughly confused by Stephanie, and what

possible motives had propelled her into his bed, he continued his efforts to comfort her. His own gentle reactions seemed as alien to him as every other aspect of what had taken place between them.

When her shudders finally calmed and her body relaxed against his, he caught her chin with the edge of his hand and tipped her head back to peer into her face.

“How come?” he asked, feeling awkward, but wanting to understand, so he could better repair the pain he’d caused. “You’re an attractive woman of twenty-four. How is it possible for you to be a virgin in this day and age?” An unsavory idea stirred in his mind. He tried to ignore the thought, but accepted that the question needed to be asked. “It’s not because you have a preference for women, is it?”

Stephanie made a muffled sound of denial and shook her head. Her lids fluttered down to shield the expression in her eyes. “I wanted to save it for marriage. I thought that one day I’d meet someone and fall in love, and I wanted to give him a gift on my wedding night. Something to prove how much I loved him.”

“Oh, Christ, Stephanie. I’m sorry.” The knowledge of what he’d done turned his voice into a hoarse growl. Grant studied the girl in his arms, took in the tearstained face free of makeup and the short unadorned hair. In a flash of insight that came too late, he got an inkling of the values that ruled her world, and understood her grief.

She’d treasured her body as a gift for the man she’d marry, and now he’d used his money to buy that gift, leaving her with less to give.

The realization left him even more baffled as to why she had agreed to their arrangement, but he had the good sense to put aside his harsh tendency to force answers to questions that troubled him. Instead, he pulled her close and held her tight. There would be time later to uncover the forces that had driven her to accepting their bargain.

As she nuzzled up against him, one thought filled his mind. Stephanie had wanted to save herself for the man she’d fall in love with. He had taken her virginity. The best way to repair the damage he’d done was to become a man who deserved that gift.

To gain her forgiveness and appease his gnawing guilt, he needed to make Stephanie fall in love with him, just a little, and only for the brief duration of their relationship, so she wouldn’t resent having made the sacrifice. And when the time came for them to say goodbye, he would let her down gently, and they could part as friends.

Chapter Five

Slowly, Stephanie's sobs subsided and the shaking of her shoulders calmed under Grant's soothing hands. He kept up his steady stream of softly murmured words. A strange tenderness filled him as he felt the warmth of her body against his and the velvety texture of her skin beneath his fingers.

"Are you all right, sweetheart?" he asked, arching away to examine her face.

Her lashes fluttered up. Tears glinted in the sooty strands and broke loose to roll down her cheeks. The blue in her eyes had deepened to midnight. Without thinking, Grant lowered his head and kissed away a tear, and then another, and another. His lips traced the curve of her cheekbone, down to her jaw.

With a tiny murmur of longing, Stephanie turned her head until their lips met. It seemed the most natural thing in the world for Grant to continue kissing her, a tender caress that coaxed her mouth to open, to accept what he had to offer. Endlessly, he traced her lips with his, keeping the pressure delicate, finding a reservoir of patience inside him that he hadn't known existed.

Until now. Until tonight. Until Stephanie.

"Will you let me make love to you?" he asked. "Show you how good it can be?"

He felt her hesitant nod in how her lips rubbed against his.

"Say it," he demanded in a rough murmur. "I need to hear you say the words. Tell me that you want me to make love to you."

"I want you to make love to me," Stephanie told him, and not a single victory in his life had given Grant the same surge of triumph as her whispered response.

He returned to her mouth, increasing the pressure of his lips on hers. Her body stirred in his arms. Her hands crept up to twine around his neck, and with a shuddering sigh, Stephanie opened her mouth for him, her tongue darting out to meet his, her lips molding in a greedy crush against his.

The impact felt like a rocket going off in his loins. A harsh groan rose in his chest. Grant rolled over to his back, dragging Stephanie on top of him. She molded against him like a contented cat, kissing him, sliding her fingers into his hair. He curled his hands around her waist and lifted her up,

balancing her above him, nuzzling kisses along her shoulder and her collarbone, until he caught one peaked breast and closed his mouth around the nipple, sucking, teasing, gently nibbling with his teeth.

Stephanie gave a frantic cry that brought him to a reluctant halt.

"What is it?" he asked. "Did I hurt you?"

"No," she breathed, the harsh sound echoing the need Grant struggled to keep at bay. "More. Again." She shifted above him, dipped her head for another hungry kiss, then guided his mouth to her other breast.

The steady whimper that rose in Stephanie's throat gave Grant the assurance he needed to continue his sensual onslaught. Observing her every move, paying attention to the tiniest of reactions, he measured her responses, building an awareness of what she appeared to enjoy the most.

She liked his mouth on her breast, the tug of his teeth on the beaded nipple, harder than he would have expected. The steady sweep of his hands against her back made her arch up against him. His fingers firmly cupping her softly rounded buttocks elicited a low moan of pleasure from her throat.

He edged one hand between their bodies, reached down to the triangle of curls at the apex of her thighs. Stephanie stiffened above him, gasping a sharp breath.

"Easy," he murmured. "There's no rush." Grant rolled her onto her back and leisurely traced his fingertips over her flat belly, at the same time leaning over her, a smile of reassurance on his lips. "Are you okay?"

"No," she told him. "I'm on fire and my brain has stopped working."

He gave a low laugh and dropped a kiss on her lips. "That's the way it's supposed to be." His fingers drifted to brush the curls that shielded her intimacy. "Do you want more?"

Her mouth curled into a tight smile. "If you stopped now, I'd probably kill you, and no jury in the world would convict me of a crime."

Rocking with laughter, Grant edged down her body. "In that case, I'd better get on with saving my life." He pressed his mouth over the smooth texture of her belly and began to inch lower, only to be stopped by Stephanie tangling her fingers into his hair.

"Not there," she told him when he raised his head to look at her. "That's too much."

He nodded, moved back up to lean over her, and instead slid one hand between her thighs and waited. After a moment of hesitation, she relaxed, allowing him to nudge her legs apart.

"That's it," he told her as he slipped his fingers into the moist valley where he found the plump petals and traced them with his fingertips, circling each side, separating the peaks to reach the hidden folds in between.

Stephanie writhed on the bed. A low keening sound escaped her lips, punctuated by a mix of incoherent words in English and French, and what Grant assumed to be Swedish. A sense of loss pierced him at each foreign sound, since the meaning the words remained lost to him.

"That's it, sweetheart," he murmured. "Let it happen." He kept up his soft stroking, then found her opening and probed one finger gently along the contours.

"Oh my God." Stephanie lifted her shoulders on the bed and stared at him with wide eyes. "What are you doing?"

"Saving my life," he told her with a wry smile, and moved his hand a fraction to find the tip of her swollen bud where every nerve centered.

It wasn't supposed to happen like this.

The thought flashed through Stephanie's mind as another ray of pleasure arrowed through her. She had planned to remain aloof, tolerating Grant's invasion of her body with a cool disdain. Instead, like a flower reaching toward the sun, she had opened up for him, welcoming his touch.

Her mind scattered as Grant increased the pressure of his searching fingers. Tension built inside her, a tightness that she had before known only alone, sheltered by darkness, in the privacy of her own bedroom. Words tumbled out of her in Swedish, as instinct switched to the language she had grown up with, which best allowed her to express the turbulent feelings that buffeted her.

Grant leaned over her, his bronzed torso dark in the dim light. She clung to his shoulders, felt the warmth and strength beneath the smooth skin. His taut muscles, together with the frown of concentration and the tightly clenched set of his jaw revealed the effort it had cost him to pull back, to put easing her distress before seeking his own satisfaction.

The thought that he had cared enough to take the time to console her soothed Stephanie's fears over what was happening between them. Her head fell back against the pillows. Her eyes shut tight as she focused on enjoying Grant's touch on her most intimate spot.

There. Just there. She shifted on the bed to seek a firmer contact with his hand and murmured out a demand for more. Grant's exploring fingers stoked the need inside her as the sharp rays of pleasure teased her with promises of experiences that surpassed anything she had known before. Her words grew into an incoherent stream of sounds. Then Grant caught her on a rising tide of sensation, and her tension crested. A wave of pleasure washed over her, so powerful it tore a scream from her throat. Unable to control her reaction, she thrashed on the bed, her head flinging side to side on the pillow.

"Do you want me inside you now?" Grant asked in a strained voice as he watched Stephanie fly apart, her climax as primitive as the howl of a wild animal finding its release.

"Yes," Stephanie rasped. She cracked her eyes open to give him a dazed look. "Please. Do it. Now."

His body quivering with need, Grant shifted into position between Stephanie's slender legs, now spread wantonly wide to receive him. He guided his shaft into her. With infinite care, he inched deeper, taking his time, watching her face, ready to stop at the smallest sign of distress. But instead of crying out with pain, Stephanie tilted her hips to meet him. She clung to his shoulders, her blunt nails digging into his skin as she urged him to hurry.

Using every ounce of his willpower, Grant kept his progress slow, until he was buried to the hilt inside her. The hot pressure against his shaft sent sparks of pleasure shooting from his groin all through his body, and yet he remained still. Then Stephanie began to rock against him. With small moans of delight, she found her own rhythm of advance and recoil that caused him to move inside her tight passage. Grant met her movements, amplified them, and then abandoned his caution and pulled all the way out of her, only to plunge back in with a jolt that seemed to wipe every trace of civilization from his mind, sending him back to the basic instincts of male to capture a female and consummate their union.

Again and again, he thrust into Stephanie. She clung to his shoulders, her head raised from the pillow to allow her lips to scatter tiny kisses over his neck and shoulders. For a while, she wound her legs around him, and then released her hold and instead propped her feet against the bed to better meet his thrusts. The sheets tangled beneath them. A dull noise filled his ears and his vision dimmed. When Grant thought his heart would surely stop, Stephanie bowed under him, and with a keening cry she began to pulse around him, clenching his shaft, sharing her pleasure with him.

A roar of ownership, as old as mankind, broke from deep in his chest, and he crested to release his seed into the woman who for tonight had become his chosen mate.

It took Grant several minutes to regain his breath and his sanity. He lay slumped on top of Stephanie, only vaguely concerned that his weight might be crushing her. He rolled onto his side, propped up on one elbow, and studied her face. Her mouth hung open. Swift breaths rushed in and out between her parted lips. Her eyes remained tightly shut, and the stunned expression on her face left him unsure of how she felt.

"Stephanie," he prompted. "Look at me."

She blinked her eyes open, the blue gaze deep and unfathomable.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

Stephanie shook her head. "No," she said in a small voice. "My blood boiled and my bones melted. My brain has been rewired to be the slave of my body. My life will never go back to being how it was before." She closed her eyes again, and with a satisfied sigh, she curled up against him.

Grant watched over her as she drifted off to sleep. When he settled beside her and wrapped his arms around her slender waist, he felt he had taken the first step in redeeming himself in her eyes.

* * * *

Stephanie curled up under the covers and listened to the sounds of Grant moving around the suite. After showering and getting dressed, he made a few murmured telephone calls. He thanked the waiter who delivered breakfast, and ate with the soft clink of cutlery against china. The lingering smells of ham and eggs made her mouth water, but she didn't allow a single muscle in her body to stir.

Of all her confused feelings, the one that grew to blot out all others was a fervent gratitude that Grant made no effort to wake her. By allowing her to keep up the pretense of sleep, he spared her the embarrassment of facing up to her brazen behavior last night.

Wanton. Uninhibited. Hedonistic.

All her life, she had kept herself aloof from men, believing that she was adhering to the old-fashioned values of her upbringing. In truth, it had been her instincts warning her that a deep core of sensuality lay hidden beneath her controlled exterior. Once released, the needs of her body might take over and rule her sensible mind.

Her fears had been justified. With a frightening certainty, Stephanie knew that the passions released last night could never be reeled back inside, but would roam free, demanding to be satisfied.

Footsteps crossed the room, and she sensed the heat from Grant's body as he leaned over her. "I know you're awake," he told her softly. "I need to go out for a few hours. I'll see you back here around midday. We need to check out and leave for the airport by two."

He waited, and when she didn't react, he gave her shoulder a gentle squeeze. "Will you be all right on your own?"

Stephanie moved her head in a reluctant nod, and Grant withdrew his hand from her skin with a caressing motion. "I want you to go out and buy yourself something nice. A piece of jewelry. Use the money in the safe. All of it. Don't worry about clothes. You can get those in Houston."

The footsteps retreated, and the door closed with a soft click.

Only then did Stephanie open her eyes and face the truth.

She had lied to herself.

She had fabricated a noble motive for accepting Grant's proposition. The simple admittance that she'd been unable to resist the attraction between them would have unsettled her moral beliefs. She had *wanted* to go with him. Tired of waiting for someone to capture her heart, she'd been eager to explore the physical pleasures between a man and a woman.

A sob escaped her throat as she realized how she had cheated herself. If she had told Grant the truth, confessed that she longed for his touch but was afraid of the unknown, he would have revered the gift she had to offer. He would have treated her with the courtesy and respect a proper girlfriend deserved.

Instead, she had gone along with the stupid charade, and now he would never forget she was someone he'd purchased with his money. He would always think of her as he thought of his mother—faithless and worthless.

To protect her pride and her heart, she ought to leave at once, but every fiber in her body rebelled against the thought. She couldn't bear the thought of being thrown back into her lonely existence so soon. She'd enjoy the three months with Grant. She might never feel the same instinctive bond with another man, and she wanted to gather memories to cherish during the cold winter nights if she ended up alone.

It would be safe to stay, provided she observed three important rules. One, she would allow her emotions to flow freely during the night, but would be careful to keep aloof during the day. Two, she would refuse to accept any material benefits beyond their agreement. Three, and the most vital, she would *not* allow herself to fall in love with Grant Buchanan.

Chapter Six

Stephanie glanced up from her laptop when Grant strode into the suite at half past one. Her leather travel bag and her canvas tote stood lined up by her feet. All she needed to do was to unplug her laptop and slip it inside the tote, and she'd be ready to go.

"Did you have a nice morning?" Grant crossed the room and steadied one hand on her shoulder as he leaned down to brush a light kiss on her mouth. She turned her head, so that his lips grazed her cheek instead. He didn't show any reaction, merely stood straight and moved to the coffee pot that simmered on the bar counter.

"I had a fine time," she muttered.

"Did you have breakfast in the restaurant downstairs?"

She shook her head. "I finished what was left of yours."

"You don't have to eat leftovers. You can order anything you want."

His tone of irritation strengthened Stephanie's resolve to maintain her financial independence to the extent she could. "It was all right, and it was there. I didn't want to order something else and then have to wait for it to arrive."

"Did you go shopping?"

"No. I took a walk in Central Park."

He shot her a glance, but made no comment that she'd disobeyed his order to buy something for herself.

"I'm sorry I'm late," he said, sounding distracted. "I had planned to take you out to lunch, but there's no time."

"Doesn't matter." She shifted one shoulder in dismissal. "I bought a sandwich for lunch."

Grant picked up a wrinkled shirt from the back of a chair and threw it in the overnight case he flipped open on one of the green sofas. Stephanie watched him, saw his broad shoulders strain under

the charcoal suit as he bent forward. A sudden tightness stole her breath as she recalled the feel of his body against hers during the night. She lowered her lashes to shield her eyes, in case he glanced in her direction, but instead he disappeared into the bedroom. She heard a few rattling sounds when something was tossed in the trash. A moment later Grant reemerged. He added a zipped leather pouch into the suitcase, closed the lid, and snapped the locks.

"Ready?" he asked.

"I'll just go in the bathroom." Stephanie returned with the unused miniature toiletries and packed them in the small transparent plastic bag intended for getting liquids through airport security.

"There's no need to do that," he told her. "I can buy you anything you want."

She ignored him, gaining a small measure of strength from how his brows gathered in frustration. She walked over to the safe and punched in the combination. "Your money." She held the thick envelope out to him.

Grant hesitated, appearing to be weighing up his options. "I'd be grateful if you could hold on to it," he said finally. "That way, I don't need to worry if I have to ask you to pay for a delivery, or tip a waiter, or take a taxi somewhere." He met her eyes with a searching look. "Is that all right with you?"

Stephanie nodded. From his carefully chosen words she understood that Grant didn't intend to use her financially dependent situation to humiliate her. That he should be so sensitive to her feelings sent an unexpected surge of warmth through her.

Barricading her heart against him would be her biggest challenge in the next three months.

* * * *

"I'm sorry." Grant leaned back in the wide leather seat of the first class cabin. "I thought we'd have time to grab something to eat at the airport."

"It's not your fault there was a demonstration that blocked the traffic."

Baffled, Grant studied the delicate profile beside him. In his experience, as soon as he allowed a woman to join him on a trip, she abdicated all responsibility for the arrangements to him. Any problem that arose became his fault. Never satisfied with their lot in life, women had a tendency to complain, and he had expected the same from Stephanie.

With an uneasy tug of curiosity, he considered the possibility that she was different from other women of his acquaintance in more aspects than just her old-fashioned attitude to sex. Could it be that she really was as honest and down to earth as she appeared? Had God truly created women who put loyalty and integrity and friendship before material comforts and financial security?

Grant shrugged his shoulders to dismiss the thought. *Of course not.* Stephanie had proved the opposite herself, by accepting the arrangement he had proposed. All women were the same—out to get as much as they could, and God have mercy on a man stupid enough to fall in love. The only way for a man to safeguard his pride and dignity was to keep his emotions under lock and key.

"What exactly is it that you do in Paris?" he asked, with some vague idea that knowing more about her would help him figure out how to disentangle her from his thoughts.

"Telling you about my personal life isn't part of our arrangement."

His jaws clenched in anger at her blunt response. They were in a public place, and discretion prevented him from airing out the terms of their agreement. "You'll like Houston." He forced his voice to remain calm. "There'll be plenty for you to do. Concerts, shops, movies, art galleries."

"Do you live in the city?"

"I have an apartment and offices in the city, but I live on a horse property almost two hours to the west."

"What's a horse property?"

"Like a small ranch. Big enough to have stables and grazing for horses, but not a working ranch with cattle."

"I see." Her mouth pulled into a considering pout, but she made no further comment.

Grant stood up and reached for his briefcase in the overhead compartment. He pulled out a sheaf of papers, dropped down the tray table in front of him, and started to review estimates for an installation project in Prudhoe Bay in Alaska.

"What is it *you* do?" Stephanie craned her neck to inspect the documents in front of him.

"I design and supply service quarters for oil rigs. Accommodation modules, waste treatment plants, kitchen areas. On shore and off shore." He paused, but when he detected a spark of interest in her eyes, he felt compelled to carry on. "I've built up enough cash to start expanding downstream. I'm looking to buy up small companies that supply the components. Gives me control over delivery times and quality."

She gave him a slow nod, but he didn't probe to check how much of the complexities of his business she might be capable of understanding. His eyes were still on Stephanie when she bent to rummage in the canvas tote before her feet.

"Would you like a sandwich? I bought two." She held up a pair of packages wrapped in cellophane.

"What have you got?" he asked, and decided not to belittle her gesture by pointing out that unlike the rest of the plane, the first class cabin would have a meal served during the flight.

"Tuna or pastrami."

"Okay if I take the pastrami?"

"Perfect. I prefer the tuna." A smile lit up her face, and Grant would have sworn the plane hit an air pocket. He held his breath as he stored his papers and accepted the impromptu feast. It was a small thing, but the fact that she had done something to ensure his welfare sent a jolt of pleasure through him.

While they ate, he covertly watched Stephanie and tried to figure out what it was about her that unsettled him so. Once he knew, he'd be able to deal with the problem and get back to his normal routine.

* * * *

The late afternoon sun cast a golden glow over the flat green fields and slowly meandering muddy rivers as the plane circled upon approach to Houston. Grant had spent the entire flight engrossed in his papers, but when the stewardess ordered him to stow away his briefcase and raise the tray table, he obeyed without protest.

"I can't see any skyscrapers," Stephanie complained.

"The airport is too far north." Grant leaned across Stephanie to glance out through the window. "The world looks sleepy and peaceful down below, but the city is less than an hour away. You'll see plenty of skyscrapers there. My office is on the sixteenth floor."

Stephanie held her breath as Grant's shoulder pressed against her arm. Throughout the flight, her skin had tingled with awareness of him in the aisle seat beside her. She had pretended to be engrossed in looking out of the window. Once or twice, Grant had given her an amused look, raising his brows at the view, which contained nothing but a solid blue sky and a few wispy clouds.

She had allowed him to think it was the excitement of flying that made her jittery.

The instant the seatbelt sign was turned off, Grant stood up. He retrieved their luggage from the overhead bin, passing Stephanie her leather bag. When the doors opened, he headed out and stalked down the corridor at a determined pace.

"Are you okay to keep up?" he called over his shoulder as Stephanie trailed behind. "I want to try and beat the rush hour around the city."

"Yes," she replied, hurrying after him, trying to snatch a few glimpses of the crowds, so different from the people in Paris or Stockholm. Large bodies, casual clothing, open and friendly expressions. "People really do wear Stetson hats," she blurted out after a while. "I thought it was just in the movies."

"This is Texas," Grant replied as he finished the call he'd been making on his cell phone and ushered her through the exit. Hot air hit her like an open furnace. Stephanie paused and tilted her head back to inhale deeply.

"Too hot and muggy for you?" Grant asked.

"No." She blinked her eyes open and grinned at him. "I grew up with snow and ice. It can never be too hot or muggy for me."

Stephanie had expected a chauffeur driven limo, but instead a valet drove up a big sedan with darkened windows and handed the keys to Grant. He tossed their bags in the trunk and motioned her into the passenger seat.

"I only drive this thing for business. At home I drive a pick-up," he explained as he pulled away from the curb. "Will you be comfortable driving the truck, or do we need to rent you something smaller?"

"I don't drive."

He shot her a startled glance across the front seat. "You don't drive?"

Stephanie shrugged. "I can't afford a car, so there's never been any point in learning. And in Paris the Metro is the easiest way to get around anyway."

"I'll have to hire someone to drive you around."

"I'm perfectly capable of amusing myself for three months without trips to the cinema and art galleries," she told him, and anticipated another round in his battle to exert control over her.

"What about going out to the shops?"

"Am I expected to do your grocery shopping?"

"No." He scowled at her. "Of course not. I have household staff for that."

"In which case, there should be no need to employ someone to drive me around."

"Stephanie, your life is going to be very uncomfortable if you refuse to accept anything from me."

She contemplated Grant in the cool air that hummed through the car. For a moment, she almost gave in to the temptation of telling him about Anders, about how she'd tricked herself into accepting his crazy proposal. She could tell Grant that she wanted to end the charade, and instead stay with him on terms of open affection and respect.

Would he delight in her honesty? Would he acknowledge her integrity? And would he agree to cancel their financial arrangement and instead treat her like a proper girlfriend? Or would he look at her with suspicion in his eyes and think she was out to snare him and his millions?

A cold shiver ran down her spine as she considered how he could crush her pride. He might refuse to listen, or even worse, throw her out, if he felt she was stepping beyond the boundaries of their bargain.

The impossibility of confessing how she felt settled like a burden upon her shoulders. She would deal with each day as it unfolded, and do her best to guard her heart.

* * * *

Grant pulled up outside the house he'd built after his tenth million was safely in the bank. A matching pair of low wings flanked the taller central section, where a portico covered the main entrance.

"Horatio." He waved to his household manager, who hurried over, immaculate in black pleated pants and a crisp white linen shirt. "This is Stephanie." Grant watched them shake hands, saw Stephanie's admiring glance. "Before you get any ideas in your head, Horatio is gay," he informed her.

"I should have known." Stephanie sent Horatio a dimpled smile. "The best looking men always are."

Horatio brushed a hand over his dark hair. "Whoever she is, she gets my vote."

Grant yanked his briefcase from the trunk. "When you two have finished setting up your mutual fan club, can you get Stephanie settled in the house?" He turned to Horatio and lowered his voice. "She can pick a room for her exclusive use. The library might be suitable, but she's not to have a bedroom of her own. The only bed she'll sleep in is mine, whether I'm in it or not."

"Who is she?" Horatio asked in a discreet whisper.

"She's my wife," Grant said, and grinned at the startled expression on Stephanie's face. Ignoring the sense of alarm that his own words stirred inside him, he stalked up to his study, not pausing to reply to Horatio's mumbled request for additional details.

As he extracted a stack of papers from his briefcase and focused on the demands of his business, Grant allowed himself a brief moment of reflection. In the beginning, it had been his sole aim to prove that Stephanie was mercenary and scheming, like his mother had been. Now, for the first time in his life, he gloried in the possibility that he might be proved wrong.

* * * *

Horatio gave up staring after Grant in shock and turned to Stephanie. "Is it all right if I call you Stephanie, or would you prefer Mrs. Buchanan?"

"Stephanie. Please. And we're not really married. Grant is just joking."

A crease appeared between Horatio's dark brows, but the frown didn't spoil the perfection of his features. "It's an odd topic for him to joke about. He isn't exactly pro-marriage."

"Oh?" Stephanie pulled a wry face. "You've noticed, then?"

"I have." Horatio gave a soft chuckle as he pulled the luggage from the trunk, taking care to protect his clothes from any clinging dirt. "And the trail of disappointed females in his wake hasn't exactly suffered in silence. One of them even organized a scene at a charity ball, accusing him of being a cold-hearted bastard."

A mix of jealousy and satisfaction rippled through Stephanie. "What did Grant say?"

Horatio glanced up from the task of pulling up the handle on Grant's carry on. "He agreed with her. Thanked her for the compliment. Although he was pissed off when the picture of her screaming at him made the gossip columns the next morning. He dislikes personal publicity. The only newspaper he likes to be in is the Wall Street Journal."

"Let me." Stephanie moved over and took her leather bag from Horatio. "You've got your hands full with opening and closing doors."

He shot her a puzzled look. "You're not Grant's usual type."

"Oh?" she said, curiosity stirring inside her. "What's his usual type?"

"Big hair. Lots of makeup." Horatio's grin widened. "Long fingernails. Don't carry their suitcases. Or tidy up their room. But excel in shopping in expensive stores."

"Oh dear." Stephanie marched along the circular drive to follow Horatio inside. "It seems I've failed at the first hurdle."

Horatio laughed out loud. "You certainly have. But if I were a betting man, you're the horse I would back."

"I'm flattered, but I think you'd lose your money," Stephanie replied, although pleasure weaved around her at the veiled compliment, and the warm welcome she had received.

"So..." Horatio deposited the suitcase in the vast galleried hall and indicated Stephanie to do the same with her travel bag. "We've got to find you a room. Let's go and check out the library. I'll introduce you to the others later. There are two maids, who both live out. Paquita is almost fifty, although she'll only admit to forty-two. She is married with two grown-up kids. Maria is in her twenties and single. They've both gone home early today. Sorry about that. We didn't expect an extra guest."

As Horatio spoke, he escorted her down a corridor and flung open a heavy oak door.

"What is this?" Stephanie stepped into the dimly lit room and inhaled the musty air. "Is this like Miss Havisham's library, sealed in the past?"

"A little dusting will go a long way. Let me pull open the drapes." Horatio hurried across the room to where a thin line of sunshine broke through the thick velvet curtains.

"A little dusting?" Stephanie cast a doubtful glance around. Yellowing piles of newspapers filled most of the bookcases that lined the walls, and what looked like a junkyard of old office equipment cluttered one corner of the floor.

"Well, maybe a mop, and a bucketful of water too. Grant doesn't want Maria and Paquita to clean here. He worries they'll throw out the old newspapers before he's had a chance to read them."

"You'd better bring me a mop and a bucket, and find some rubber gloves to protect my hands." Stephanie surveyed the generous space and sturdy oak furniture, relishing the challenge of bringing about a transformation.

"I didn't mean that you'd get on with it." Horatio cast a look of horror in her direction. "Maria will do it tomorrow. She does the cleaning. Paquita is in charge of the kitchen."

"Grant's busy, and I need to occupy my time until he's free." Stephanie checked her watch. "I have until nine. Three hours. That should be enough."

Horatio shook his head, but amusement and interest sparked in his dark eyes. "Grant is going to fire me if he finds you elbow deep in dirty water."

"So don't tell him." Stephanie yanked off her angora sweater and rolled up the sleeves of her cotton top. "Maybe you could see if you can find me an old T-shirt to go with the rubber gloves."

Muttering to himself, still shaking his head, Horatio retreated from the room.

Full of energy, itching with a sense of purpose, Stephanie tackled the task of turning the library into her personal space. She recalled the comment her mother had made when they moved in with Anders' father. 'A woman cleaning a man's house is like a tomcat peeing in the corners—marking her territory'

Is that what she was doing? Trying to lay claim to Grant by scrubbing his parquet floor and dusting his bookshelves?

Watch out, Stephanie told herself. Don't fall into the age old trap of looking after a man and letting him steal your heart.

Chapter Seven

At precisely nine o'clock that evening, Stephanie knocked on the door of Grant's den. She had thrown herself into the task of cleaning the library, and the physical effort had served to keep her restless thoughts at bay. She had no idea if Grant had learned what she was occupied with, or if he had forgotten that she even existed, as more important matters demanded his attention.

She found him sprawled in a big leather recliner, dressed in jeans and a loose dark blue top with the number twenty-five on the front, watching a football game on a big flat screen television.

"I'm coming on duty," she informed him.

He glanced at his watch. "Punctual."

He waved her over, and when she was close enough, he reached out and yanked her into his lap. Stephanie toppled down with a shriek.

Grant clutched her into his chest. "Hush," he told her. "I can't hear the commentary when you're screaming into my ear."

For the next half hour, she nestled in his lap. His right hand drifted up and down her arm in a lazy caress. Once in a while, he nuzzled a kiss on the side of her neck. Gradually, Stephanie conquered the anxiety that had filled her as the evening hours passed, bringing with them the promise of a renewal of the previous night's intimacies. Her body relaxed into an easy slump that molded her curves against the muscled thighs and chest of the man beneath her, allowing her to enjoy the heat their bodies generated between them.

A sense of belonging had already set root in her heart, and she chased away the fleeting dream of what life could be if they truly were married. Nothing good would come from such make-believe. And yet, a feeling of safety and comfort enveloped her in Grant's arms, banishing away the sadness that had been her companion in the past two years.

"What have you been doing this evening?" Grant mumbled, his lips brushing her cheek as the final score flashed up on the screen and the crowd at the stadium stood up and cheered.

"I've taken over the room Horatio pitifully calls the library."

Grant arched a brow. "Pitifully?"

Stephanie wriggled in his lap to face him and twined her hands behind his neck. "A library is meant to have books. Not moldy newspapers and a collection of old fax machines."

Grant dragged his mouth against hers and spoke with his lips on hers. "When I see something interesting that I don't have the time to read, I put the newspaper aside for later. I always forget what the interesting thing was."

"And the fax machines?" She traced the contours of his lips with the tip of her tongue.

His arm around her tightened and he hugged her to his chest. "Backup in case the new one breaks."

"And the other three?" she murmured.

"Backup for backup."

"A thorough man."

"Un-huh." He thrust his tongue into her mouth for a very thorough kiss. For a while, the only sounds in the room were the automotive commercial on the television and the low hum of pleasure that Stephanie made in the back of her throat.

"What did you have for dinner?" Grant asked when he paused for breath, appearing totally in control, as if the kiss had only briefly distracted him.

"A tuna sandwich," Stephanie murmured, and inhaled the musky scent of his skin.

"You had a tuna sandwich for lunch," Grant said.

"I like tuna sandwiches."

"If you like something, are you happy to have it over and over again, every night?"

"Uh-huh." She trailed her finger down the neckline of his jersey until she reached the crisp red-gold hairs on his chest.

He pulled his head back and searched her features. "Might that apply to making love to me?"

Alarm bells pealed in her head, loud and clear. In the few days they had spent together, she had built up a mental portrait of Grant Buchanan. Stubborn to the point of obstinacy, possessed of an iron determination, combined with a strong will to win. Her instincts warned her that Grant had set out to conquer her. If he couldn't dominate her with money, he'd seek to do it with emotions. He'd manipulate her heartstrings, until they were wound tight around him, and then he'd cast her off and break her heart.

If she allowed him.

"You ask too many questions," she muttered against his lips. "Let's go to bed."

"Don't you want to have a shower first?"

"I already did. I was covered in dust after my encounter with the fax machines."

"In which case—" He picked her up and planted her on her feet on the ground. Clasp ing her hand in his, he ushered her up the stairs.

Keep it light. It's only physical. Sex. God, if I'd known how fantastic it is to sleep with a man, I wouldn't have waited so long.

Confused thoughts jumbled around Stephanie's mind, but even as she accepted her new-found sensual hunger, she wondered if it would ever be as good with any other man. Excitement coiled inside her in anticipation of experiencing the same shattering intensity of emotion Grant had wrought from her last night. Deep in her mind she knew there was some fact she was not facing, some danger she had closed her mind to.

As they reached the bedroom door, Grant turned to her. He scooped her in his arms and lifted her high against his chest, kicking the door open as he carried her across the threshold in a symbolic gesture so sweet it brought tears to her eyes.

Pregnancy. Contraception.

That was the danger she had closed her mind to, but now, like a flashing police lights in the rearview mirror, the thoughts streaked through her consciousness. She chose to ignore them. If something happened, so be it. A new life would balance out Anders dying. Resolutely, recklessly, Stephanie thrust aside the caution any sensible woman should have dealt with as a matter of priority.

As Grant swung her on her feet beside the bed, Stephanie knew she had found an answer to a question that had always puzzled her. Every educated woman understood the prospect of conceiving a child as a result of unprotected sex, and yet every year thousands of them ended up with unwanted pregnancies.

You knew the danger. But sometimes you just didn't care.

Stephanie held her breath as Grant stood facing her. Every nerve in her body throbbed, waiting, wanting. Torn between impatience and the excitement of anticipation, she watched him frowning in concentration as, one by one, he released the buttons on her ivory cotton blouse. He pushed the garment down her shoulders, his calloused hands scraping her skin a little, and then he spun her around to unhook her bra. As he slipped the straps down her arms, baring her to his touch, he pressed slow kisses on her shoulders and neck.

"You have a soft skin that is lovely to touch." He spun her back around and brushed his fingers down the valley between her small upright breasts. Fleeting ly Stephanie regretted not having a more voluptuous figure. Marie had had her breasts augmented, and had suggested the same procedure would enhance Stephanie's figure.

"See how perfectly you fit?" Grant cupped his hands around her breasts.

Her lids fluttered down in relief. Altering what nature had provided had seemed such a drastic step, and now she knew there would never be a need to even think about it. With a low murmur of admiration, Grant brushed his thumbs over the hardened nipples. The contact sent tendrils of pleasure shooting through her, and fleeting ly Stephanie wondered why anyone would accept the risk of losing some of the ability to feel those incredible sensations in order to increase the size of her breasts through surgery.

She grabbed the hem of Grant's floppy jersey and tugged the garment over his head. Exhaling a sigh of satisfaction, she smoothed her hands over the padded contours of his chest and shoulders. He

probably carried more weight now than he had in his youth, but it made him solid, a wall of warmth and safety to cuddle up to in the night.

"I like this," she told him as she tangled her fingers in the hairs sprinkled on his chest.

"What about this?" He reached down to swiftly discard his jeans and boxers, then took hold of her wrist and guided her hand to the coarse curls from which his manhood jutted out.

"I don't know," she told him. "I haven't made up my mind yet."

Grant chuckled, a grin easing his tense features. "By all means, feel free to explore."

With a small gust of laughter, Stephanie fell down on her knees before him. "I believe putting it in my mouth would be the ultimate source of male pleasure."

His eyes glittered with intent. "How would you know? You haven't—?"

She shook her head, an impish smile curving her lips. "I've read it in magazines. And living with Marie has been an education." She extended one finger and ran it along his quivering shaft, marveling at how hot and smooth it felt, and yet hard as steel beneath the satiny skin. She slanted a glance up to his face. "For example, I understand that you have been circumcised."

A thrill raced down her spine at how Grant closed his eyes and tipped his head back, an expression of intense concentration on his face.

"Does that mean you're Jewish?" she asked.

"No." His voice came out on a strangled rasp. "My foreskin was too tight. It was fixed when I was a toddler."

"Good," she informed him breezily. "It is supposed to be better for the woman. Reduces the chances of cervical cancer."

"Happy to be accommodating."

She continued tracing the outline of his shaft with her finger, all the way from the curls at the base, to the helmet-shaped end. Gradually she concentrated on the tip, taking her guidance from Grant's reaction. She ran her finger around the rim, and then spread out the drop of moisture that had seeped out from the small opening in the center.

"Are you going to do it or not?" Grant demanded.

"I haven't made up my mind," she said, and felt a surge of feminine power when his strong body shuddered in response.

"If you don't do something soon, I'm going to toss you on your back and thrust into you," Grant warned.

"Do something? Like this?" Stephanie said, and licked the length of him with a smooth lap of her tongue.

"Jesus." Grant took a backward step and reached out to seek support from the footboard of the bed behind him. "What are you doing?"

"I'm tasting you," she told him, and closed her mouth around him. She curled her fingers around the smooth shaft and swirled her tongue around the bulbous end.

"Christ," Grant groaned. "Stephanie. Stop. Jesus. No. Hold my balls. Hold my balls."

She reached her fingers beneath the flurry of curls, found the tightened spheres and gently squeezed them. Grant's hands rested on her head, locking her in place, urging her on, and his ragged moans of pleasure sent a wave of triumph through her, despite the slightly uncomfortable choking sensation. And then he burst into her mouth in a series of slightly salty spurts of semen, and she held him, one hand cradling his testicles, the other curled around his shaft, her lips and tongue no longer moving on him.

Grant kept murmuring her name, until she carefully pulled away and tiptoed into the bathroom, where she spat her mouth empty into the sink and rinsed with water.

She found Grant rooted where she'd left him, a dazed grin on his face. "Christ, Stephanie. Where the hell did you learn to do that?"

"You just taught me." She drifted closer and pressed a kiss on one of the flat brown nipples that punctuated his chest. "It's a useful thing to know. If we get stranded on a desert island, I can keep myself alive doing that. Sperm is supposed to be full of protein." She switched her attention to the other nipple. "Marie spits it into a jar, brings it home, and puts it in the fridge. She mixes it with honey to make a face pack. She says it's better for your skin than any of those expensive serums they advertise on home shopping channels."

Grant shook his head. "You're one hell of a contradiction, Stephanie Forssell. I thought you were too innocent for words, and now you're making plans to suck my strength, like some new species of vampire." He dropped to his knees in front of her and tackled the fastening of her jeans.

"My turn," he said, and despite her startled cry of protest, proceeded to swiftly strip her naked. Then he tossed her on the bed and climbed up between her thighs, hooking his hands behind her knees to fold up her legs in order to create a better access for his mouth.

"No," Stephanie pleaded. "Not yet. I just wouldn't feel...comfortable. Please?" She sent him a pleading look, and when Grant adhered to her request and instead moved up along her body and began to kiss her on the lips, a strand of trust was added into the ties of attraction that were slowly and surely weaving around her heart.

Strong and warm, his mouth explored hers, sending a pulse of yearning to thrum in her private places. His heavy frame on top of her, and the slight rasp of his evening stubble against her skin, added to the masculine appeal that overwhelmed her senses. When his tongue invaded her mouth, she caught a faint taste of the beer he'd been drinking while he watched the football game.

Emitting a small helpless moan of surrender, she tipped back her head and closed her eyes. Grant trailed hungry kisses down her neck, dipping between her breasts. From one side to another, he roamed with his lips, tasting her, lapping the tip of his tongue along the smooth slopes of her breasts, but never making full contact with the sensitive nipples.

And then he pulled away, leaving a chill to sweep her skin.

"Please," Stephanie muttered, twisting her body to offer her left breast to him. A need pulsed through her for him to touch her, like an ache that danced along her nerve endings.

"Promise you won't stop me," he said.

Her eyes snapped wide open.

Grant was kneeling astride her on the bed. Dark gold hair shadowed the ridged muscles of his chest. The slight heaviness of the contours revealed his age, and the fact that he lacked the time to work out as regularly as he would have liked to. He didn't look at her face, but surveyed her exposed body with an intent gaze that skimmed downward from her breasts.

"I want to possess you fully. As intimately as a man can possess a woman. I want to taste you. The way you tasted me." As he spoke, he dragged one fingertip along her stomach, almost travelling up to her breasts, but remaining a maddening fraction away.

"Please," Stephanie murmured again, arching her back to guide his touch to one of the beaded nipples.

"No." His hand lifted away, leaving her bereft. "Not until you promise that you won't stop me."

Excitement coiled at the apex of her thighs. Like an electric current, the tension radiated up her spine and all over her skin. Her hands began to shake, and she fisted them in the crisp cotton sheet, digging her nails deep into the fabric.

"I won't stop you." The words spilled out of her on a rushed murmur as arousal overcame her modesty. "You can...kiss me...anywhere you want to."

Her lids fluttered down to shield her eyes, as if that small barrier would protect her privacy from being breached. Even with her body fully exposed to his touch, the lack of visual contact gave her a place to hide. Fear filled her that the emotions he commanded from her would reveal too much, would let him see the full extent of her sensual nature, and the knowledge would give him even more power over her.

She felt the mattress dip and rise as Grant scooted further down on the bed. A sharp inhale caught in her throat as she felt his warm breath right there, in her feminine center. Instinctively, her knees tried to slam shut, but met a solid wall of resistance. Blinking her eyes open, she saw Grant between her legs, his broad shoulders the barrier that had stopped her motion.

"Easy," he murmured. "Don't be afraid. I won't hurt you. It's going to feel good. I promise you that."

With a small whimper of acquiescence, born of nearly unbearable tension, Stephanie lowered her shoulders on the bed and closed her eyes once more. And then she felt it. A caress, so soft and gentle it barely brushed her intimate folds, yet so full of heat that it scorched her to the core.

"Ah!" The cry burst from her, high and uncontrollable.

"Enjoy it, sweetheart."

She barely heard the words, could not spare any of her attention to anything else than the sharp jolt of pleasure that returned when Grant lowered his mouth to her again. Now firmer, stronger, the heat between her legs acted like a switch that amplified every glorious sensation that streaked along her nerves.

Her body ceased to belong to her. She became Grant's, totally enslaved, under his control. Wanton cries left her lips as he used his tongue to trace her contours. Her back arched on the bed, as taut as a bow. Her legs shook. Tears gathered in her eyes, and her keening moans muffled into frantic sobs.

And then, just when she thought she could no longer bear the torture of such exquisite, overwhelming pleasure, he sucked her sensitive bud into his mouth. Like a cord stretched too tight, her limbs strained on the bed, poised for an endless second until a shattering climax crashed over her.

The force of it nearly drowned her. Her shoulders shot up, then fell down again. Her hands flung out. A vague awareness entered her mind that she had just hit Grant in the face with the violent throes of the release that buffeted her body, but the thought was instantly forgotten.

Not until the current of sensation that swept her along had stilled into a gently flowing river did she open her eyes. She found Grant watching her. A small smile of satisfaction curved his mouth, and an unmistakable glint of masculine pride shone in his amber eyes.

"I did promise you," he said. "It feels good, doesn't it?"

"Yes." With a lazy smile of her own, Stephanie reached out her arms, inviting Grant closer. He rose on his knees, leaning over her, and she gripped his shoulders, trying to pull him down to her, so she could snuggle up to him and share his warmth.

"What do you think you're doing?" Grant said in a voice light with amusement.

She peered at him from between her lids, partly feeling shy, but also lazy and sated after the explosive climax. "I'm going to sleep," she told him.

"No you're not." His fingers trailed along her belly, found her breast and began to tease the nipple into a peak.

"No?" A tremor shook her body as the cinders of pleasure inside her began to reignite, like dying flames being fanned.

"No," he said. "Now I'm going to make love to you."

Barely pausing after he spoke the words, he stretched out over her. His movements were unhurried as he settled into position, his straining shaft probing her entrance. Slowly, dreamily, he inched into her. He didn't kiss her, but braced up on his arms, so he could watch her.

"Open your eyes, Stephanie."

She obeyed the low command, found an oddly serious expression on his face, as if he was wrestling with some profound internal dilemma. Brows together, mouth unsmiling, eyes searching hers.

Instead of asking what troubled him, Stephanie reached up and cupped one hand over his cheek. "Thank you," she whispered. "That was the most wonderful thing I've ever experienced."

Grant didn't reply, merely nodded, then set to slide in and out of her in smooth strokes. Slow and steady, as if the world would wait for them forever. His eyes held hers, and Stephanie thought she saw questions in them, a hesitation which contradicted the confidence with which he usually appeared to face life.

Endlessly, he continued the easy rhythm of advance and recoil, until a small whimper of tension escaped her lips and told him she had started the climb toward release. At that point, he dipped his head to press a kiss on the corner of her mouth. Then he resumed his motion, picking up speed, but still leisurely, as if to make sure she stayed with him.

“Do you regret having come to Texas with me?” he asked, rising up on his arms again.

“No,” she said.

“Do you regret that you won’t be a virgin on your wedding night?”

“No.”

Without replying, he paused in his motion, and then thrust hard and deep. And again. And again, until she arched and cried out, her body rocking in rhythm with his.

“Good,” he said. His jaws clenched as with one final stroke he bowed and pulsed his own release inside her. “That’s what I wanted to hear.”

After his tremors stilled, he rolled to his side and wrapped his arms around her.

Exhausted, Stephanie fell asleep almost instantly, but not before a shudder of concern crept over her about the way Grant had once again succeeded in breaching her defenses.

Chapter Eight

Not a single ray of light broke through the thick curtains, but instinct told Stephanie morning had dawned. She turned on the bedside lamp and found Grant gone. Tossing the covers aside, she hopped up, strode to the window, and yanked the curtains wide.

Sunshine blinded her. When her eyes adjusted, she stretched, raising her arms high overhead, her naked skin warmed by the golden glow that streamed in through the glass.

She ought to feel guilty, wanton and ashamed, but instead she felt gloriously alive. Closing her mind to all thoughts of worry or regret, she sauntered back across the room and made a firm resolution to enjoy the day.

The black marble bathroom with its pulsing jets and chrome cabinets lacked any trace of feminine charm. Even the towels were dark brown. Stephanie showered, pulled on a pair of shorts and a T-shirt that had seemed unseasonal when they left Paris, and set off to explore the house.

"Mrs. Buchanan?"

The timid greeting startled her just as she was about to bounce down the curving staircase that descended in the center of the soaring hall. Stephanie halted, looked around. A slender girl in beige pants and a loose smock stood beside a chest of drawers, a yellow duster clasped in her fingers, her dark eyes round with curiosity.

"Good morning." Stephanie took a step closer. The girl lifted one hand to ward her off. Dropping the cloth to the floor, she clamped the other hand across her mouth. A long brown ponytail swished as she whirled about and lurched along the landing, eventually vanishing through an open doorway.

Stephanie followed. She found the girl on her knees, retching into a toilet bowl. "What's wrong?" Stephanie asked, her voice sharp with concern.

Pale as a sheet, the girl straightened. "Morning sickness," she murmured. "The smell of cleaning materials sets it off. Furniture polish is the worst."

Stephanie grabbed a small towel from the rail, ran cold water over it, wrung the towel dry, and passed it to the girl. "You must be Maria."

"Yes." She pressed the cool cloth to her skin. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Buchanan. I'll be fine in a moment."

"Heavens. No need to apologize." Stephanie surveyed the girl. "You look too thin to be pregnant. You shouldn't be handling chemicals that make you nauseous. I'll tell Grant that you can't do cleaning for a while, until it passes."

"Oh no, please, Mrs. Buchanan." If possible, the girl's olive skin grew paler.

"What?" Stephanie frowned. "Why not?"

"I've only been working here for two months." Color flared up the girl's cheeks. "I'm not married," she blurted out.

Slowly, Stephanie nodded as the truth dawned upon her. "You haven't told Grant that you're expecting?"

Maria shook her head.

Stephanie's stomach jolted. For a second, she thought she'd need to push the girl aside, to make room at the toilet bowl, but with a sharp inhale, she conquered the sick feeling.

"Is Grant...?" She couldn't quite get the words out.

Maria stared at her. Then a flicker of comprehension animated the girl's dark eyes. "*Senor* Grant? Father of my baby?" Her pinched features relaxed, and a gust of laughter bubbled up in her throat. "Mrs. Buchanan, he barely knows I exist. I doubt he even remembers my name." Her mirth settled into a proud smile. "Miguel, my fiancé, is the father. He has gone back to Mexico. He is trying to get a green card, become legal, so he can get a job with healthcare benefits."

"Are you Mexican also?"

The girl nodded. "My mother is Mexican. My father is from Venezuela."

"But you *do* speak Spanish?"

"*Si, senora*. Of course I do."

"Okay, here's the deal." Stephanie gestured between them. "You teach me Spanish, and I'll polish any furniture that needs polishing."

"Mrs. Buchanan, you cannot do housework." Maria looked as if Stephanie had announced she was going to shoot the president.

"Of course I can. How do you think the library got cleaned up?" Stephanie retreated to the bathroom door as she prepared to carry on her interrupted journey downstairs. She sensed the girl needed a moment of privacy. "And please don't call me Mrs. Buchanan. My name is Stephanie." She hesitated, added in a low voice. "I won't tell Grant about the baby unless you want me to."

The expression of intense relief on Maria's face filled Stephanie with unease. Why would a servant be afraid of Grant? Was there some nasty side of him she had yet to discover?

At the bottom of the stairs, Stephanie turned right and sauntered into the huge kitchen lined with oak cabinets and a long expanse of granite counters. A scent of freshly ground coffee drifted in the air.

"Good morning," she called out to the stout woman dressed in a green polka dot housedress who stood at the central island, chopping meat with resounding thuds. "You must be Paquita."

"Si, Mrs. Buchanan," the maid replied with an eager nod, but didn't interrupt her task. With a voluptuous body and short dark hair in rigidly controlled curls, she looked in her late forties. She reached for another portion of meat from the defrosting dish by her elbow and slapped the chunk on the butcher's block. "Welcome, and congratulations." The words sounded formal, as if she'd rehearsed them in advance.

Stephanie shrugged. Explanations about her temporary status could wait. "Paquita, Maria has agreed to teach me Spanish." Stephanie edged closer in order to get the attention of the woman. "Would you like to do the same? In exchange, I could take on a household chore. Is there anything you particularly dislike doing?"

"Eh." Paquita flung her arm in the air, nearly tossing a strip of sirloin over her shoulder. "Shirts. Always he complains. I do it wrong. Crease not right, collar not right."

"What?" Stephanie asked, startled.

"Shirts for *Senor* Buchanan. Drive me crazy. Never good enough."

Suppressing a smile, Stephanie dipped her head in agreement. Maria might be scared of her employer, but Paquita displayed no such timidity. "All right," she said. "I'll iron his shirts."

"I can give Spanish lessons too."

The smooth tenor voice came from the direction of the window. Stephanie spun on her bare heels to find Horatio sipping coffee in the breakfast nook.

"And what job would you like to trade?" she asked, puzzled by the guilty expression on his face.

Horatio balanced the cup between his hands. "I hope you don't mind. I looked at the papers you left on the printer last night."

Her mouth drew into an angry pout. "The library is meant to be my private space. I don't expect anyone to intrude. Not you. Not even Grant."

"Sorry." Horatio leaned back on the padded bench. Sunlight gleamed in his jet hair and gilded his bronzed features, giving him the glossy glamour of an aftershave commercial. "But I *did* look, and I saw that you had printed out some stock market stuff."

"I don't invest, or advice others," Stephanie cut in sharply. "I'm doing a PhD in economics. Efficient market theory. Purely academic."

"I wasn't going to pester you for stock tips." Horatio's jaw grew rigid, making his words come out flat. "I'm going to night school, studying business, but there are a few things I find difficult. For example, the weighted average cost of capital."

Stephanie grinned. "Everyone finds that difficult, and if anyone tells you otherwise, they're lying." She lifted her brows. "Does Grant support your studies? He could get a tax write-off on your tuition fees."

Horatio snorted in dismissal. "Support my studies? He doesn't even know."

Stephanie sent him a baffled frown. "You haven't told him?"

"I've tried to. He doesn't listen." Horatio bounced to his feet, as limber as a cat, and carried his empty cup to the counter. "Grant sees his household staff as parts of an efficient machine. Faceless, nameless. Not to be noticed, unless the machine breaks down. Then he's quick to complain."

"Oh dear," Stephanie muttered. "You don't like him much, do you?"

"I don't dislike him. But I resent being treated as if I only exist to do my job."

"I'll help you with your studies." Stephanie eased over and laid a hand on Horatio's arm. "I have plenty of time. Perhaps we could set aside a couple of hours each afternoon."

"Thanks." Horatio offered her a strained smile, and Stephanie guessed he was worried that she would tell Grant about his outburst.

"On one condition," she added.

"What?"

"That everything you say to me, or I say to you, remains confidential." She waved her hand to take in Horatio and Paquita and Maria. The pregnant girl had tiptoed in and stood like a ghost by the kitchen door. "Nothing between the four of us goes to Grant. Are we agreed on that?"

She watched as the others exchanged glances. Rebellion flared in Horatio's flashing eyes. Paquita was less subtle and heaved out a grunt of approval. Maria's lips curved into a timid smile.

As Stephanie sat down to have breakfast, her thoughts lingered on Grant.

To her surprise, another feeling joined the ones already tugging at her heart.

Pity.

She felt sorry for the man who seemed to have everything except love, and the friendship and affection of the people who maintained his household.

* * * *

So warm. So safe. Stephanie curled into the heat, found a wall of solid muscle and a pair of strong arms holding her tight.

"Good morning," Grant murmured in the darkness, his voice husky. "Did you sleep well?"

"Hmm," she mumbled. Then her spine stiffened as consciousness flooded her mind.

Last night. Waiting. Nine o'clock. Ten o'clock. Midnight. Trying to pretend relief because Grant had left her alone for the night. Trying to deny the longing that had driven her out to roam the gravel

paths that wound between the rows of cacti and shrubs in the starlit gardens around the house. Tossing and turning in the air-conditioned bedroom. Loneliness, turning into anger as she bristled over the blunt message of how unimportant she was to Grant.

He couldn't even be bothered to come home to sleep with her.

"Where were you?" she asked, and instantly wished back the words.

"I had some urgent business with China. I needed to wait until morning their time, and then, on the way home, there was a car wreck on the expressway. I got back around three." He nuzzled her neck. "I should have stayed in Houston, but I missed you."

Stephanie hated the feeling of relief that flooded her at his words. Hated the vulnerability that came with having affection for someone who didn't return her feelings. "It doesn't matter," she told him sharply.

"Sure it matters." Grant rolled onto his back and pulled her over his chest. His arm brushed her side as he checked the heavy watch strapped to his wrist. "Eight o'clock," he said. "Plenty of time before nine when you no longer belong to me."

He clasped his hands around her waist, lifting her in the air.

"I feel like an astronaut." Stephanie extended her arms out, desperately searching for a lighthearted tone, trying to fight the need that made her breath catch and her hands shake with the longing to touch him. "Weightless, floating in space."

In awe, she played along as Grant with apparent lack of effort held her poised above him, then tipped her balance to lower her hips over his pulsing erection, with a grunted command to take him inside.

She reached down to guide him in, felt him stretch and shape her as she slowly sank around him. "*Ground control to Major Tom,*" Grant sang in a low voice, the words barely a rustle in his quickened breathing. Then he proceeded to lift her up and lower her down over his hard shaft. Making love to her, despite her position on top of him.

Stephanie braced her knees against the mattress, straddling him, and took charge, choosing her own rhythm. Her thigh muscles quivered as she arched her back, rising high, easing the tip of his shaft in and out, teasing, almost letting him slip free, then recapturing him.

"Take it all," Grant growled. "Take me deep inside."

"Uh-uh." Eyes closed, she shook her head and carried on the subtle rise and fall.

His hands around her waist gripped tight, and the world tilted as he rolled them over in a flurry of arms and legs. Making a harsh sound, Grant surged into her, all the way to the edge of her womb where he remained poised for an endless second. Then his body shuddered, and with a violent heave he began to pulse inside her.

"Sorry," he rasped after his climax stilled. "You drove me to the edge of insanity."

"It doesn't matter." Stephanie reached up and tangled her fingers in his hair, admiring the dark honey color of the thick strands.

"It should," Grant replied and withdrew from inside her, bracing up on his arms so he could look at her.

"Why?" Stephanie slid her hands lower to cup his face. "Why should it matter?"

"Sex shouldn't be one-sided. It's about mutual pleasure."

"It gave me pleasure. Just lying next to you, sharing your warmth gives me pleasure. The way you touch me fills me with incredible sensations that I can't even begin to describe. Having you inside me overwhelms me. The fact that I didn't come doesn't mean that I was left unsatisfied. It simply means that in the time available, I preferred not to focus on getting there, but chose to enjoy feeling you inside me without the mental pressure of trying to reach an orgasm."

"Are you bullshitting me, so I won't feel inadequate?"

A giggle escaped her throat. "No! I'm telling the truth."

Grant got up and stared at her, the look on his face the guilty smirk of a schoolboy who'd been caught breaking the rules but had managed to avoid detention. "Are you sure?" he asked. "Because I'm in kind of a hurry..."

"Go!" she cried, and tossed a pillow at him.

As Grant strode to the bathroom, Stephanie curled up under the covers.

She *had* been telling the truth. It really didn't matter. Like a fool, her tender heart put his pleasure before her own, sought to give rather than take, to nurture instead of take advantage.

All her fears over her situation had been justified.

Already, deep in her mind, dreams lingered like wispy clouds of mist, hinting at what could happen if Grant cared for her. If he asked her to stay at the end of their three months.

If he loved her.

Stephanie kicked the covers aside and pulled on her jeans and a cotton shirt, without waiting for Grant to come out of the bathroom.

She must, *must*, keep herself aloof.

Silently, she tiptoed out of the room and barricaded herself in the sanctuary of the library, where she could occupy her mind with her studies and forget everything else.

* * * *

A few hours later, Stephanie printed out another article about offshore oil rigs and added it to the growing stack on her desk. A knock interrupted her. She crossed the library and opened the door. Grant stood before her, dressed in a lightweight gray business suit.

"Why did you walk out on me this morning?" he asked bluntly. "Why didn't you join me for breakfast?"

"I wasn't hungry."

He craned past her to inspect the newly tidied space. "What are you doing?"

Stephanie blocked his view by pushing the door almost to a close. "I'm doing my email."

He shrugged his dismissal of her evasive reply, but let it show that her reticence annoyed him. "I'd like to take you to the country club for lunch. They have a spa and a beauty shop and a few boutiques. You can look around. If you decide you like the place, you can book a limo to drive you over any time you want."

"I'm busy. And I'm not on duty until nine o'clock tonight."

Grant's jaw tightened. "Surely, we can forget that nonsense about *working hours*."

"It's not nonsense," she countered. "It's what we agreed."

"Oh, come on." He propped one shoulder against the doorframe and lounged in an easy pose, like a predator feigning lassitude before an attack. The corners of his amber eyes crinkled as he gave her a lopsided smile. "I'm just trying to make sure you don't get bored."

"I'm not bored."

His brows gathered into an angry frown. "Are you going to ignore me whenever I happen to be at home during the day?"

"Yes," she said, and slammed the door in his face.

Her hands shook as she returned to the desk. Stephanie gripped the mouse, her fingers tight around the plastic. She knew what his game was. Fiercely competitive, Grant wanted to have the upper hand in any situation. It wasn't good enough that he effectively owned her during their time together. His need to be the winner, combined with a basic male vanity, made him want to charm her, to win her over.

He wanted her to plead to stay at the end of their three months. That was the only explanation she could give to the little gestures of affection he was bestowing on her, trying to break down her defensive walls.

Well, she'd show him that Nordic willpower was a match for Texan determination.

He might have managed to trap her heart, but he'd never find out. It wasn't for nothing that she'd been given the lead in every high school play. She might ache for him, every minute of every day, but he would think that she was counting the hours to go home.

Chapter Nine

What the hell was he doing? Grant added another muttered curse to the long string that had already left his lips. What drew him to the library door every damn time he had to leave his study? He might have got up to go to the kitchen, or the john, or the front yard for a breath of fresh air, but sure as hell, his steps would detour to the direction of Stephanie's private domain. At least a dozen times, stubborn pride had sent him away before he knocked, but now his resolve finally failed. He raised his fist and rapped his knuckles against the solid timber.

Stephanie was driving him crazy with her evasive answers to his probing questions. What on earth did she do by herself all day, locked up in the room furnished with little but a desk, bookcases full of old newspapers and a few musty books, and a collection of obsolete office equipment that cluttered the floor?

What occupied her time? Did she play internet poker? Frequent chat rooms? Read blogs, download movies, flirt long distance with men she had never met?

For two days, he'd worked from home, his curiosity itching to be satisfied, but Stephanie guarded her secrets better than the State Department, the CIA, and the FBI put together. Neglecting the office was playing havoc on his schedule, and yet, he couldn't make himself keep away.

The door flung open and Stephanie stood before him.

Her silky blonde hair had grown a little longer, giving her a mussed bedroom look even during the day. The sooty lashes made dark crescents on her cheeks as she kept reading the book she held open in one hand. Slowly, she lifted her gaze. The cornflower blue hit him like a blow in the chest.

Grant sucked in a breath, suddenly robbed of speech.

"What is it now?" Stephanie asked. Her irritation at the interruption was plain for him to see.

Grant stared at her, his mind scattering to a dozen directions. What the hell gave her so much power to annoy him? He really ought to give her a piece of his mind. Remind her who the boss was. His gut clenched at the thought that if he stepped out of line, she'd close the door between them. Wildly, he groped for something to say to keep her talking, to keep her with him, even if just briefly. "I thought you might like to go out to the stables," he blurted. "You haven't seen the rest of the grounds yet, have you?"

"No." Stephanie shook her head, her eyes already returned to the book. "I haven't had the time."

"Time?" he snapped. "You must be real busy hiding from me."

Her eyes flew up to meet his, wary and guarded. "I'm not hiding from you. I'm busy doing things that I need to do."

"*What* things?" He folded his arms across his chest to stop himself from grabbing her. "Damn it, Stephanie, I need to know. You are under my roof, using my internet connection. If you are a terrorist plotting to blow up the White House, I want to know. I don't want a strike force ramming down my front door one dark night because of whatever you are doing from my library."

Stephanie stared at him, her mouth open in surprise. Then a grin lit up her face. Pleasure exploded in Grant's chest at having made her smile. Damn, he felt like a kid in a kindergarten with his first crush on a girl.

"No, that wouldn't do," she muttered, barely loud enough for him to hear. "I wouldn't like us to be interrupted when you're making love to me."

"So, at least you tolerate me at night, although you have no time for me during the day?"

Her smile faded, and she trailed a long lingering look over him. Grant felt the tension coiling up in his belly. What the hell was wrong with him? It was as if Stephanie had bewitched him. His behavior was no longer that of a rational man.

She turned, made her way to the desk by the window, where her laptop shone silver in the sunlight. Anger stiffened Grant's shoulders at how easily she could dismiss him. She dropped the book on top of a stack of others. Then she appeared to hesitate. Without sitting down, she leaned over the keyboard. He listened to the clicks as she entered a set of commands.

"All right," she said and straightened, closing the lid on the laptop. "Let's go and check out the stables."

He waited for her to retrace her steps to the door. Then he curled his fingers around her arm, as if to make sure she wouldn't change her mind and escape while they made their way through the soaring hall to the rear door.

He stepped aside to let her through first, then followed her outside. The sun burned down from a clear blue sky, but a light breeze eased the sweltering heat. Elation buoyed Grant's steps as Stephanie walked beside him, hurrying to keep up with his longer strides.

"I've been thinking of putting a swimming pool in there." He swept his hand to indicate a sheltered spot behind the house. "Would you like that?"

Stephanie slanted him a blank look. "I'll be gone before you have the time to do anything." She turned her attention to the arid desert garden. "And Horatio tells me you don't like wasting water. That's why you have cacti and desert scrub instead of lawns, except for that small lush area by the rear patio."

Her remark sent a tide of irritation rippling inside him. Why did she have to talk about leaving, instead of enjoying each day as it passed? He opened his mouth to make a sharp retort, but a pickup truck roared up to them in a trail of dust, distracting him.

A door flung open and a dark, lean man around fifty leapt out. He was dressed in jeans and a denim shirt, and a black hat with a silver band shadowed his bronzed features.

"Stephanie, this is Rico, who looks after the stables." Grant gestured to make the introductions. "Rico, this is Stephanie." *My wife*. The thought rose in his mind, but the words froze in his throat, refusing to come out, and with dismay Grant realized that he didn't want to hear Stephanie deny them in front of his staff.

Rico touched the brim of his hat. "Do you ride, Stephanie?"

"Heavens, no!" A startled laugh burst from her. "Never been on a horse in my life. I'd probably be petrified."

Rico eyed her up and down. "You have a good body for riding. Lean but strong. I bet I could teach you in a couple of months."

Grant took a step forward. "I'll teach her." He glared at Rico, who met his anger with a puzzled look. "Stephanie is my—" Grant faltered, at a loss for the right word.

"I know." Rico grinned. "She's your wife. Paquita told me." He winked at Stephanie. "I'm not trying to steal her away from you, although I expect that I could, if I wanted to. Women just can't leave me alone. It's a burden."

Embarrassed, Grant emitted a sound between a cough and laughter. *Jealous*. Damn it, he was jealous over an old withered stable hand, because the man might tempt Stephanie to spend some of her precious time in his company.

"You do what you want," he told her gruffly. "I don't care."

He spun around and left the pair of them gaping after him.

Confusion pressed inside his chest as he stormed back along the path. How the hell had his life become such a tangle, with Stephanie at the center of the knotted strands?

Initially, he had wanted nothing more than to break free of the attraction she had woven around him during the party on Fayad's yacht. His plan had been to have her in his bed, prove her greedy and mercenary, and wipe her out of his mind for all eternity.

Then, he'd learned what an innocent she was. Ashamed of his callous lovemaking during their first night, he had wanted to make it up to her. His only aim had been to appease his guilty conscience and make sure she wouldn't hate him. That instead of resenting him, she would love him just a little, so that she wouldn't leave with a bitter regret at having wasted herself on a man so totally undeserving.

And finally, after being faced with countless acts that proved her lack of guile, having witnessed her honesty and integrity and charm, her natural beauty and down-to-earth values, his defense mechanisms had somehow been short circuited. He hadn't heard the alarm bells. No flashing lights had transmitted the signals of impending danger to his brain. No shutters had come rolling down to protect him.

Grant slowed down his steps. The crunch of gravel beneath his boot heels sounded like nature mocking him with laughter, and the sun suddenly burned unbearably bright in his eyes as he faced the truth.

Instead of making Stephanie fall in love with him, he was teetering dangerously close to falling in love with her.

* * * *

Stephanie stared at the display on her laptop, unable to concentrate. It was becoming harder and harder to keep her distance from Grant. Every day she built up her defenses, and every night he knocked them down. She had expected him to commute into his offices in Houston, but mostly he worked from home.

During the day, she hid in the library, avoiding him. At nine o'clock each evening, she sought him out, and allowed him inside her heart until the following morning.

With a rueful smile, Stephanie checked the time. Two o'clock in the afternoon. Grant got up early and ate at midday, so it ought to be safe to go into the kitchen for lunch.

"What's good today?" she asked Paquita.

"Chicken salad is fresh."

"Has Grant eaten?"

"He had some, but there's plenty left." Paquita sent her a knowing wink. Color washed up Stephanie's cheeks. She was aware that the staff gossiped about them, tried to figure out why she tiptoed around Grant during the day. She feigned indifference to him, although she didn't doubt that everyone saw through her. It must be obvious that she cared for him, particularly as she had developed a habit of finding out what he had eaten for lunch and asking for the same thing.

Every little bond, however strenuous, gave her something to cherish.

The sound of footsteps from the hall made her whirl. Grant stood in the doorway, dressed in jeans and an open-necked white shirt. The casual outfit lent his muscular body a raw vitality that he lacked in formal dress. He propped one shoulder against the doorframe.

"I've run out of coffee," he announced.

"I'll go and fill the machine at once." Paquita rushed over to the sink and started to run water from the tap into a clear glass jug.

When she had finished and hurried to the door, Grant stepped aside to let her pass. "You've finally learned how to iron my shirts the way I like," he drawled. "I had begun to despair."

Paquita flicked an urgent glance at Stephanie, who responded with an imperceptible shake of her head. Muttering a few unintelligible words, Paquita escaped the aura of tension that filled the air in the kitchen.

Grant was pleased with her ironing. Delight at his praise left Stephanie flustered. She fell into an awkward silence and pretended to be engrossed in buttering a whole grain roll and spooning chicken salad onto a plate.

"Are you giving your laptop a break?" Grant remained at the door, watching her with a curious intensity that made her skin tingle.

Stephanie swallowed. Several times, he had interrogated her, trying to find out what she did during her solitary hours in the library, but she had blocked every attempt he made to know more about her. She felt a desperate need to keep herself whole, not to let him infiltrate her piece by piece, so that when she had to leave, it wouldn't only be her heart that broke, but every aspect of her life.

"Yes." She kept her voice guarded.

"I'll see you at nine then. I'll be in the den watching a game." Grant pushed his shoulder from the doorjamb and turned to go.

"There is something I'd like to ask you," Stephanie called out after him. After hesitating for several days, she had reached a decision to put forward her request.

Grant whirled back, an eager lift to his brows. "Yes?"

"I still have the money you gave me in New York." She laced her hands together to steady them. "I'd like to spend it. Is that all right with you?"

Grant contemplated her, his expression cooling. "Sure." He offered her a slow nod and resumed his exit.

"What if I need more?" Stephanie called out at his retreating back.

He halted, but didn't turn. "Horatio will give you whatever you need." Grant set off again and strode across the hall to the stairs.

Stephanie clutched her hands together. It felt as if a sudden blast of cold air had filled the sunny kitchen, and a sense of failure niggled inside her. She knew that her request for money had displeased Grant, but she lifted her chin and blinked back the tears that clouded her eyes.

She had her future to think of. She couldn't afford to give in to sentimental thoughts.

* * * *

Grant stared at the oil rig installation schedule before him, but the figures blurred before his eyes. Not since he'd lost a fistfight in the third grade after another boy had called his mother a whore had such a corrosive mixture of confusion and humiliation coursed through his veins.

He had set out to prove that Stephanie was motivated only by financial gain. As the days of their first three weeks flew by, a hope that he was wrong had soared to life, like a butterfly signaling the arrival of spring.

Now, bitterness of having been proved right after all filled him with distaste.

His aim had been to seduce Stephanie, so that when she left, his conscience would be eased by the knowledge that the precious gift of her body she'd given to him had been offered willingly.

After a while, a new idea had pushed its roots into the arid soil of his heart.

He'd begun to think that perhaps she shouldn't go at all, but stay with him.

Anger at having been such a fool filled him with a steely resolve.

“Horatio!” he roared.

His assistant sauntered in, a cell phone in one hand. “I’m on a call.”

“Tell whoever it is that you’ll call them back.”

After Horatio had dismissed the caller, Grant barked out his instructions. “I’m going to Alaska to inspect the final layout on the Prudhoe Bay rig.”

“Is Stephanie going with you?”

“No. She’s going to stay here and spend my money.”

“Did she tell you? She needs another ten thousand dollars for—”

“I don’t care what it is for,” Grant roared. “Just give it to her and have it done with.”

The corners of Horatio’s lips tugged down in surprise. “Is something wrong? Even if you leave tomorrow, you won’t be back for Thanksgiving.”

“No,” Grant told him. “Everything is exactly as it’s supposed to be.” When the young man turned to go, Grant shouted after him. “I want a dinner party for twelve guests on Friday the week after Thanksgiving. Some of the suppliers for the Alaska project, and the two design engineers with their wives. Get Stephanie to help you with the arrangements. She’ll need a dress, and a few bits of jewelry. Let her pick out whatever she wants.”

“How much do you want to spend?”

Grant shrugged. “I don’t give a damn. The lady can satisfy every whim of her greedy little heart.”

As he returned to his calculations, the sense that he had lost something precious settled like a stone over his chest.

Chapter Ten

Stephanie ran a cloth over the oak banister on the curving staircase and breathed in the smell of beeswax and honey. She had discovered another brand of furniture polish that didn't set off Maria's stomach, but the banister was too strenuous work for a pregnant woman.

The front door opened and slammed shut behind her. Assuming it was someone from the caterers who'd been in and out all day, she took a step down and leaned over to polish another section.

"Stephanie? What the hell are you doing?"

She almost lost her balance as she spun to find Grant glaring at her. A surge of embarrassment heated her cheeks at how he'd seen her, clad in skimpy shorts and a tattered T-shirt, her butt sticking out while she rubbed the lacquered timber into a deep gloss.

"I'm polishing the banister," she told him.

"I've got maids for that."

"One of your maids is pregnant. She shouldn't do heavy work."

Grant gave a perfunctory nod to accept the news of Maria's pregnancy. "Horatio could have hired someone else. I'm not expecting you to do the work of a maid."

"Horatio says you do your fair share of manual labor when you are out on an installation."

"That's different. It makes me one of the team."

Stephanie's mouth tightened. "And your household staff isn't a team?"

"Fine. Whatever you want. I'm not going to stand in your way, if cleaning is what you want to do." Grant raked a hand through his hair in a tired gesture. "Is everything ready for the dinner party tonight?"

"You need to ask Horatio." Stephanie turned to hide her flushed face and carried on with her task.

"I'm sorry you had to spend Thanksgiving on your own," Grant said, sounding awkward.

Stephanie directed her anger at the oak beam, pressing hard as she ran the cloth along the grain of the wood. "I wasn't alone. Horatio invited me to have dinner with his family."

"That's good," Grant said, but the tone of his voice didn't match the words.

"I'm sure you have things to do," Stephanie prompted.

"Yes." His terse reply sounded more like a growl of frustration, and he scaled the stairs past her, his feet thudding an angry beat on each step.

Stephanie huffed as she slapped the rag against the wood. Grant had been gone for a full ten days, and not once had he called her, emailed her, or even sent a message via Horatio.

She recalled the night before Grant departed, the gruff demands he had made during their lovemaking. That night, his words and actions had been infused with a strange sense of desperation that gave a hard edge to his passion.

And now, he watched her with a cool contempt in his eyes. Stephanie couldn't help feeling that Grant had somehow spent a month taking her measure, and had found her wanting. He appeared to have lost all interest in her. She bent closer to the railing to hide the teary sheen that filled her eyes.

She had worried about how to keep her heart whole when she had to leave him. Instead, she was letting him break her spirit while they remained together, and the callousness of his sudden rejection added a sting of humiliation to her hurt.

Stephanie exhaled a sigh of relief as she considered the party that night. She'd been torn between her resolve not to accept anything from Grant, and a desire to please him, to make him proud of her. Her decision not to waver from her initial approach had been the right one.

Grant Buchanan might have broken her heart, but she'd never let him crush her pride.

* * * *

Grant glanced at his watch for a hundredth time. Where the hell was Stephanie? Around him, chattering couples in evening clothes lingered beneath the canopy in the rear garden amidst the climbing roses in big wooden tubs that had been delivered specially for the occasion. It was half past seven, and he'd ordered Stephanie to be downstairs at seven, dressed and ready to play the part of a gracious hostess.

According to Horatio, Stephanie had spent another twenty thousand dollars on top of the ten thousand he had already given her in New York. With a bitter twist in his gut Grant waited to see the clothes and trinkets his money had bought.

She had to spend the money, a small voice inside him whispered. You ordered her to attend a dinner party, and she had nothing suitable to wear.

He brushed aside the little voice, just like he would brush Stephanie out of his heart and his mind. She had proved to be exactly what he had expected—a woman out to get as much of his money as she could, although she'd been clever enough to bide her time until he'd been lulled into believing that she was different.

"Where the hell is she?" he grunted to Horatio, who had entered the garden through the rear doors.

"I don't know. I've checked every room in the house."

"The cars?" An icy blast of fear reached into his lungs when he recalled Stephanie's words that she couldn't drive.

"All accounted for."

"Thank heavens for that," Grant muttered, and turned away to hide his emotions from Horatio's prying eyes.

"What do you want to do about dinner?" Horatio asked.

"We'll eat at eight as planned."

"Do you want me to rearrange the place settings?"

"No," he growled. "Leave them, with an empty chair where she ought to be."

* * * *

Grant smiled at the jokes, made the appropriate answers to questions. His hand rose and fell to transport food into his mouth. His teeth chewed and his throat swallowed. And all the while, his mind was occupied with a rising fury.

Where the hell was Stephanie?

The grandfather clock in the corner of the dining room had barely finished chiming nine o'clock when he heard the soft tap of a footfall. A second later, Stephanie faced him from the doorway.

"It's nine o'clock," she told him calmly. "What would you like me to do?"

Words choked in Grant's throat, and he simply pointed to the empty seat at the opposite end of the table. His brows drew into a stormy frown as he took in her bare feet, blue jeans, and the form fitting long-sleeved pink top he remembered from when she'd swum ashore from the yacht in Cannes. He watched as she craned her neck to inspect the place settings and check which course was being served. Next, she spoke a few words in halting Spanish to the waitress standing discreetly along the wall. The girl hurried to place a bowl of fruit salad and cream in front of Stephanie, who squared her shoulders, offered a dimpled smile around the table, and proceeded to exchange small talk with the nearest dinner guests.

It was the smile that did it. It sent an explosion of frustration tearing through Grant's limbs. For ten nights, he'd slept in a basic accommodation cabin on an offshore oil rig, the roar of the Arctic Ocean filling his ears, thinking that if he hadn't allowed the greedy little elf to wheedle her way into his heart, he'd be happily at home, sleeping his nights in a comfortable bed, instead of running away from her to the ends of the earth.

"I apologize for my wife's late arrival, since she seems to lack the good manners to make her own apologies."

"I'm not your wife." Her voice was low and controlled.

"What are you then?" Grant narrowed his eyes across the table.

He saw the flash of defiance, followed by a quick glance of caution at the dinner guests. "I'm your contracted civil partner."

He pursed his lips and gave a slow nod.

"Is something wrong?" one of the women asked Stephanie. "Didn't you have time to get dressed?"

"I don't own an evening dress."

"I certainly gave you enough money to buy one," Grant threw in from his end of the table.

Stephanie turned to the woman who'd spoken. "I don't wish to be rude, but how much did your dress cost?"

The woman shrugged her elegant shoulders, left bare by the scooped neckline in softly draped yellow silk. "I don't recall. Five thousand dollars?" She swept her gaze around the table, as though seeking conformation from the others.

"With that, you could provide fresh water for five villages in Africa. You could save the sight of a hundred children, or immunize a thousand against lethal diseases." Stephanie gestured at the guests. "I'm sure you all give generously to charity, in addition to buying lovely gowns." She smiled at the woman in yellow. "But I don't have that kind of money. I need to make a choice, and for me saving the sight of a child is more important than wearing an expensive dress."

Grant watched as Stephanie turned to the man on her right, and smoothly changed the topic by asking a surprisingly astute question about the difficulties of waste treatment on offshore oil rigs.

His heart began to pound as he dwelled on the possibility that he might have been wrong about Stephanie after all.

The questions that plagued most of his waking moments rose to torment his mind. Why had Stephanie accepted their bargain? What did she want from him? And what had she done with the money she had taken from him?

* * * *

Stephanie's hands shook as she quickly removed her clothing and hid under the covers in Grant's big bed. For two hours, she'd been at the receiving end of his furious gaze across the polished mahogany table under the twinkling crystal chandelier.

She swallowed down the lump of fear that tightened her chest. It was vital that she stood up for her rights. She couldn't allow Grant to gradually sap her independence of spirit. The man was used to dominating everyone around him. It was time for him to realize that other people could be just as strong.

Mentally, if not physically.

She heard the door open and close, and an instant later Grant's voice drifted across the room. "You might have stayed downstairs to say a proper goodbye to our guests."

"They were your guests, not mine. I've never even met them before."

She listened to the scuffling sounds as Grant undressed, then heard water cascade in the shower. Closing her eyes tightly, Stephanie willed her mind and body to go to sleep, but knew that such a miracle was too much to ask for. When Grant slipped under the covers next to her, his skin still damp from the shower, Stephanie didn't turn to face him. She kept her body rigid, anticipating an angry blast of words.

"Not talking, huh?" Grant murmured into her ear. His hand crept around her waist, brushing a heated trail in its wake before sliding up to cup her breast. His thumb teased the nipple already pebbling into a hard point, and his warm breath brushed her neck. With a gentle tug of his teeth, he nipped her shoulder, on the exact spot that seemed to contain a switch to activate her entire nervous system.

How did he do it? In just a few weeks, Grant had learned her body so thoroughly that he knew exactly what turned her on. What wound the coil of excitement inside her so unbearably tight that she could barely breathe, and what sent her crashing over the edge into a mind shattering release.

How could she have been so foolish and give him the keys that allowed him to possess her body so completely?

Grant dragged his lips along her neck, until he found her ear, and boldly flicked his tongue inside. A soft moan escaped her throat, and Stephanie bit her lip to stifle the sound of pleasure. Grant's chest vibrated against her shoulder, and she heard the muffled sounds of his low knowing chuckle.

"Have it your way," he muttered. Then he curled his hand around her right thigh, folded up her leg, and before Stephanie realized his intention, he had filled her in one swift thrust from behind. His left arm slipped beneath her body to wrap around her waist, holding her tight against him. His fingers played with her nipples, stroking and teasing, almost hard enough to border on pain, but never overstepping the fine line from pleasure. His other hand released her leg, since he was now safely embedded inside her, and reached to the front, between her legs, where he set to drive her over the edge.

Abandoning his usual tenderness, Grant pounded in and out her, the arm underneath her curled tight across her waist to hold her in place when she began to slip away from him. Throughout the overpowering invasion, he remained silent, but every now and then Stephanie could feel his lips on her shoulder, in that magic spot that sent shivers of pleasure all the way down her spine.

"Oh God, Grant, don't stop." His name burst from her lips despite her effort to stifle the sound. The tension inside her coiled tighter and tighter, as he increased his force and speed into a hammering rhythm that rocked the bed against the wall. "Oh God, oh Grant," she mumbled, incoherent now, not sure which one she was praying to.

Her legs trembled, her entire body felt aflame, the completion hovering so close, and yet out of reach. And then, the final ratcheting drew her in its grip, that wondrous instant just before release, when you knew what will happen soon, and in the next moment the whole world around her came crashing down in a madly beating pulse of pleasure.

Vaguely she heard Grant roar behind her, felt his arm tighten around her waist as he held her still for one final thrust.

Exhaustion drained every thought from her mind, both the fight of holding her emotions hidden from him, and the marvel of what had just taken place. Without speaking a single word, Stephanie closed her eyes and sank into a deep sleep while Grant remained inside her.

Grant tossed on the mattress and flung out one arm. When he didn't encounter Stephanie's welcoming warmth, for one horrible moment he thought he was back on the oil rig. He reached out to snap on the bedside light and saw the familiar dark colors and bare walls of his bedroom at home.

He searched the bed on his left. On his right. No Stephanie.

He sprung to his feet, pulled on the pair of sweatpants he'd laid out for his morning run. Damn Horatio, if in his absence the man had allowed Stephanie to take up residence in a separate bedroom.

Grant searched the guestrooms, found all of them deserted. A fear like he'd never known choked his lungs, making each intake of breath an effort.

She'd left him. His gruff departure, and his silence while in Alaska had upset her, and his harsh manner when they made love last night had been the final straw. She'd walked out on him. Grant pounded down the stairs, confused thoughts shooting through his brain.

She'd walked off with his thirty thousand dollars. She was a deceitful little bitch.

She'd walked away from half a million bucks. She had backbone and pride.

She'd walked away from him. He didn't care what she was, as long as she came back.

When Grant spotted the thin line of yellow light beneath the library door, he nearly broke the handle in his rush to get through.

Stephanie sat in front of her laptop, dressed in loose cotton pants and his football jersey that swamped her narrow frame. A set of padded headphones covered her ears. Grant crept closer, laid a hand over her shoulder.

She leapt up and gave a startled cry. Past her, Grant saw an elderly man gesturing in mute speech on the computer screen.

"Jesus, you scared the life out of me," Stephanie complained and pulled the headphones down to circle her neck.

"What on earth are you doing down here at three o'clock in the morning?"

"I'm listening to my lectures." She slanted a longing glance at the mute man on the screen. "I was falling behind with my studies, but they agreed to set up a webcam to broadcast the lectures if I paid for the equipment." She peered at him through her thick dark lashes, a startling contrast to her soft golden hair that always took his breath away.

"You can get a tax deduction on the equipment," she told him. "It counts as a charitable donation since it allows disabled students to hear the lectures at home. I'll give the receipts to Horatio as soon as the final installment has been invoiced."

"Is this what my money paid for?"

"Yeah." Her eyes flickered back to the little man on the screen and her fingers crept up to the headphones. "With the time difference, the lectures will be in the early morning hours. I'll be back

in bed before you wake up.” She worried her bottom lip between her teeth. “You don’t mind, do you?”

“No,” he said, carefully hiding his relief. “I guess from now on we can call it flex hours.” He waited for her response, but Stephanie had already slipped the headphones back over her ears.

Only the second time in his life, Grant experienced a searing jolt of jealousy. He derived some amusement from the fact that the objects of his resentment had been his stable hand and an unknown middle-aged university lecturer three thousand miles away.

On his way up the stairs, his steps fell heavily on the oak treads as he admitted to himself how he felt.

His surge of relief wasn’t because Stephanie had used his money for a worthy cause, but because she hadn’t left him.

It didn’t matter why she had entered into the arrangement with him. She could be a scheming little fool who coveted his money, or a saint with some noble motive he had yet to understand.

Either way, he was in love with her.

Chapter Eleven

"Did you sleep well?" Grant leaned over Stephanie as she came awake with a frown that wrinkled her nose and made the freckles chase each other on her skin that was already turning golden under the hot Texas sun.

"What are you doing here?" She slanted a glance at the bedside clock. "Shouldn't you be working?"

"I'm going into Houston today, and you're coming with me." He sent her a conspiratorial wink. "Flex time, remember? From now on, I'm entitled to some of your daytime hours. We'll leave at eleven and stay overnight. Don't forget to pack evening clothes. We'll attend a charity ball."

A chuckle rose in his throat at Stephanie's groan of protest and the tart comment that she didn't own an evening gown. He had a solution for the problem, and he couldn't wait to see how she would deal with his ultimatum.

During the drive through the sprawling suburbs into the city of glass and steel, Grant perfected the plan he'd hatched earlier that morning while he waited for Stephanie to wake up. He already had her body. Stephanie's response to him when they made love was too spontaneous to be faked. Now he wanted her mind, and he'd reach for it using the things that were important to her.

He recalled his early questions about her life in Paris, and what she did during her solitary hours in the library. Damn him for his stupidity for allowing her to brush him off those times. Last night, after Stephanie crept back into bed, he had waited until she fell asleep. Then he sneaked into the library and snooped. In addition to the textbooks on finance and accounting, he found reviews of the petroleum industry, brochures for oil rig equipment, and annual reports of his client companies.

The discovery that Stephanie was studying economics and trying to learn about his business had rendered him speechless at first. Then a surge of pride and possessiveness had roared through his every nerve.

Stephanie was his, would always be his. Her interest in his business gave him a key to her mind, and once he had her body *and* her mind, he'd find a way of securing the ownership of her heart.

He'd make sure she'd never leave him.

* * * *

When Grant pulled into a parking lot, Stephanie peered through the window, puzzled by the elegant boutiques that flanked the tree-lined avenue. She'd checked out his office address, and this wasn't the right part of town.

He got out and circled the car, flung the passenger door open, and extended a hand to assist her. His silence, combined with the amused glint in his amber eyes sent a shiver of apprehension down her limbs. What was Grant up to? What secret joke tugged at the corners of his mouth? Stephanie followed meekly as he marched her across the sidewalk, and in through the door of an air-conditioned store which seemed more like a shrine to glamour and elegance than a place of business.

A sales clerk in a pink silk sheath sashayed across the glossy floor on vertiginous heels that made her ankles look as if they could snap any moment. "May I help you?" She shared her smile equally between Grant and Stephanie.

"A dress for the lady." Grant gestured at Stephanie with one hand, using the other hand to extract a bundle of money from his jacket pocket. "Five thousand dollars." He passed the cash to the sales clerk. "She picks a dress, you give her the change. She doesn't buy a dress, you can keep it all."

He turned to Stephanie. "If you choose a dress for tonight, you'll be able to give the rest to the starving children in Africa. If you don't, you'll be the most generous tipper in the history of this store. Do you understand?"

Stephanie pulled a face and inclined her head in a reluctant nod.

"Here's my office address." Grant shoved a business card at her. "Grab some lunch and take a taxi over when you're done."

Like a pair of mannequins, Stephanie and the sales girl stood still and stared after Grant as he stormed out through the door.

"Right," Stephanie said, coming back to life. "What do you think would annoy a man like him most, a frumpy ugly dress, or a sexy revealing dress?"

"I have just the dress for you," the sales girl said, and swung her hips as she set off across the floor to the racks of clothing that lined the walls.

* * * *

Stephanie followed the brisk secretary to an opaque set of glass double doors. She waited for the woman to push one side open and walked through. "I'm sorry." She halted after taking a few steps into the grand office with a panoramic view over the Houston skyline. "I didn't realize you were in a meeting."

"Sit down." Grant waved at a pair of casual chairs by the window and turned back to the three men seated around a conference table. "We're almost done here."

Stephanie studied Grant while she waited. He'd rolled up his shirtsleeves and removed his tie. The others had discarded their jackets but gone no further. She listened to their conversation, realized that they were discussing a bid to buy up a hydraulics company in Norway. A cardboard box full of books and brochures occupied the chair beside her, and she began to root inside for something she could read to pass the time.

When a bundle of papers landed into her lap, she gave a startled cry and shot an alarmed glance over to the conference table.

"That's the latest accounts and the annual report translated into English," Grant told her, turning back to face the others. "See what you can make of it."

Stephanie opened the stack of documents, uneasy thoughts tumbling around in her head. What was Grant up to? Did he think she had made up the story about the webcam to follow her studies and was trying to trap her in a lie? She began to skim over the financial statements. Her heart gave a single hard bump when she spotted a fact that might be of interest. She searched the cardboard box again. Now she knew exactly how medieval knights felt when riding out to the tourney field in the hope of impressing a damsel. Thankfully, she lived in an age where the roles could be reversed, and damsels could seek to impress their knights.

"The business might be worth a lot more than you think," she cut in, a tremor in her voice. She consoled herself that if she ended up looking a fool, her dress would make Grant forget, and the other three people in the room didn't really matter.

One of the other three men started to say something, but Grant held up a restraining hand. "Let's hear her out."

"Did you see this?" Stephanie raised a dusty volume from the cardboard box.

"That's the history of the company," a sturdy man with a sandy crew cut said in a dismissive tone. "Written in the seventies. No longer relevant. Not worth the cost of having it translated into English."

Stephanie flicked the pages. "There are pictures."

The youngest of the three men tittered with laughter. Humiliation stained Stephanie's cheeks. She strode across the room to lay the book open in front of Grant.

"What is it, sweetheart?" He hadn't used the endearment since their first night together, and Stephanie knew that he was sending the others a warning signal to treat her with courtesy.

"It's their ice hockey team in 1924," she replied.

"So?"

"Look at the building behind." Her voice rose in excitement. "And look at the picture in the annual report. I'm fairly certain that the current factory incorporates the original building. They have expanded and renovated, but they're still on the same site as they were between the two World Wars."

One of the men cursed under his breath, and Stephanie exhaled a sigh of relief. She'd been right to trust her judgment. "Look at a footnote in the accounts," she said softly. "The land and buildings are valued at original cost. Property values have gone up hundredfold since they acquired the factory site."

"Son-of-a-bitch," Grant murmured. He frowned around the table. "How did you guys miss this?"

Stephanie smiled in triumph at the young man who'd laughed at her. "They didn't look at the pictures," she told him.

She took no offense at all when Grant patted her bottom and pulled her into his lap for a quick kiss in the presence of three strangers.

* * * *

Stephanie caught the elevator from the hotel suite to the ballroom on the top floor. Grant had taken a hurried shower and gone ahead to talk business more than an hour ago, with strict instructions for her to make an appearance by seven o'clock.

Stephanie closed her eyes to avoid her multi-faceted reflection in the mirrors that lined the elevator. What had she done? At midday, angered by Grant's blunt demand that she accompany him despite her shyness, she had set out to provoke him with her outfit. And then, in the afternoon, Grant had given her the respect due an equal. He'd sought her opinion, defended her against humiliation, and finally shown her affection in front of strangers.

He deserved better than to be embarrassed in public, but it was too late to go back and exchange the dress.

The elevator doors slid open and a middle-aged couple entered. The man turned away to hide his startled look. The woman frowned with blatant disapproval. A hot blush of shame crept over Stephanie's breasts and rose all the way up to her scalp.

What had she done?

A dizzy spell clouded her vision when the elevator came to a smooth halt and the doors slid open. Dear God, she was in love with Grant, and nothing would ever change that. Shouldn't she admit the truth to him, give him time to consider their future before the three months were up? Guilt weighed down her limbs at how she had allowed herself to pretend that the noble cause of saving Anders had tempted her into the affair. She had seen Grant and had wanted him, plain and simple, and Anders had been nothing but an excuse.

Stephanie swallowed down the hard lump that rose in her chest as she evaluated her actions. If she had really wanted to do the best for Anders, she should have been at his bedside, loving him while she still could. Instead, she had run off with Grant. She had sought his warmth and strength as a means of forgetting her grief, casting her worries aside for a few precious moments.

From now on, she would no longer hide from life. She would tell Grant that she loved him. She would face the fact that Anders would die. She would explain to Grant about her little stepbrother and ask for money. They could fly Anders over to America and make his last few months full of joy, brimming with experiences and discoveries that money and love could buy for a twelve year old who had never traveled beyond the rural farmlands of northern Sweden.

Her heart expanded in a wild burst of elation as she spotted Grant in the crowd. His broad shoulders seemed strong enough to carry all her worries. His tawny head glinted under the ceiling lights as he bent to listen to the small balding man opposite him.

With a deep breath, Stephanie set off across the floor.

She felt the hungry male eyes that flickered over her bare flesh, heard the silence that fell in her wake. The heavy beaded gown swished around her legs in black and white strips that reminded her of frosty streaks of snow that clung to bare winter trees. She resisted the temptation to reach behind to make sure the low-cut back hadn't inched down to reveal the crack between her buttocks. Her

eyes were drawn to the plunging neckline, and against her skin she felt the slits on either side of her hips. They came up so high that there could be no doubt she wore nothing underneath.

Ahead of her, Grant must have registered the stunned expression on the face of the man he was talking to, since he turned to glance over his shoulder. Even from five paces away, Stephanie could hear the snap of breaking crystal as Grant's fingers tightened over the stem of the glass he held in his hand.

"Watch out," she cried out and rushed forward. The movement sent the slivers of beaded fabric that made up the lower half of her dress into a swing which revealed even more of her legs. "Ease your grip," she murmured. Gingerly, she captured the top and bottom of the broken glass that stuck out of Grant's clenched fist, until he uncurled his fingers, allowing the pieces to fall free. She placed them on the tray of a passing waiter and whirled back to Grant.

"Let me see." She trapped his hand in hers. Upon careful inspection, she found nothing but a small cut and a tiny drop of blood. "Do you have a handkerchief?" she asked.

Grant didn't reply. He merely stared at her, his face expressionless.

"Does anyone have a clean tissue?" she called out without taking her eyes from Grant's hand. The waiter thrust a paper napkin at her, and she carefully blotted out the red stain on Grant's calloused palm.

"Is that the dress you bought today?" Grant's voice was low, controlled.

"Yes." She slanted a glance up to his face. The heat in his guarded gaze sent a shudder through her. "I'm sorry," she muttered. "I was angry with you." Her eyes flickered up to him once more. "And it was the cheapest dress they had."

"I'm sure it was. There's hardly any material in it."

Amusement warmed his voice, and Stephanie's stiff spine relaxed. "I'm sorry," she said again. "It was a stupid thing to do."

Grant bent to whisper in her ear. "You look magnificent. I want to go back to the suite and see if you're wearing anything underneath."

The warm glow on her skin deepened to a fiery blush of embarrassment. "No," she whispered back. "The sales lady told me it's not possible. Underwear would show."

Grant made a sound of muffled laughter and straightened to address the waiter who continued to hover nearby. "I need your jacket."

"My jacket, sir?"

"My wife seems to have mislaid most of her dress." Grant reached over to take the tray from the waiter, leaving the man's hands free to remove the white jacket of his uniform. When the waiter had completed the task, Grant exchanged the tray for the jacket, and held the garment up for Stephanie. After she slotted her arms into the sleeves, Grant spun her around and buttoned up the front, as if dressing a toddler.

"There," he said and stepped back to admire his handiwork, ignoring the amused smiles from the onlookers. "Now I don't have to worry about you catching a cold."

Beside them, the small balding man that Grant had been talking to cleared his throat. "Are you going to introduce me to this delightful young lady?"

"Certainly." Grant wrapped his arm around Stephanie's shoulders and hauled her to his side. "This delightful young lady is Stephanie Forssell. She also happens to be my wife."

For the rest of the evening, Grant kept Stephanie anchored close, either holding her hand in a firm grip, or draping his arm over her shoulders. When he engaged in business conversations, he took the time to explain the issues to her. He danced with her and kissed her in the middle of the floor, in plain view of the crowd. He introduced her to everyone they came into contact with.

After the first three times Stephanie started counting, Grant called her his wife a total of thirty-seven times.

It was the happiest night of her life.

Chapter Twelve

Grant pressed his foot on the accelerator and sped along the four-lane highway, anxious to get home. Damn the business emergency that had kept him in town three more days since the charity ball. Stephanie's attitude toward him was changing, and he was eager to strengthen the bond between them. On the night of the ball, when she made love to him in the hotel suite, for the first time in their relationship, she had taken on the role of an aggressor, demanding more of him, voicing her needs in husky whispers.

In the morning, when he explained to her that he needed to stay in the city, she had looked at him with disappointment in her eyes. She had said there were things she wanted to tell him, plans she wanted to make, but they could wait until he got home.

He wanted to tell her things too, make plans for the future.

Grant brushed off the niggling doubts that warned him he didn't know much about Stephanie. Even if there were practical problems about Stephanie making her life with him in America, he would deal with them.

He could deal with anything with Stephanie by his side.

Grant glanced at his briefcase on the passenger seat. The jeweler had offered to send a security guard with a whole tray of rings for Stephanie to choose from, but Grant believed he knew her well enough to pick out something she would like.

Simple, but breathtakingly lovely. The purest of diamonds in a flawless setting. That was his Stephanie. He chuckled when he recalled his doubts over ever finding a woman he could trust. A woman not after his wealth. A wry smile twisted his lips as he considered the irony that since he had accepted that Stephanie wanted nothing from him, he'd grown desperate to give her everything she might want.

Things that would declare to the whole world that she was his.

The car tires screeched on the gravel drive as he pulled up outside the house. He parked haphazardly and rushed through the airy hall into the library. At the last minute, he paused to flick on the video conferencing system he had installed to take business meetings at home. He wanted to preserve the moment, to capture the dimpled smile that lit up Stephanie's face when he sank down

on one knee before her and asked her to be his wife for the rest of her life. He wanted a church ceremony, to be married in the eyes of God as well as the law.

He flung the door open and spotted Stephanie standing on the far side of the library, staring out into the small lush rear garden where sprinklers fought a constant battle with the arid climate. He couldn't see her face, but he heard the emotion in her voice as she spoke into the cell phone she clutched tight in her hand.

A jolt of concern tore through him when he saw the stiff set of her shoulders. She spoke in Swedish. For a second, he halted on the doorstep, curious about the way the foreign words added a lilt to her voice. He'd never seen her speaking on the telephone before, but he recalled her mentioning when they spent the first night in New York that she wanted to acquire a cell phone connected to a US network. At some point, she must have put her plan into action.

Grant stood still, admiring the graceful curve of her neck below the short flaxen hair, waiting for Stephanie to finish. Then he heard her last words, and the air stopped pumping in and out of his lungs.

Jag älskar dig, Anders.

He knew the first three words, had known them since he'd spent four months on a North Sea oil rig ten years ago. The only decent video on board had been an Ingmar Bergman classic with subtitles in English.

I love you.

That's what the words meant, and she was not telling them to him. She was telling them to someone called Anders.

As Grant stepped back and quietly closed the door between them, it felt as if every moment he had spent with Stephanie had turned into a lie.

* * * *

Grant stared at the telephone on the desk in front of him. For three hours, his mind had been a battlefield between doubts and hopes. Allowing the doubts to win, he picked up the receiver and dialed his vice-president of human resources.

"Jim? Can you run an urgent check on someone for me? Nothing much, the same background search you'd do for a prospective new employee. Education and family, the usual facts to make sure they are who they say they are, and that there's no conflict of interest with any family members being employed by the competition."

He gave Stephanie's details.

Then he put out a satellite call to one of his design engineers on the oil rig in Alaska. "Is there anyone up there who speaks Swedish?" When the reply was positive, he paused then carried on. "If I send over a video clip, can you get it translated? It's only a couple of minutes."

By the end of the day Grant had the information he sought. He stared at the screen and read the email with a translation of Stephanie's telephone conversation.

"I'm so sorry, Anders. I should have been with you. I should never have left you, but it's going to be different from now on. Trust me. I have money. Lots of money. I can give you everything you want, and we'll be together. We'll be together forever. I love you Anders. I'll always love you. Remember that, whatever happens."

Next, he scrolled through to the email which contained Stephanie's personal information. She was an only child of divorced parents. Her father's name was Olaf. There was no family member by the name of Anders.

Grant powered down the computer, the taste of his own gullibility like a surge of bitter bile in his mouth.

* * * *

Stephanie blinked her eyes open and saw sunshine peeking in under the dark curtains of Grant's bedroom. She had tossed and turned all night, unable to sleep without Grant to provide a solid wall of warmth that she could curl up against.

He'd been avoiding her ever since he returned from Houston four days ago. He didn't talk to her, sleep with her, or even take his meals with her. Stephanie accepted that the isolation was her own doing. In the beginning, when she'd been fighting against falling in love with Grant, she had been the one who had set the pattern of keeping aloof until nine o'clock, only getting together for a few hours in the evening before the sensual firestorms of lovemaking that sometimes lasted until the morning.

Only now, he no longer came to her at night. She slept alone in his masculine bedroom with blackout drapes and stark functional furnishings. Paquita had told her that Grant had taken up residence in the guest suite in the north wing.

As far away from her as possible.

How could she have been so wrong? When he'd kept her by his side throughout the charity ball, constantly referring to her as his wife, she had assumed that the same sense of belonging, the unmistakable pull of a shared future had overcome his suspicion of women, and he was prepared to open his heart to her.

How wrong she'd been. It had simply been about a conquest, about bending her to his stronger will, and once he'd proved his emotional power over her, he'd lost interest. Pride demanded that she leave at once, but she couldn't. Not anymore. Stephanie shut her eyes to block out the harsh reality. She had made a promise to Anders to make his final months an adventure beyond his dreams, and she'd keep her promise. She recalled the emails from her little stepbrother. A trip to Disneyland, a remote controlled model airplane with a wingspan of three feet, a flight in a hot air balloon over the meadows during the midnight sun. She needed money to give Anders his dreams, and the only way she would get that kind of money was to see out the remaining six weeks of her arrangement with Grant.

If it came to the choice between breaking her little stepbrother's heart and her own, she knew what to do. Her heart would have years to heal. Anders didn't have the luxury of time.

With a defeated sigh, Stephanie swung her legs over the edge of the bed and prepared to face yet another day filled with the torment of unrequited love.

* * * *

Grant paced his den. He'd taken to pacing recently. In the past, he'd always been able to direct his energy in more productive ways. Now he just paced, with pictures of Stephanie jumbling through his mind. Stephanie across the deck on Fayad's yacht. Stephanie in her bright blue bathing suit, slinging a black trash bag into the sea. Stephanie at the Plaza in New York, her cheeks aglow from the crisp air outside. Stephanie in his bed, her eyes dark with sensual promises of the pleasures they were about to share. Stephanie in her outrageously sexy black and white beaded dress, her golden head bent as she carefully patted a drop of blood from the cut on his palm.

Why had she sold herself to him? Who was Anders? If she loved this man, why had she been a virgin? Could Anders be a woman instead of a man? Why did she need money so badly she was willing to follow one man across the ocean while she loved another? Was Anders in prison? Did Anders need the money to save his home from creditors? Did he want to start a business, and Stephanie wanted to provide him with the capital?

How could she come to his bed when she loved someone else?

That final question tore him to pieces. Last night, he had dreamed of being a boy again, tormented by the call of a bully. *Your mother is a whore*. And worst, by far the worst of all, was the knowledge that despite everything, he couldn't stop loving Stephanie.

Grant stalked out and slammed the door of the den behind him. He needed sunshine to pull him out of his dark mood. Stephanie was just a slip of a woman, for heaven's sake. The world was full of women. He'd find another one. He'd find a dozen more.

When he got near to the long low building of the stables, he heard a horse neighing and the beat of hooves against the hard ground. He waved at Rico, the wiry groom who never seemed to get a day older.

"Who's riding?" Grant called out.

"Stephanie."

He halted next to Rico by the open stable door. "Stephanie can't ride."

"She is learning." Rico's sunburned skin cracked into a wide grin. "Never seen such a determined woman. She doesn't have the aptitude, but she isn't giving up."

Unable to keep away, Grant rounded the corner to get a view of the corrals behind the stables. Stephanie was riding bareback on Laramie, a dappled grey mare who looked small and gentle, but possessed the stubbornness of a donkey.

"Why is she riding bareback?" Grant turned to Rico who had drifted up behind him.

Rico released a guilty sigh. "It's my fault. I told her that the only way to ride truly well is to be one with the horse, and you only learn that riding bareback."

They stood in silence and watched as Stephanie rode around in a tight circle inside the corral. Laramie leaped with a sudden twist and tossed up her hind legs. Stephanie bounced up in the air and toppled down to the dirt in a flurry of dust. Without realizing he'd moved, Grant rushed up to the fence and gripped the top beam to swing himself over.

"Stephanie!" He roared out her name and knelt beside her slumped form. "Are you all right?"

Stephanie rolled over and raised one dirty hand to shove a wisp of hair from her eyes. "Of course I'm all right. Do you think this is the first time I fell off?" Her pink tongue peeked out to lick the coating of dust from her lips. She grimaced in disgust and wiped her mouth on her sleeve.

An unbearable sense of protectiveness surged inside Grant, and for a moment he gave in to the luxury of thinking only of the moment.

"You hold your hips too stiff," he told her. "You don't sit deep enough." He curled his fingers over her upper arms and helped Stephanie up to her feet. "I'll show you." He caught the reins dragging on the ground and used the fence to climb on the horse's back. "Come on." He extended one hand down to her.

After a moment of peering at him suspiciously from beneath her brows, Stephanie climbed up on the fence and slipped one leg over the horse to sit in front of him. "I've got you." Grant clasped his hands around her waist and pulled her against his chest. Her buttocks molded against his groin, sending a surge of desire through him, like a jolt of physical pain.

He anchored her close with his right arm and picked up the reins with his left, at the same time urging the horse to a slow walk. "You've got to rock your hips. Like this." He pressed his palm against her abdomen and coaxed her to lean into him. When she followed the swaying rhythm of his body, he kicked Laramie into a trot.

"Relax," he murmured. Before he could stop himself, his arm eased around her and his hand drifted up her ribcage in a sweeping caress. His fingers found the curve of her breast, lingered there, then smoothed their way down her side.

With a murmur of acquiescence, Stephanie sagged against him. Her head fell back and, without thinking, Grant leaned over to press a kiss on her neck where it joined the shoulder. She shuddered in his arms, emitting a hungry whimper for more.

"Hush," he told her. "Relax. Feel how I'm moving with the horse." He tightened his arm around Stephanie, but she struggled against him, and he allowed her to pull away. He thought she wanted to get off, and adjusted his weight against the horse, preparing to lift her down, but instead she clung to Laramie's mane and swung one leg across to sit sideways. Then she twisted around to face him and edged one leg between their bodies, until she was sitting astride again, facing him, her slim legs on top of his thighs. Astride him and the horse at the same time.

"I've missed you," she murmured, and with a satisfied sigh she wound her arms around his neck and reached up to kiss him. The rocking motion of the horse under them made Grant feel like a drowning man seeking to breathe, and the only air there was came from Stephanie's lips. One hand still clutching the reins, he stroked her back, molding her body into his at the same time as his mouth roamed hers. He met the exploring pressure of her tongue against his, learned again every smell and texture he had spent the last few nights trying to forget.

"I've missed you too," he murmured, and the confession tore open another sealed door in his heart.

She clung to him, twining her legs around his waist to rise up to meet his kiss. He slipped his hands under her buttocks and lifted her against his throbbing erection. "Damn these clothes," he muttered, running his fingers over her loose cotton pants with a fleeting thought of how impractical they were for riding, not robust enough to offer protection when she took a tumble into the dirt. With a savage curse, he fisted his hands over the fabric and yanked. The satisfaction when he heard the tearing sound stoked the force of his lust. He searched with his fingers, found the edge of the seam he'd torn

open and forced it wider, then located her panties and removed that obstacle with the same ruthlessness.

He kept one arm wrapped around her and slipped his other hand between their bodies, finding the feminine heat between her legs, feeling the pulse of her desire against his fingertips.

“God, you’re dripping wet, Stephanie,” he murmured. “I’ve got to get you into the house.”

“No,” she told him, her voice a gravely rasp. “Here. Now.”

“What?” He leaned back to examine her face. “Out in the open?” He swept a gaze around the stable yard, saw that Rico had discreetly vanished. The maids were indoors, and Horatio was busy in his office which overlooked the front drive. A sense of inevitability filled Grant, and he tipped Stephanie further back to allow her to swing her leg across the horse’s back, so he could lower her down to the ground. He followed her, leaving Laramie standing idle beside them at the corral fence.

“Undo my jeans,” he instructed. Wondering if he’d lost his sanity, Grant watched as Stephanie struggled with the snap at his waist and yanked down the zipper. “Careful,” he warned as she reached into his pants to release his aching shaft.

When she’d worked him free of the constraints of the clothing, he glanced down at his manhood that jutted out from his undone jeans. The metal zipper ground against the base of his cock, and the fold of denim trapped his balls into a tight squeeze. He lowered his head to cover Stephanie’s mouth with his, at the same time as he curled his hands over her buttocks and hoisted her up. She wound her legs around his waist, and he lifted her higher, until he felt her inner folds against the tip of his shaft.

“Guide me in,” he told her, his voice a hoarse growl as he propped her back against the fence for balance.

Stephanie reached one hand between them. She positioned him with a greedy touch and ordered him to hurry in urgent whispers. When he felt his cock probing her entrance, he released his grip on her buttocks and allowed her to sink down, taking him deep inside. His hips flexed to make sure he was buried to the hilt, and a fleeting thought raced through his mind that the grating edge of the zip might cause him injury, but he no longer cared. Even if the damn jeans were going to castrate him, he couldn’t have called a halt as Stephanie began to slide up and down his cock, her arms twined around his neck and her ankles crossed behind his back to help her cling on tight.

Behind them, hooves beat the ground as the sounds and smells of their lovemaking triggered a nervous reaction in the mare. Instead of controlling the horse, Grant reached out with his hand and slapped Laramie on the flank, sending her to walk around the corral, away from them.

An instant later, he forgot the horse as Stephanie rose and fell with a passion that swallowed him up and buried any doubts he might have had that he loved her—loved her, whatever she had done, even if she had given her loyalty to another man.

“Christ, Stephanie,” he murmured. “You’re killing me. You are killing me.” He burst inside her in wild pulsing explosion that was the source of life, and with a cruel flash of clarity Grant realized that he wasn’t just talking about the little death that accompanied the ecstasy of completion, but that with her treacherous ways Stephanie was killing his heart, just when he had allowed it to come alive.

Chapter Thirteen

Grant sat at the desk in the den, head propped in his hands. He glanced up at the three clocks that formed a neat row along the wall. The one showing local time said four in the afternoon. He'd been sitting there for five hours. After he slipped out of Stephanie and she released her legs from around his waist and lowered her feet to the ground, he had held her in a wordless embrace for what felt like an eternity.

Then Laramie walked up to them, curious and eager for attention. The horse butted her head to Stephanie's side. Without a word of explanation, Stephanie had twisted free from his embrace and adjusted her torn clothing. Keeping her face averted, she had climbed over the fence, and hurried across the dusty gravel yard toward the house.

He had done up his jeans, taken the bridle off Laramie, and stalked back into the house. As he passed the closed library door, he had paused, but instead of knocking, he'd continued to the den.

He had to go away. If he stayed, Stephanie would breach his defenses time and time again. He'd end up like his father, tied to a woman who humiliated and shamed him by her faithlessness, and yet held him a prisoner of his love for her.

With slow and defeated movements, Grant got to his feet and drifted to the north wing where he'd been sleeping the last few nights. He threw a few clothes into an overnight case. The apartment downtown Houston wasn't far enough. He might drive back when the need to be with Stephanie overcame him, when the urge to hold her, to see her smile, to hear her soft voice got too desperate.

He needed to put a safer distance between them.

Not wanting to face Horatio and make explanations, Grant set off in the dark sedan he used for business and called the house on his cell phone. "I'm going to Alaska to check the progress on the Prudhoe Bay installation."

"Why? Is there a problem? You've only just been."

"No problem. I just feel the need to get my hands dirty with fieldwork. To make sure I'm not losing my touch."

"All right." Horatio paused. "Do you want me to make the travel arrangements?"

"No. I'm already on my way to the airport. I'll see what's available when I get there." Grant hung up before Horatio had the time to ask further questions.

For the rest of the drive to the airport, he stared straight ahead, trying to empty his mind of images of Stephanie propped against the fence, clinging to him, whispering his name in her throaty voice.

* * * *

Grant stood outside in the howling wind, waiting for the helicopter to transport him from the oil rig back to the mainland. The frost numbed his skin, but nothing could numb the pain inside him. Hard work hadn't been the sedative he'd hoped to it be. For three days, he had thought of nothing but Stephanie, how much he wanted to be with her.

How could a man love a woman who didn't love him back? What cruel trick of nature allowed unrequited emotions to survive? Why didn't the very fact that the love was not returned make it shrivel up and die? What cosmic joke if creation allowed such an imbalance to exist, and torment those afflicted?

Back on solid land, Grant took a chauffeured four wheel drive through the roads covered in snow and ice to the nearest hotel. He thawed his body with a spell in the sauna and a few stiff whiskies. Then he sat down in his room and telephoned his father.

"Grant?"

The delight in the old man's voice twisted at his heart, and he made a mental promise to call more often. "Yeah, Dad, it's me."

"How are you, son?"

He skipped the polite response and got straight to the point of his call. "I need to ask you something. Something I've never asked before."

He heard the rasp of his father's heavy sigh. "I know, son. Go ahead. I won't be offended."

"How could you live with Mom screwing around? Why did you never toss her out? Did you ever demand that she stop, choose between you and the other men? How could you live with the humiliation?"

"You know that your mother and I couldn't have any more children after you were born?"

"Of course I do. Always felt damn guilty, thinking I must have done some damage to Mom's insides when I was born."

"Nonsense, son. It was me. I had a medical problem when you were around two. Left me unable to father any more children." His father paused. "Also left me impotent."

"Jesus, Dad," Grant muttered. "I'm not sure I want to hear this."

"You need to know. You should have known all along, but your mother didn't let me tell you."

"Go ahead. I'm listening." A shiver of doubt trickled down Grant's skin at the prospect that what he was about to hear would alter the way his world fitted together, and shake the foundations some of his opinions had been built on.

"Your mother was a very physically passionate woman. When it became clear that I couldn't... fulfill my husbandly duties, I offered her freedom. I told her she could have affairs. I only asked her one thing."

"What was that?" Grant forced out the question.

"I made her promise that she would never become emotionally involved with any of her lovers. As soon as the man tried to make it into something more than merely a physical relationship, she would break it off." Grant heard his father give another long sigh. "She never broke that promise. Unfortunately, men had a tendency to fall in love with your mother and start making demands. Each time, she ended the affair and moved on to someone else."

His father's voice trembled with emotion. "Do you understand, son? She sacrificed her reputation in order to keep her promise to me, and she never told anyone why she was unfaithful. She allowed people to call her a whore to spare me the humiliation of people knowing that I wasn't sexually capable."

"Christ, Dad. Why didn't you tell me before?"

"Your mother wouldn't let me. She felt it was important for a son to look up to his father. She didn't want you to think that I was less of a man because I couldn't—"

"I always thought..." Grant shook his head in baffled silence. "Where's Mom? Is she there?"

"She's at the country club doing an aerobics class. I'll tell her you called."

"Tell her I'm sorry I didn't come home for Thanksgiving. I'll try to make it for Christmas."

"We'd love that, son." After a pause the old man added. "You know, Grant, it was worth putting up with her affairs. When she turned fifty, her appetites waned. Now all she wants is a cuddle and a cup of cocoa at night. I've got her all to myself for the rest of my life."

As Grant lowered the phone, relief eased his mind that his mother was out, and he didn't need to talk to her right now. He needed time to come up with suitable words to apologize for thirty years of unfair resentment.

* * * *

On the flight back to Houston, uneasy thoughts wouldn't leave Grant alone.

He'd been wrong about his mother.

Could he have been wrong about Stephanie?

Was there something he didn't know, something he hadn't understood?

Why hadn't he confronted her, asked her to explain who Anders was?

Why had he allowed pride to chase him away?

He broke the speed limit on his way home from the airport. When a traffic cop pulled him over, he told the man to write him a few more tickets instead of stopping him again. With an angry flick of his pen, the cop launched into a warning lecture, but spotted the emblem on Grant's window that

identified him as a contributor to the Fallen Troopers' Fund. Easing his tone, the cop told Grant that speed limits were for his safety and jokes like that could get him into trouble. Just to make sure, he hung on Grant's tail until they exited the highway.

At home, Grant rushed to the library first, but Stephanie wasn't there, nor was her laptop set up in its usual place facing the window. Perhaps she was at the stables, riding in the evening cool. Grant raced through the hall, but before heading out he paused to find Horatio in his office.

Horatio sat at the computer, paying household bills.

"Where's Stephanie?" Grant tried to mask his impatience but failed.

"She's gone." Horatio's smooth brow furrowed. "Didn't you get her message?"

"What message?" Fear gripped Grant, slowing the world around him to a blur that possessed the unreal quality of a nightmare.

"She said she'd call you on her way to the airport and explain."

"Explain what?"

"That she's gone."

Grant pulled over a chair and sank into it. "What happened? I want to know everything. Every word she said, every move she made."

"Well." Horatio shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "The day after you left for Alaska, I heard Stephanie crying in the library." He stole a glance at Grant. "Not just weeping. She was crying so hard it sounded like she might choke, so I knocked on the door and went inside. She was kneeling on the floor, her arms clutched tight around her, her whole body shaking with the sobs. I tried to go to her, but she waved me away."

Grant felt his chest tighten at the thought of Stephanie's grief, and the fact that he hadn't been there to comfort her. "Did she say anything?"

"No." Horatio gave a little shrug. "I don't mean that she didn't say anything, I meant that she said '*no*'. Wailing it over and over again, rocking her body back and forth and sobbing inconsolably, between endlessly repeating '*no*'."

"And then? When did she leave?"

"I hung around outside the library and listened for a while. I was worried about her. A couple of hours later she came out, pale as death. She told me that she needed to go, and she said that she'd call you on her way to the airport to explain."

"She never called me." Grant shook his head in defeat. "Who drove her to the airport? You or Rico?"

"No one did. I thought she'd ask me, but less than an hour after she told me that she needed to go, I heard a car pull up. When I looked out through the window, I saw her getting into a cab. She was carrying her leather bag and that canvas tote she uses for her laptop." Horatio paused. "I went upstairs to check your bedroom. I hope you don't mind. She left a letter for you. It's on the dresser."

"Christ." Grant tipped his head back and closed his eyes. "My life's turning into a bad movie. My wife leaves me, and I'm getting a '*Dear John*' letter left on the dresser."

"But she wasn't really your wife, was she?" Horatio said quietly. "It wasn't intended to last. You never said anything, but it was clear for all to see."

The surge of fury that tore through Grant took him by surprise. He rose to his feet, his hands clenched into fists. "If you say that one more time, you're fired, and before you go, I'll rearrange your face so that you'll never be called pretty again. Do you understand me?"

Something flashed in Horatio's eyes, and it looked like triumph. A new doubt soared inside Grant. He had always thought that he got on well with his household manager, but Horatio seemed to take pleasure in his plight. Maybe he'd been wrong about many things.

"You seem to be gloating about my misfortune of losing Stephanie," he said. "Have I done something to make you resent me?"

Horatio frowned. "I don't resent you. I rejoice for you."

"Rejoice?" Grant said sharply. "What are you talking about?"

"Stephanie has made you human. She's cracked the shell of indifference that you used to shield behind."

"I'm not indifferent."

Horatio's forehead furrowed with scorn. "What do you know about me? Are my parents alive? Do I have a boyfriend? What are my aspirations in life?"

Grant stared at the classically handsome young man before him. "I don't know. I guess someone with your looks might dream of being a movie star."

"Wrong. I want to work for you, move up in the business. I was too poor to go to college, but Stephanie has started teaching me. She thinks she can get me enrolled on a remote program in England. They have something called 'Open University' that you can do on-line relatively cheaply."

Grant unclenched his fists as the odd sense of confusion that had taken hold of his mind expanded inside him. "Why didn't you tell me?"

Horatio ignored his question and carried on. "Stephanie has been here less than two months, and she knows my parents are called Raul and Liana, and I have two sisters, Elena and Christina. She worries about Maria's morning sickness, and Paquita's elderly mother who has complications with diabetes. She irons your shirts because Paquita hates doing it. She does the heavy cleaning because Maria needs to be careful with her pregnancy and Stephanie thinks it's waste of money to employ a cleaning contractor when she is perfectly capable of doing the job."

"Are you telling me I'm a stranger in my own house?"

"I'm telling you that you're crazy if you let Stephanie go." Horatio began to shuffle the stack of bills. "I suggest that you go and read her letter. Then you can come back to me. I might have some information for you."

Grant scaled the stairs slowly, troubled thoughts chasing each other in his head, slowing his progress. Had he lived in some kind of a vacuum? Not really knowing his parents, ignoring his domestic help. What did he really know about Stephanie? Did he know her any better than he knew Horatio and Maria and Paquita?

He plucked the letter from where it leaned against the brass carriage clock on the dresser. With shaking hands, he tore open the flap.

Dear Grant,

I need to leave. I don't want the money, and the time isn't up for another five weeks anyway. If you were inclined to make a partial payment, attached is a list of charities I'd like you to make a donation to.

You were right. When the time came to part, I'm leaving with fond memories of our time together. Everything I gave you was given freely, and there is no one else to whom I would have rather given it.

*All the best,
Stephanie.*

Grant clenched his hands into fists, then realized he'd crumpled up the letter and hurried to smooth it between his fingers. *Dear Grant.* It was the first endearment he'd had from Stephanie. Even during their nights filled with passion she'd been guarded with her words. He knew it was just a polite phrase, but he whispered it aloud anyway.

He'd achieved what he wanted. Stephanie had left with good memories of him. But that was not the most important message in the letter. The crucial words were not what had been said, but what had been left unsaid.

She hadn't said. *'Don't try to find me'.*

Grant stormed downstairs into his den, a harsh smile on his lips. He'd be damned if he let Stephanie go without a fight. This Anders guy was a fool if he thought Grant would just fade away. He'd fight to win, and he'd fight dirty. He'd declare war on the entire nation of Sweden, if it came to that. The country had once managed to escape the ravages of war by declaring themselves neutral. He wouldn't give them the choice.

Grant pulled the telephone across the desk. Bypassing his human resources director, he went straight to his head of security. "I want you to find someone for me. I don't care how much it costs, or how many laws you have to break. I take full responsibility. Here are the details."

When Grant hung up, he found Horatio lounging against the doorframe. "Before you get all of us arrested for hacking into confidential databases, you might like to try this." The young man crossed the room to lay a slip of paper on the desk in front of Grant.

He picked up the handwritten note. "What's this?"

"A couple of times, when I was going into the post office, Stephanie asked me to mail a parcel for her. This is the address they were going to." Horatio laid down another piece of paper. "And this is

how you get there. You can either fly to Stockholm and rent a car from there, or take an internal flight to one of three possible towns which are closer, and drive the rest of the way.”

“How do you know she’ll be there?”

“I don’t. But the parcels were addressed to her mother, and she’s bound to know where Stephanie is.”

Grant picked up the second piece of paper and stared at the alien names of towns. *Sundsvall, Umeå, Östersund*. What was he doing, tearing around the world after a woman he barely knew?

He sighed and leaned back in the seat. “Book me on a plane to Stockholm. I’ll drive the rest of the way.”

Chapter Fourteen

Stephanie knelt on a drift of snow. Every time she thought the tears had stopped flowing, they started again. She removed one mitten and rubbed her bare fingers over the raised letters on the cold gravestone. *Anders Westerlund*. Twelve years old. A child's life ended before he'd even reached his teens.

The track of tears on her face froze with the chill of the wind, and Stephanie patted away the icy dampness from her skin. The guilt of not being there when Anders died would never leave her. At least she had made the funeral, had been there for her mother, and for Anders' inconsolable father.

Stephanie knew she had been right to sneak out while Grant was away. His demeanor toward her had already cooled. If she sought comfort from him now, her heart would truly shatter when they parted in another five weeks.

This was better. Getting both sources of grief dealt with at once.

Behind her, the crunch of footsteps over snow distracted her, and she slanted a curious look at the approaching figure. Which fool would go out without a hat and a thick overcoat during a cold snap? Her heart began to pound when the stranger got closer and she saw the familiar line of broad shoulders and the tousle of tawny hair.

Not a stranger. Grant. All her nerves began to hum, but Stephanie remained kneeling by the gravestone.

"So, there really was a little brother who needed an operation to save his life." Grant's voice was gravely with emotion.

Stephanie glanced at him over her shoulder, then turned back to the gravestone. "His name was Anders. My parents are divorced, but a few years ago my Mom met a widowed farmer and we moved in with him and his small son. The relationship didn't last, and we moved out again, but Anders will always be my little brother, and for my mother he'll always be like a son."

"Why didn't you tell me?" Grant made a helpless gesture with his hand, the skin on his fingers turning blue without gloves in the cold. "I could have helped. We could have sought out the best doctors, made sure he got every possible medical care."

Stephanie shook her head, the pressure of guilt inside her sending the tears flowing again. "There was nothing that could be done. Anders had bone cancer, well advanced. I was lying to myself. I wanted to be with you, but I didn't want to seem selfish or flighty, so I needed an excuse. I told myself I was doing it for Anders. That by the end of the three months there would be some new treatment, and your money could save him. And all the time I knew that nothing could save him. I should have been here, to comfort him in his last months. Instead, I sought my own comfort in your arms. I was a coward, afraid of watching him die, and equally afraid of letting a man get close to me, of falling in love and it not lasting."

"You're not a coward," Grant said and laid a hand on her shoulder.

Stephanie peered up at him through the haze of tears. "Why are you here?"

"You owe me five weeks."

Stephanie stood up and shook the snow from her jeans. "I don't owe you anything." She tried to face him with a stern look, but her eyes brimmed again. "I signed all the papers to dissolve the PACS. You're free of me."

"Wrong." Grant took a step closer. "I haven't signed the papers, and until I do, you remained legally tied to me."

Stephanie pulled her mittens back on and took one of Grant's hands between hers, trying to rub it warm. "What are you doing out here without proper clothes?"

"Your mother told me I'd find you here."

"I meant in Sweden." She dropped his right hand and switched to the left, lifting it to her mouth to breathe warmth into the numb fingers.

"I've come to be with you." Grant gestured with his free hand. "If you want to live here, I'll build you a house and work from here."

"They won't let you into the country without a residence permit."

Grant rested his chin on top of her head. "As your husband, I should qualify."

Horried, Stephanie pulled back. "You didn't tell my mother, did you? I told her I was in America on a student exchange program."

Grant cupped her chin in his fingers, tilting up her head. "I've been lying to myself too," he told her softly. "Despite the way I asked you to come with me, it's clear that I never intended to let you go. And it's equally clear that you never intended to leave me."

Stephanie searched his features, not daring to accept the hope that fluttered into life inside her. "What makes you say that?"

"Think. You're an intelligent woman." Grant paused to contemplate her.

She stared blankly at him.

"What do you use for contraception?" he asked.

"Nothing," Stephanie said as a blush of embarrassment rose on her cheeks. "I did think about it—I'm not stupid—but I chose to ignore the question. I thought that if I fell pregnant, the child would ease the pain of losing Anders. I would not have asked you for any child support."

"I'm more or less the same. I was aware of the possibility of pregnancy, of course I was, but I refused to think about it."

"We are two intelligent people with a lot to lose—you have your wealth to protect, I have my studies to finish—and yet we have acted totally irresponsibly." Stephanie shook her head. "Why do you think we did it?"

"Sometimes the subconscious can overrule the conscious mind. We both wanted to be tied to each other, but didn't have the courage to admit it. We wanted to box ourselves into a corner and have the decision forced upon us." Grant's brows knotted. "Are you pregnant? You haven't had your period while I've been with you, unless you had one while I was in Alaska."

"Oh my God." Stephanie sank to sit on the bank of snow. "Oh my God." She turned to Grant, blinking in stunned realization. "I had a period when you went to Alaska the first time, but I think I'm overdue. I've never been very regular. With the funeral, I haven't remembered to keep count."

Grant sent her a calm nod. "We are two healthy people, and I've made love to you almost every night for a more than a month, except for the two weeks I was in Alaska."

Stephanie swallowed. She glanced down at her flat stomach, swathed in layers of sweaters under the padded parka. "A baby," she whispered.

"Possibly." Grant crouched beside her and laid his hand over her midriff. "I want to give you everything. A home. A child. A life full of love. Will you let me do that?"

Stephanie clasped her hands between her knees and stared at him. "I've applied to have my scholarship funding transferred to Harvard. I thought, if I graduated from there, I might be able to get a green card and stay in the US. I was going to get a job in Houston. I hoped that maybe then, I might occasionally see you in the crowd. I could stand outside your office building to catch a glimpse of you on your way in and out."

Grant slipped his hands under her arms and pulled her to her feet. "No need to do that. You can see me every morning when you open your eyes, and every night before you go to sleep." He brushed a kiss on her lips, his mouth warm upon hers. "Will you come home with me, Stephanie?"

She closed her eyes to stem the tears of relief. The protective shield of Grant beside her acted like a barrier that pushed the grief of losing Anders a little further away, allowing her room to heal. The icy fist of loneliness and despair that had seized her in its grip since she ran away from Grant began to ease.

In front of her, the future unfolded, filled with a promise of love and the hope of a new life to cherish.

Her lids fluttered up. She found Grant staring at her. A vulnerable expression of hope and longing softened his tired features.

"Yes," she said. "I'll come home with you."

THE END

About the Author

Tatiana March learned to read at four, and since then no other pastime has matched the thrill of being transported to other worlds. She took up fiction writing in 2002 while taking a career break from her job as a senior director in a large international corporation.

Tatiana lives in the UK near the river Thames. She loves to travel and has lived in several European countries, as well as spending time in the US. One of her favorite destinations is Arizona, the setting of her historical romance *Circle Star*.

When Tatiana is not reading or writing, she enjoys hiking, camping, and watching old movies on the TV.

Le PACS is her sixth published novel. She is working on several other manuscripts, both historical and contemporary romance.