

The background of the book cover features a romantic couple in a close embrace, nearly kissing. The woman is on the left, and the man is on the right. They are both looking at each other. The scene is set against a backdrop of a city skyline at night, with the CN Tower prominently visible in the center. The sky is dark with some clouds, and the city lights are glowing. The overall color palette is a mix of purples, blues, and warm city lights.

SAMHAIN

SECRETS<sup>AND</sup>  
*Seduction*

JANE BECKENHAM

*He wants to hate her, but a little lust wouldn't hurt...*

The only emotion Leah Grainger can muster when thinking of her dead husband is relief. Until she learns his gambling debt threatens her beloved farm and the child she wanted to protect from the rootless existence she grew up with.

The last straw? Her husband's brother demands a meeting. When she charges into his office to tell him she won't let another Grainger screw up her life, the startlingly handsome, former oil rig wildcatter goes for the jugular. He's claimed legal guardianship of her daughter, bought her mortgage...and he's moving in.

The final email Mac received from his suicidal brother blamed Leah for everything. If it's the last thing he does, he plans to protect his niece. Even if it means using his millions to gain the upper hand. And hardening his heart against the beautiful Leah's protests of innocence.

Yet something seems off. Leah is nothing like the uncaring woman his brother described. She's warm, loving...and when a new threat to her child surfaces and she reaches out to him in need, his body won't let him say no. Even when her last secret forces him to make a decision that exposes his most closely guarded possession. His heart.

Warning: Contains tug-your-heart love, raise-the-roof lust, a marriage of convenience and hot sex that will give a whole new meaning to the word "wildcatter".

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# Secrets and Seduction

*Jane Beckenham*

## Dedication

To Nicole, Yvonne, Frances and Annie, and my fab editor Linda. Thank you for being great friends and wonderful supporters.

# Chapter One

With every step up the grand marble entrance of Mackenzie International, Leah Talbot-Grainger wanted to spit tacks. Fury somersaulted in her stomach as she focused on one man.

Mac Grainger.

She'd thought he'd disappear. Definitely wanted him to. Needed him to.

Fat chance!

His velvety smooth messages left on her answer phone reminded her every single day he wasn't backing off. What the heck did her dead husband's brother want?

"I won't wait any longer" had been the last one.

Then she received his letter demanding she attend a meeting. No "come and see me". Just do it, or else.

Leah had stewed, waiting, and wondering, until eventually, anger overrode common sense, and here she was about to storm into the lion's den.

Standing at the columned entrance, she tilted her head back. The midday sun glinted off the towering edifice that housed his international conglomerate.

Mac Grainger might have money, and lots of it, if the tabloids were correct about the elusive Midas Man returning to New Zealand's shores, but he was *not* going to tell her what to do.

A little part of her subconscious stamped down the fact that right now she *was* doing exactly what he wanted, because she had come to see him on his turf, just as *he* demanded. But there was too much at stake, and she intended to tell him to back off.

Perspiration dotted her brow and seeped a sticky trail between her shoulder blades. She rotated her shoulders as if it would afford her the luxury of relaxation, then rubbed damp hands down the sides of her T-shirt. Exhaling a long, trembling breath, she entered the marble lobby and headed toward the bank of elevators.

The elevator doors hissed open, and a millisecond later, she realized the elevator wasn't empty. She stepped in and gave the man on the other side a momentary glance.

The guy was...well, big. Tall. Strong. And broad shouldered enough to do a linebacker proud. He seemed kinda familiar, in a vague sort of way.

But looking wasn't a good idea, because he gazed right back, and the hairs on Leah's forearms prickled to attention.

*You're over men, remember?*

The elevator doors closed and sealed off her last chance to escape. Dread pooled in her stomach as the conveyance whizzed past floor after floor. She hated confrontation and had learned to back away from it. Anything for a quiet life. But enough was enough. She was the mother lion, the protector, and nobody would threaten the sanctuary she'd worked long and hard to create.

As the elevator ascended, Leah found herself overpowered by temptation and stole a quick glance at the stranger, then immediately regretted it.

The man oozed authority. Muscular legs encased in dark trousers, his crisp white shirt a sharp contrast to tanned skin. Gold cufflinks glinted from beneath the sleeve edge of his worsted wool jacket, while the hint of his exotic cologne, a fusion of sandalwood and citrus, tickled her overactive senses. Just looking at him caused heat to shoot from the tips of her fingers to her toes and right back up again, while her heartbeat danced a nervous rat-a-tat.

Lordy! She shouldn't be feeling like this. Feeling guilty. Or looking. But she was.

*Shame on me. Shame.*

The electronic voice announced her floor, and she dragged her wayward thoughts back to the reason for being here. This was about protecting Charlee, her daughter.

Her worried gaze directed straight ahead, she stepped out, surprised to find the reception area deserted.

Too bad. She wasn't prepared to wait. This had to end, right now.

She turned and headed with purposeful strides down the luxuriously carpeted hallway to a door that stood ajar. She focused on the nameplate etched in gold lettering: Mackenzie Grainger, C.E.O. This was it.

Hand fisted, about to knock, she heard a voice from behind.

"Can I help you?"

That voice! Still smooth. Still velvety. No answer phone to dull the incendiary tone. But real...and in person.

Leah spun round on the soles of her well-worn shoes, accusations on the tip of her tongue. Her jaw dropped as recognition registered. "You were in the elevator."

A single dark brow arched. "So I was."

She clenched and unclenched her hands at her sides, willing herself to stay calm and focused. "And you know who I am."

"That depends on who you are." One corner of his mouth quirked, offering her a clear view of a dimpled cheek.

She was a sucker for dimples.

Leah stamped that thought right back down and drew in a desperate breath, fingers fidgeting with her hair as humor-filled eyes followed her nervous movements. Damn him, he was laughing at her. “It seems you do know who I am, so I’m presuming you’re Mackenzie Grainger.”

He nodded, and that darn dimple deepened.

Leah squeezed her eyes shut for a moment to block it out. She wouldn’t look. She wouldn’t.

“Would you care to come in?”

Her eyes shot open, and when she took her time peering through the door and into in his well-appointed office, he shrugged and strode passed her. “Well, are you coming in?” He stood back for her.

Leah stepped over the threshold, and he shut the door behind her, the click of the latch reverberating a thousand-fold, though nothing could drown out the thud of her heartbeat.

With precision, he walked to the other side of his mahogany desk and sat, stretching out his long legs beneath it. He linked his fingers and fixed an inquisitive stare on her for the briefest of moments. Then that same haughty examination slid down her length with an unquestionable curiosity, detonating a wave of discomfort through her. She shook her head and brushed away a tangled curl.

Focus. She needed to focus. She stood behind one of the two leather club chairs facing his desk, fingers biting into the luxurious hide. She tossed her head and lifted her chin as if it would afford her more bravado than she possessed. “You have no right demanding this meeting, Mr. Grainger.”

“But you came nevertheless.”

“Only to tell you to back off,” she stated baldly. “Charlee and I are fine on our own. We don’t need anyone else.”

The light in his eyes burned, though his expression remained coolly assessing. “Really? Sit down, Leah.” His request wasn’t a social nicety but an order.

Leah clamped down the rampant urge to bolt, looped her hands through her handbag strap and held on tight. “Thank you, but I prefer to stand. I don’t intend staying.”

He offered a half smile and leant forward. “Shame.”

The waft of his cologne intensified, and she gritted her teeth, inhaled and held her breath. Maybe she could not breathe, not smell him and just leave. “Stay away, Mr. Grainger. I was married to your brother, but Curtis is dead. I don’t want anything more to do with *any* Grainger. So no more phone calls, and,” she said, retrieving his letter from her handbag, “no more demanding letters.” She slammed the offending envelope on his desk to make her point.

But he made no move to pick it up, and her fear escalated. She waited for the explosion. He was Curtis’s brother, after all. Then he did something Curtis never would have. He smiled, and in that instant she knew this man was far more dangerous than her dead husband. “Right, I’ve said all I’ve come to say.” She went to turn away.

“Not so fast, Leah. Now it’s my turn.”



She swung back to face him, more bluster in her voice than she actually felt. “What’s there left to say? I don’t know you. Your brother barely mentioned you in all the years we were married.”

“Why doesn’t that surprise me?”

“It’s too late to establish the familial bond, if that’s what you’re after.”

“It’s never too late.”

For a moment, she digested his words, or tried to. “Look, Mister—”

“Mac,” he offered. “We are related, after all.”

“Were. I’m sorry Curtis committed suicide, but he was...unwell. Now I have to go. I have an olive farm due to be harvested in a few weeks.”

“And you need to make sure it’s a good harvest.”

Her brow crinkled, suspicion tangling with fear inside her overstimulated brain. “Of course. High yield means high payout, as in all business.”

“Crucial,” he agreed.

The ever-increasing dread in her stomach coiled tighter.

“The thing is, Leah, I know about Aroha Farm,” he said silkily. “I also know it eats up a lot of money.”

Her shoulders sagged. “The farm is my inheritance from my grandfather. Curtis had no interest in it.” Except for what he could get out of it.

“Ah...there’s the difference. You see, I’m not Curtis. You have a debt. A rather large one, I believe.”

*He knows.*

With those few words, Leah’s world teetered on the edge. Her jaw clenched, but she held herself in check. “That is none of your business.”

“Oh, but *that* is where you’re definitely wrong, sweetheart.” His dark eyes narrowed, an aura of satisfaction in their depths giving Leah the distinct impression he was reeling her in. “You *need* to sit down.” His clipped intonation offered no hint of sympathy, or kindness. Just cold, hard, grim determination.

She reached for the chair in front of her, fingers clawing at it for support. Unable to stem the icy shivers inching along her spine, she sat, then linked her fingers together to stop their shaking and hooked her gaze with his impenetrable one. “What do you want, *Mr. Grainger*?”

“Want?” he asked, mouth quirking on one side and a slight teasing in his tone. “It’s not *what* I want, believe me, but I have no choice.”

Choice? Leah restrained her disbelief. The man had no idea about choices. She glanced around the room, taking in the accoutrements of wealth—the cut crystal decanters and champagne flutes on the antique sideboard, the diamond Rolex on his wrist. Her gaze dropped to her faded jeans and T-shirt, and she shrugged. She wasn’t here to win prizes for best dressed or to make an impression.

Pushing his chair back, he stood and unhooked the buttons of his jacket, the edges of the exquisite fabric folding back to reveal his silk shirt and tie. He sidestepped the desk and hitched himself on its edge.

Leah studied him, from the tips of his leather shoes, moving up long legs, and finally settling on his chiseled, unsmiling face. The man remained cool, showing not a flicker of emotion, while her stomach heaved.

“So what is it you have no choice over?” she asked.

“Curtis emailed me before his death. He wants...wanted me,” he corrected, his expression unreadable, “to spend some time with my niece, to get to know Charlee.”

“My daughter?”

“Yes. Perhaps take her out sometime.”

“She’s too young. You’ve never met her. She doesn’t know you.” Leah scrambled for any excuse. She didn’t want her daughter anywhere near Curtis’s relations.

But her defense didn’t faze him. “That’s obviously what I’m wanting to remedy,” he said, offering her a smile. In any other circumstances, she might have thought it charming. Disarming, even. Now it proved lethal, and she flicked her gaze away from his dimples.

“Time to get to know you too,” he suggested.

“Absolutely not!” She shot to her feet. She’d be dead before she let another Grainger into her life. “Charlee is my daughter. She’s four years old. Curtis...” She clamped her mouth closed. Should she tell him the truth?

Impossible. Then it would all be over.

From the day Charlee arrived in her life, Leah had *felt* like her mother, believed it. And so did Charlee.

Mac pushed away from the desk, coming closer, and Leah noticed the faint shadow on his jaw and the fine creases around his eyes—dark, bottomless eyes that condemned her. He stood so close she could reach out and wipe that self-satisfied smirk right off his face. She wanted to, a whole lot.

“What you want makes no difference to me,” he stated. “I’m her uncle. I’d like the chance to get to know her. How about I come round later?”

*Said the spider to the fly.*

“Not now. Maybe in a month or two.”

“No, Leah. Soon. Very soon.”

Leah snatched up her battered leather handbag and tossed the worn strap over her shoulder. “We’ll see about that.” Without offering a good-bye, she strode from his office to the elevator, knowing full well he followed her, a silent predator. A Grainger. The man was too smooth, too rich, too arrogant. And in control, damn him.

Every skin cell on her body burned with an awareness at his closeness, and her heart hammered as the old fear she'd fought so hard to keep in check reared to the surface. She shot him a baleful glare as she punched the elevator call button repeatedly. She needed to get out of a world that had begun to spin out of control. She needed to think. "There's no way I'll give up my daughter."

He leaned against the wall to the right of the elevators, arms folded across his chest as if he had no cares in the world. "Who said anything about giving her up?"

"I don't want another Grainger near her."

"Charlee *is* a Grainger."

Leah's nerves were shot, and she began to shake. "I'll fight you in court if I have to."

"Really? Legal battles cost a lot of money."

"Oh, damn you to hell, Mac Grainger."

"Many have tried." Then he did something she didn't expect and wished to God he hadn't. He laughed, a rich and throaty sound that fired something she didn't believe she would ever feel again: excitement.

*She's hiding something.*

Mac's instinct kicked in, and he sucked in a low breath, letting the oxygen roll around his lungs and seep through his veins.

She's guilty.

*Just like you.*

He pasted on his best smile and watched as the color drained from her face. All the while, her striking green eyes held him captive. They changed from light green and then replicated the shades of the forest as her mood darkened.

For more than a heartbeat, he couldn't take his eyes off her. Curtis had called his wife cold and unforgiving, and yet all he could see was passion and emotion. A spitfire.

Leah Talbot-Grainger was a beautiful woman, with a tousel of curls that created an auburn halo falling to her shoulders and eyes that had the capacity to bewitch. When the tip of her tongue slid across her slightly parted mouth, Mac's body heated. Her actions taunted him.

But there were no tears, only a desperate fear in eyes that shadowed secrets, and without realizing it, she confirmed everything Curtis had told him about her, strengthening his resolve to protect his niece at all costs.

As the elevator leveled off with the thirtieth floor, the doors opened in silence, and she shoved past him and retreated to the far wall.

Without saying a word, he placed a foot in the doorway, forcing them to remain open.

Frightened green eyes stared at him. “What are you doing?” she demanded.

“Making sure you understand.”

She wrapped her hands across her middle. He recognized her desperation. “Oh, I understand, all right, but you won’t win.”

“We’ll see about that.” He removed his foot and stepped back. “I’ll be in touch, Leah.”

The elevator doors slid closed, and for a moment, he simply stood there.

*What next?*

Needing to think his next step through, Mac strode back to his office, took a seat at his desk and swiveled round to face the stunning Auckland vista. It was early summer, and the Waitemata harbor glistened, a myriad of yachts and launches cruising against the backdrop of a bustling city and the lush islands in the gulf.

As a teen, he’d tried to swim to one of those islands, not realizing until halfway there how far it was. He’d made it through sheer grit and determination and learned a hard life lesson. Be prepared. Follow through.

His foot tapped a silent beat on the carpet as a sense of urgency egged him on. He had a plan. Part one was complete.

He knew his announcement had been a shock. More than that. Fear had ringed Leah’s eyes, and that validated his suspicions.

It had taken Mac fifteen years to reach this spot in his life. Curtis’s emails and then his death had prompted his move back to New Zealand to come home and make amends.

Except for Charlee, Mac’s family was all gone, and he wasn’t about to let her down. He wouldn’t let Leah ruin his niece’s life.

A smug smile curved his mouth upward. Plans. It was all about plans, focus, success. His way and on his terms.

His interoffice phone buzzed, and he flicked the speaker switch. “Yes, Connie.”

“It’s already after six thirty, Mac, do you mind if I go?”

“Six?” Where had the time gone?

“You’ve been sitting there for a long time. You okay?”

He heard the hint of concern in his personal assistant’s voice. “Yes, fine. Go. ” He switched off the speaker and turned back to the view. What was he doing? Thinking, that’s what. Thinking of long legs, auburn curls and eyes that a man could drown in. That and justice. Curtis’s accusations that Leah neglected her daughter had scored deep with Mac. He knew about parental negligence, had experienced it and intended to make sure his niece didn’t suffer as he had. He would keep a close eye on Leah, watch her every move.

He reached for his phone and punched in the phone number of an investigator he'd used before, a man he trusted.

As he waited for Barney to pick up, he sought out the file on his desk and rifled through it for the particular documents he needed. He scanned them, satisfaction easing his claustrophobic shroud of tension.

"Barney."

"Mac Grainger giving you the go ahead." He dropped the file back to his desk. Leah had better watch out.

"Sure thing, Mr. Grainger."

"Just make sure she doesn't know what's going on."

"No problem."

Reassured Leah wouldn't be able to run out on this one, he disconnected the call, pushed up from his chair, stretched and surveyed the view of the downtown.

One hundred and fifty years ago, the area had been ocean, until the city's forefather's reclaimed it from the sea so the shallow harbor could host the large ships bringing immigrants from across the globe. Now it bustled with life and vitality.

As Mac took in the view of a city built on volcanoes, he couldn't help but wonder what his forefathers would think now of this sprawling metropolis with its Polynesian flavor.

From his vantage point he spied the Sky Tower, and a sense of satisfaction settled over him. A mecca for casinos and fine dining, the tower was the only building taller than his. Years ago when he'd first left school and traveled to the city from his family home on the northern shores of the city the only high rise in the city was four stories high. How life had changed. And he too had come a long way in a few short years. The bad boy had definitely done good.

He was an uncle now and had responsibilities.

He turned from the million-dollar view. Yes, he'd achieved everything he'd set out to do. Almost.

Now it was time to put part two of his plan into place.

## Chapter Two

The drive home passed in a blur of tears.

Why did Mac Grainger want to get to know Charlee?

A tumble of reasons scattered around in Leah's brain.

He said he wanted to rekindle family ties, but what concerned her more was what Curtis might have said in his email.

Married as a naïve twenty-year-old consumed by her first passion, she'd been oblivious to the real Curtis until it was too late. "What a fool I was," she sniffed as she directed her battered pickup to the freeway off-ramp.

A blind fool. She'd believed everything Curtis had said. She'd signed everything, and look where it got her. Dead broke, with her olive grove mortgaged to the hilt, praying that as the crop reached maturity at last, she would be able to pay off the crippling debt.

But Charlee always came first.

From the day her daughter had arrived, Leah declared she would give the little girl the security and sanctuary of a stable home, something Leah had never had.

Now Curtis's brother wanted to be a part of her daughter's life. Could she trust him? Trust a Grainger? How like Curtis was he?

Through the winding countryside that was in fact only thirty minutes from the heart of the city, Leah ignored the beautiful setting. Normally the sway of the towering palms and the sight of the luxuriant scarlet flowers of the Pohutukawa trees brought a smile to her face, but today she could see only Mac Grainger's cold eyes and her future being torn from her. She cruised the last fifty meters up the driveway and brought the vehicle to a halt in the courtyard outside her tumbledown villa. She switched off the engine, but nothing could stifle her mounting panic.

What was she going to do?

Stay and fight? Or run? And where to?

With more questions than answers, she scrambled from the vehicle. Charlee would be home soon after an extended playdate with her friend Matty's children, and she had to get rid of her tears. There was no way she'd let Charlee see she'd been crying.

In a brain fog, Leah cooked dinner for the two of them, and once she'd settled Charlee for the night, she headed outside. An evening hush had settled over her tiny part of the world, the last heat of the day sending up rippling waves from the verdant valley. Row upon row of olive trees stood sentinel, their dusky green leaves sparkling under the sun-shower they'd had earlier. She found herself smiling at the leafy acres spread out before her, relishing the tranquility of it all. It refueled her determination. She would do her grandfather proud.

Just for a moment, she shut her eyes, the scratchy sound of cicadas her only companion.

"Enough daydreaming..." Her eyes flicked open. Climbing onto the deck of the pickup, she began to unload the last of the olive shrubs she'd not had time to shift the day before. It was time to put aside big problems like Mac Grainger. She needed to think, and hard work had always helped her think, or else the rising terror would take over.

After hefting the first of the bushes from the pickup, she placed it by the fenced entrance to the grove, then climbed back up on the vehicle for the next one. She hoisted it on her hip and turned to get off.

"Need a hand?"

Mac Grainger leant against the porch railing, arms folded across his broad chest. He stared at her, full mouth curling at the corners.

Leah swallowed back the sudden lump in her throat.

He'd changed from the suit he'd worn at his office into a pair of jeans and Polo shirt, making him appear deceptively approachable. Almost—because Leah knew Mac Grainger wasn't a man to toy with.

A few yards behind him, parked beneath the copse of cabbage trees, was a red Ferrari. Expensive, classic, with a hint of the devil. She shouldn't have expected anything different.

Leah backed up a step, hoping the shadow cast from the overhanging trees would hide the shock she felt heating her cheeks. "What are you doing here?"

"Exactly what I said I would. I take my role as uncle seriously."

The bush she'd been holding slid from her grip and landed at her feet. "You can't just walk in here any time you like. This is my property. I'll..."

He stepped away from the porch and took a few steps toward her. "I'm not going away, Leah. We need to talk."

She glanced to the house. *Charlee, please stay asleep.* "Not now. Not here," she countered.

He came another step closer. "You can't run away."

Could he read her mind?

"You don't get a choice, Leah," he reminded her.

*Choice.* That word highlighted their differences. Rich versus stone broke.

"We can talk here," she prevaricated.

"We could, but we won't."

“Pardon?”

“Look, why make this harder than it has to be?”

“It’s already hard. I don’t want you here.”

“And I told you I’m not going away. So I guess we’re at an impasse.”

For the count of several heartbeats, his dark eyes held her captive. He wasn’t about to budge. Somehow she had to get him on her side and appeal to his better nature.

Did he have one?

Of that, Leah wasn’t certain. He was, after all, Curtis’s brother.

Steadying her nerves, she exhaled a choppy breath and wiped her hands down her jeans. She hooked her gaze with his, tilting her chin up a tad higher. “Five minutes. That’s all. Then you go.”

She jumped off the back of the pickup and walked right past him, refusing to offer a whiff of weakness, even though resignation soured in her stomach and desperation constricted every breath. She took the front steps two at a time up to the wooden porch, where she peeled off her gumboots, entered her house and switched the light on in the entry hall.

A crackle of electricity exploded above her, a current shooting from her fingertips and up her arm. “Ouch.” She yanked her hand back. The bulb above flickered momentarily, then a loud popping sound bounced off the walls, and the bulb died, sending the hall into darkness. “Damn.”

“Problem?”

“Nothing I can’t handle,” she snapped. Darn it. How many more bulbs would blow? “I might as well take out shares in the company that makes those blasted bulbs,” she grumbled. “It’s an old house and dates back to the eighteen hundreds. There’s bound to be...problems,” she said, unsure why she was trying to explain the shortcomings of her dilapidated house.

“So get them fixed,” he countered.

*If only it were that easy.*

“Follow me.” She beckoned to Mac and led him down the hallway and into the welcoming kitchen-cum-dining-and-lounge area, grateful no more bulbs exploded overhead.

Leah knew he followed. She felt him right behind her, just as she’d done when she’d left his office. It was a sensation that was disconcerting and scarily exciting at the same time. Mac Grainger didn’t exactly frighten her, though she was uncertain what he really knew or didn’t know about Charlee. But she did, however, fear his power and what he could take away.

A coffee, a chat, then she’d see him out. Easy.

Confident she could cope with at least that, she washed her hands at the sink, wiped them on the towel she kept close by and busied herself in the kitchen. She reached for two mugs from a cupboard and, without asking him, tossed a spoonful of coffee into each. “Sugar?” she queried, holding a sugar bowl in one hand and a spoon in the other.



He shook his head.

He stood at the entrance to her tiny kitchen, so close that heat burned off him. Her mouth dried, and she slid her tongue across parted lips, only to catch him watching her like a falcon focused on its prey.

“You don’t have to stand guard, Mr. Grainger. I’m not running.”

“Yet,” he answered smoothly.

Nerves spun taut, her fragile control tilted precariously. She directed her attention to the steam rising from the kettle, though her awareness of him burgeoned as she tried desperately to remember what, if anything, Curtis had said about him. Though in truth, her husband’s brother had barely rated a mention during their marriage, and while Curtis had been good-looking, charming her easily, Mac doubled the quota in the good-looks department. She peered at him through the wispy steam rising from the kettle.

He was tall, imposing and sexy as hell, and even though it shouldn’t, her heart did a flurry of flip-flops.

*Don’t let him charm you, Leah!*

The kettle’s reedy whistle echoed across the silence, breaking her thoughts, which was just as well. Those sorts of thoughts weren’t a good idea, and she chastised herself for even noticing him.

She filled both cups and handed one to him, holding hers with both hands so he wouldn’t see them shaking. She walked right past him and back into her tiny lounge and stood beside the rough-hewn table. “I’m *not* letting you walk in here on a whim, so you can get that idea right out of your head, Mr. Grainger.”

He took a sip from his coffee, his expression unreadable. “Tough. Curtis asked me to look out for her.”

Leah’s heart constricted. “Why?”

“Because I’m his brother and Charlee’s uncle.”

Focusing on keeping her voice calm and controlled, she put her cup down on the table. “And I was his wife. As far as I’m aware, you’ve never been around, too busy for family. Curtis died weeks ago. Where were you then?”

Instead of answering her, he scanned the room, and Leah found herself bristling, knowing what he saw: the faded and peeled paintwork, a tired house in need of repair.

She challenged him with an upward flick of her chin. “It’s not much, but it’s mine.”

His gaze returned to her, his mouth severe. “Not quite.”

“Pardon?”

“Running this place must take a lot of time, energy and money.” He pointed toward her mail scattered on the table. The mail she didn’t want to read. Bills she couldn’t pay.

“I’m not complaining.”

“Borrowing money, spending it when you know you can’t pay it back.” He wagged a finger at her as if she were a spoilt child. “Tut, tut.”

A sting of heat curled across her skin. “That’s not true.”

“I’m no fool. You’re Curtis’s wife.”

“His widow,” she corrected.

“He said you never had enough money.”

Leah met Mac’s gaze full on. Big mistake. He stepped closer. Not so close that he touched her, but still too close, his expression unyielding and full of condemnation.

But it was her reaction to him that scared her the most. The awareness that fired up all over again. She shook her head, willing away thoughts that had no right being there, and backed up.

“I’ve seen the loan documents, Leah. Your signature is quite clear, and according to an interesting conversation I had with Curtis’s solicitor, your *big* problem runs into five digits.”

Leah’s shoulders slumped, and Mac bit out a harsh laugh, his tone as arrogant and brutal as the expression he wore. “Finally, I’ve got your attention.”

“You have no right to nose into something that doesn’t concern you.”

“You’re wrong. As Charlee’s uncle, I’ve made it my business. I promised Curtis to look out for his daughter.”

“His... Curtis barely registered her existence.”

Mac frowned, but even her uttering the truth didn’t swerve him from his self-proclaimed purpose. “I always keep my promises. Your husband insinuated certain...allegations.”

Her heartbeat skidded to a standstill. “Rubbish.” But she had to ask. “About what?”

“That you’re not a fit mother.”

Leah threw her hands up, then shoved back the hair that had fallen across her eyes. Her palms were sweaty, and a sticky sheen of nervous perspiration slicked across her pores. “That’s ridiculous. Curtis was sick and not in his right mind.”

“That’s your story, but don’t worry, I intend to find out the truth.”

“Charlee is *my* daughter,” she said glancing toward the closed bedroom door where she prayed her daughter would stay sleeping. Her heart ached for her little girl. “I would never harm her.”

He leaned toward her, his voice a threatening rumble, and Leah’s breath stalled in her chest. “You’d better not. I’m not prepared to watch my niece suffer because of your negligence.”

Negligence. She jerked back bodily, anger spiraling to every part of her. “How dare you! Charlee has never suffered. Never. She has security here.”

“Are you sure? You owe thousands you can’t repay. How secure is your home when the bank is on your tail?”

Money. Always about money. Leah shook her head, and her eyes shuttered for a moment, a brief chance to wish it all away. To be safe.

“The bank is about to foreclose, Leah. You need me.”

Her eyes flashed open. "Like hell. I'll never need a Grainger again."

"Such protest. But then what would you do to save Aroha Farm?"

Anything! She'd stayed, despite the years of Curtis's abuse, his threats to take Charlee from her. Didn't that prove it?

And now Curtis's brother seemingly spoke the same language.

"Taking a moment to decide?" he berated her.

But Leah refused to rise to his bait. She didn't know how he'd react. Curtis would have taunted her, and she'd learned early in their marriage that reaction brought brutal consequences. How could she know his brother wouldn't react in the same way? She couldn't take the chance. "The farm is all I have."

"And if you lose that, how will you care for Charlee?"

*Yes, how?* Leah had asked herself that question in the quiet hours of night when the worry wouldn't go away. So far, she'd come up with no real solution.

"You need my money."

She glanced through the french doors in the darkening of the summer evening, and her heart swelled with pride as she viewed row upon row of her olives. "What I need is to bring in my harvest. Then I can settle the debt." And she would be free at last. She turned back to face him, grim determination holding her steadfast. "I don't want Grainger money."

For a moment, Mac's dark, almost obsidian gaze bored into her, but with the downward slice of lashes as jet black as his hair, every ounce of emotion evaporated. "Then you've a problem," he said, pulling himself to his full height, "because you see, you've no choice. I've bought your debt from the bank. I'm your new business partner."

Shock clamped around Leah's heart. She couldn't breathe, too scared to. She clutched at her throat as if that would release oxygen into her lungs. It didn't. "You can't do that," she finally exhaled as his words slammed into her conscious.

"Says who?"

"But why? I'm nothing to you. We've never even met."

"Call it taking precautions."

"Against what?"

"Against you doing a disappearing act with my niece. Now all you have to worry about, sweetheart," he said, his breath scalding a path over her icy skin as he leaned close, eyes glittering with the satisfaction of the hunt, "is me."

The butterflies in Leah's belly sank to the bottom. "Why? You've had no contact for years. You can't be serious." Her raised voice echoed the length of the compact lounge. "Is this some sort of familial revenge?"

"As I said, it's a done deal."

Leah reined in her fury, trying for reason. “Then undo it.”

“No can do. When I set my mind to something, I follow through. You might have been able to fool my brother, but not me. You used to owe the bank; now you owe me. You see, I don’t gamble unless it’s a sure thing.” His lips curled. “I’m not going anywhere, Leah. And since I own half the land *and* half the house, I intend to stick around and keep an eye on you. Oh, and just to make sure, I’m moving in.”

“What? That’s impossible.”

“No it’s not. This document” —he reached into the pocket of his jeans and withdrew a piece of paper, then waved it in front of her— “says exactly that.”

Leah snatched it from his fingers, scanning words that barely made sense. She tossed it to the table where it landed across her bills, an irony she didn’t miss despite her fractured nerves and the imprisoning disaster unfolding with each breath. “What do you know about olive growing?”

“I’m a fast learner.”

“When the harvest comes in, I can pay you back. You don’t have to move in.” Her voice cracked with incredulity while the roar in her head escalated. Aroha Farm was her solace against the world, against her past, for both her and Charlee. Having Mac Grainger in her house was unthinkable.

“Mummy, Mummy.”

Charlee!

The walls of Leah’s sanctuary came crashing down as the cry she had so desperately not wanted to hear reached from behind a closed door. She shoved past Mac, ran down the hallway, pushed open the door and turned on the light. She hunkered beside the pink-painted wrought-iron bed, gathering her daughter in her arms and breathing in her sweet innocence. “What is it, darling?”

Teardrops glistened on her daughter’s flushed cheeks. “Dreams, Mummy, angry dreams. It was the bad man.”

“Oh, sweetie, hush.” She brushed her daughter’s damp hair from her forehead. “You know what we say about bad dreams,” she reminded Charlee, gentling her tone. She reached for her daughter’s pillow and turned it over, patting it down. “Now it’s your turn.”

Charlee’s tiny hand bunched into a fist, and she punched the pillow several times. “Squash, squash, go away.”

“That’s right. Turn the pillow. Squash the bad dream and it will go away.”

Tentative eyes the image of her father’s, and Mac’s, searched Leah’s face for reassurance. “It is gone, isn’t it, Mummy?”

Leah kissed the top of her daughter’s blonde curls, inhaling the sweet fragrance she knew so well. It fired every protective bone in her body. No one would hurt her child ever again. She offered Charlee a reassuring smile. “Sure is. Now down you go, back to sleep. I’ll leave the side light on, and that bad dream won’t dare come back.”

“Are you sure?”

“Absolutely,” Mac’s strong voice reached from behind. “It wouldn’t dare come back with me here.”

Leah stiffened and instinctively shielded her daughter with her body. “Please keep your voice down.”

A wide-eyed Charlee stared at him. “You’re big.”

“So they tell me. Thought you might need some help. Bad dreams sometimes need a couple of warriors to vanquish them.” He offered Charlee a smile as he stepped into the room, and a tiny part of Leah melted. Why couldn’t Curtis have been more like him? Kind. Gentle. Fatherly. Charlee deserved that.

Then Leah remembered the real world.

With a soft sigh, Charlee settled, dark lashes shadowing her tiny face, her acceptance of another man in the house surprising Leah. “All gone now, Mummy.”

Leah’s heart swelled with love for her daughter. “Yes, sweetie, all gone. Back to sleep, but remember, I’m only in the kitchen if you need me.” Leah rose and walked to the doorway, bitter tension coiling inside when she thought of Mac’s unwelcome intrusion. Wasn’t that just like a Grainger? He walked in as if it was his automatic right to be there, and could be as charming as the devil when he wanted something. Just like Curtis. Leah wanted Mac gone. “Time to go,” she said to him with a soft plea.

“Sure, now that the demons are gone.”

She stepped into the hallway, making sure to leave the door slightly ajar and only the bedside lamp on. She flicked him a withering glare. “So how come you’re still here?”

“You know why.”

Even with Curtis, Leah had never felt so awkward. Mac loomed large and overpowering. She didn’t know what to do with him and certainly didn’t want him anywhere near Aroha Farm. Secrets had to be protected.

He talked about choices, but right now Leah knew she had none left. A heavy sigh slid from her chest as she turned toward the spare bedroom. “I’ll make up the spare bed.”

He didn’t say a word. Didn’t need to. He just offered a suggestive slight arch of one brow.

That was enough to set her off. Hands on her hips, she rounded on him. “Just because you want to fulfill some familial role, don’t go getting any ideas of making it permanent, Mr. Grainger.”

He held his hands up in surrender. “As if I would.”

And that was her problem—the man made her more than nervous. A little frisson of heat sparked through her every time he came near, a sexual awareness she didn’t want to acknowledge. The man was a Grainger, and Grainger men were not reliable as far as she was concerned. She wanted safety and security, not the erotic surge of excitement he generated.

She jabbed a finger toward the closed door to the spare bedroom. “In there.”

Mac pushed open the door, and if Leah hadn’t been so darned furious, she might have laughed as she witnessed his horrified expression.

“You expect me to sleep in here?”

“I do.”

He dragged a hand through his hair, looking to the bed, then to her and back again to the bed. “It’s...”

“Small,” she finished for him.

“Try minute,” he countered.

With delight, Leah envisioned his long legs dangling over the end of the single bed. She forced her lips into a stiff smile. “You wanted to play happy families. I, however, did not promise it would be comfortable.”

## Chapter Three

Nightmares filled Leah's sleep, fears escalating and countering all reasonable thought, and as morning edged over the horizon and shards of light filtered from behind the curtain, exhaustion racked every part of her. Her head ached, her muscles were stiff and uncoordinated, yet she couldn't take the day off. She had a debt to repay, and the faster she paid Mac Grainger, the quicker he would disappear from her life.

She hauled herself from bed, walked through to the kitchen and spied the door to his bedroom wide open.

"Mac?" Her call echoed through the expanding silence, his name uncomfortable on her tongue. At the doorway to his bedroom, she switched on the light, only to see the bed made, corners tucked in hospital-style, but no Mac. She turned to face her small kitchen. "Mac?"

Still nothing.

And he'd talked about her doing a runner. Perhaps the thought of hours toiling under the hot sun had turned him off the idea of familial fun after all. She smiled. Good. Now she could carry on and relax.

With no sign of him, nerves that had been stretched to breaking point finally eased, and she busied herself with her normal morning routine.

An hour later, with breakfast out of the way, she readied Charlee for kindergarten. She locked up the house and was down the front steps before she realized what was different. Mac's car wasn't there.

She breathed deeply. He truly had gone.

"Mummy" —Charlee tugged at her hand— "where's the big man?"

"Gone, sweetheart." They were safe, just the two of them.

"But he helped you fight my bad dream. Why can't he stay?"

"Because..." Because in less than twenty-four hours, he made her want things she wasn't sure she could cope with—things like passion and heat, and when Curtis died, she had vowed never to trust those feelings ever again.

Relieved that Charlee didn't keep questioning her about Mac's appearance and disappearance, she dropped her off at kindergarten, then returned home and headed straight into the grove to check the crop.

At this time of the year there was only a little light pruning to be done to remove small branches that grew toward the centre of the bush to allow the light to get to the fruit and help ripen it. She had no choice but to manage it on her own for now, but she'd be grateful when Howard Parker's crew arrived to help with the picking.

She glanced toward the heavens and prayed the weather would stay warm and dry. The last thing she wanted was rain at harvest time.

About to walk through the small white wooden gate that led to the grove, already able to smell the pungent fragrance of her olives, Leah stalled at the intrusion of a shrill whistle that pierced the quiet.

But this was no avian morning chorus. Mac stood in *her* grove. Working! Whistling!

Her fingers curled over the fence posts as she watched him. Already stripped to the waist, he reached beneath an olive bush, tugging at the undergrowth, a soft sheen of perspiration slicking his taut muscles.

Leah's insides did a flip, her mouth suddenly desert dry. Then she remembered what was most important. Where she was. Where *he* was. She stormed down the path. How dare he? She didn't want him here. He had to go. This was her home, her safe place, and having Mac Grainger here made everything topsy-turvy. She came to a halt in front of him. "What are you doing here? Your car is gone."

He offered her a cocky grin as he straightened and arched back, large hands massaging the base of his spine.

Leah swallowed as heated awareness tingled through her body. She tugged at the hem of her T-shirt, suddenly out of her depth. She didn't want to feel this. Or... Her gaze slid lower. *Stop it!*

"Morning to you too, sweetheart. I parked it out back."

"You had no right. I thought you were gone. Why aren't you? And don't you sweetheart me. This is my grove, my house, my..."

His smile slipped. "Not quite."

Leah's hands curled as she wrestled to rein in her temper. "Damn you, Mac Grainger. You storm in here, take over. You may hold the debt, but this is *my* olive grove. I work here."

"And I can't?"

"That's right."

He shrugged, his attention abandoning her for a moment as he viewed the grove. He dragged a hand through his hair, an action he did often when he seemed to be considering his reply. It was also an action that highlighted his six-pack torso.

*Stop. Stop.* Leah found herself focusing on a tiny bead of sweat as it inched down his chest. *Please stop!*

Oh, this was bad. She was bad.

"Why not? You look like you need the help. This is too much work for one woman."

Yeah, why not?

Leah shook her head. What was wrong with her? Twenty-four hours, and she was beginning to agree with him.

"From what I understand," Mac said, "it's only going to get busier. You need extra help."



"I have a crew coming soon, so I don't *need* you." She also didn't need to be seduced by another Grainger's good looks and charm. His help came with far too high a price.

However, she could protest all she liked that it was because she wanted to protect Charlee, but truth was, she desperately needed to protect her heart. "Oh...you...you... Go away, Mac." She waved her hand at him, as if, like a magician waving a wand, she could simply make him disappear. Trouble was, it didn't work. "Just go. This is *my* home. I can't work with you here, hovering, watching, waiting for me to make a mistake."

"Tough. I'm not going anywhere. So get used to it."

Between Mac's stubborn refusal to back down and the constant uncertainty of whether she'd be able to keep the roof over their heads, Leah couldn't take any more. And what about her secrets? They had to be kept, for Charlee's sake.

Everything crowded in on her brain, overwhelming her. Too many things to do, too many bills, and all the time Mac checking up on her, his powerful presence a threat not just to her security, but to the part of her she had locked away.

She sank to her knees, dropped her head to her chest and just sat there. Then the tears launched.

Tears for everything.

For death. For the loss of hope and love, and what could have been. Dreams she had thought would come true. For loving a man who had failed her too many times to count.

And for how hard it had been.

She tugged her scarf from her head, and a tumble of curls fell across her eyes, mixing hair with tears.

Lost in misery, she barely noticed the touch of warm hands on her shoulders, drawing her from the bleakness.

"Leah?" Mac pulled her to her feet. Not one iota of humor shone in his dark eyes, but something strangely comforting that wrenched at the tenuous grip she had on her emotions. Suddenly, it became easier to simply give in to the strong arms holding her as warm fingers, their tips surprisingly roughened, threaded through her curls, cupping her head so that she snuggled into the curve of his shoulder.

Leah inhaled the hint of his masculine scent manipulating her olfactory senses, offering a hint of a life so different from the musky aroma she knew of earth and plants.

Then his lips slanted across hers in the barest of kisses, caressing the side of her cheek. Her eyes shuttered, fingertips trailing across his bare chest, sensitive to the race of his heartbeat, lost to a world of sensations she hadn't felt for...

"No!" What the hell was she thinking? Doing? Leah stiffened her spine, every inch of her aware of the hard body against hers, the warmth it offered...and the comfort.

Cold comfort.

She backed up a fraction, shivering.

From shock? Or was it from lust?

She wouldn't go there. The man shouldn't be here. And she shouldn't be doing this. She shouldn't be kissing him, kissing any man. And certainly not...liking it.

She needed him gone. "You can't work here. You know nothing about this life. My life."

He didn't move but remained cool and calm, which only deepened her irritation. His jaw set, and the cold, hard businessman returned. "Who says? I'm not afraid of hard work. I know what's involved. I always check out my opposition. Don't you?"

Oh, dear God. She had to get rid of Mac Grainger, not think about his kisses. Definitely not those. And allowing him to work here, live here? She'd be nuts to agree.

"A little hard work never hurt anyone." His gaze drifted down the path that led through the grove, then returned to her. Leah wished he wouldn't look at her like that, because the moment he did, her body heated beyond boiling point, and despite her all her willpower not to let him affect her like that, she failed miserably.

"I've worked in worse places. I can learn, Leah. Teach me."

After that day, Leah made sure Mac kept his distance. Each time he came close, she backed away. It didn't stop the awareness, though she made sure she thrust that back to where it belonged, which was nowhere.

She didn't want to teach Mac anything other than that she didn't need him around, but she also realized the futility of arguing with this imposing stranger.

Because he was a stranger.

Oh, he'd kissed her...and to her shame and annoyance, she'd actually kissed him right back, but that didn't mean she liked having him there. It had been a mistake, a temporary lapse of judgment, and no part of her admitting that she liked his kiss would make it right. It had been a bad move, very bad. One she was determined she wouldn't repeat.

Several days later, Leah woke to a beautiful sunrise, and despite herself, she smiled. As she worked in the grove, she found herself singing.

Mac came up beside her and emptied his sack of cuttings into the bin several meters away. "You sound happy."

"It's a beautiful day," she answered with a lightness in her voice that surprised her.

"And all is right with the world?"

"Soon will be." As she stood in the grove, the sky cloudless, the sun a burnished gold high over the valley, everything seemed perfect. Beside her, Mac rested his hands on his hips, a broad smile on his face. Leah couldn't help but admire the strength of him. He was sexy, muscled perfection. And so far, she'd

managed to hold in check those pesky emotions that stirred big-time whenever he came close. She felt safer now...safer from her own wayward reactions.

Besides, she had to admit he worked hard, which in turn cut her workload down. And for that she had to be grateful.

She smiled up at him. Trouble was, he smiled right back, and an instantaneous jolt of heat galloped up and down her spine. Oops, and here she had been thinking she was in control. Apparently the wall she'd erected between them wasn't as solid as she'd hoped.

She had to try harder. Had to keep her distance.

She stepped away, hugging her arms across her middle, as if a physical barrier might work better. "I've...got to get going." Without looking back, because she so didn't want to witness what was on Mac's face or mirrored in those dark eyes of his, she hurried down to the far end of the row they'd been working in. This...this lust wasn't allowed to happen. She wouldn't let it. She couldn't let her guard down. Or kiss him. Not again.

At different ends of the aisle, they worked in silence beneath the heat of a burgeoning summer. The fronds on the Pohutukawa trees brushed by the slight breeze lay scattered in a scarlet carpet around them. It would soon be Christmas.

At first Leah was grateful Mac didn't try to talk to her, and she lost herself in her conundrum.

What had just happened?

*Awareness, Leah. You reacted in that male-versus-female way. It was natural and real.*

No. No way. But as time ticked on, the silence got to her. *He* got to her.

She should have been stronger, known better and kept it business. No laughter, no light chatter, and definitely no smiles. Because when she smiled, he smiled back, and that was not good at all. Mac Grainger's smiles did something to her. They reached inside her all the way to her heart.

"You can't ignore me, Leah, I'm not going away."

"Shame," she said wrinkling her nose at him, "It'd be nice to be able to blink and *poof*, you'd disappear." Then she wouldn't have to think about kissing him or wanting to.

"Yeah, I know."

Leah tugged at a stubborn weed beneath a bush.

"But you're not angry just because I'm here, are you?"

"I..." She shot him a quick glance, then regretted it instantly as she noticed the sure knowledge in his eyes.

"You kissed me back," he said.

Her cheeks colored, and it wasn't from the heat of the sun. "I didn't."

"Did too." His smile broadened.

She tugged harder at the recalcitrant weed and it finally sprang free. “You’re imagining things. The sun’s addled your brains, Mac Grainger.” *Oh, you are such a liar, Leah.*

She grabbed her weed bag and emptied the contents into the portable compost bin. “I do not want to talk about this.”

“Scaredy cat.”

“Oooh...” She turned away from him. Scared? Definitely.

Mac didn’t understand Leah.

*So what’s new?*

Having her in his arms had touched something deep, a vulnerability he hadn’t known before. His jaw tensed, and he hemmed in his errant emotions. Dumb-ass...

Maybe it was that he didn’t quite understand himself either!

She’d ignored him for days, which should have been a good thing. She was his brother’s widow, and knowing Curtis, Mac didn’t doubt that his brother was partially to blame for Leah’s attitude toward men. Toward him.

Had Leah loved Curtis? Or was she just too money-grubbing?

He kept reminding himself he wasn’t here to play, and each morning he hauled his sorry butt into the grove and worked. Today, as the sun rose higher, so did the heat. But it wasn’t just the summer heat that held him in some sort of sensual abeyance, but the building awareness between them. The waiting for her to smile at him again, because he sure hoped she would.

Stripping off his shirt, he arched his back and wiped the trail of sweat from his brow, and then caught Leah watching him. He curled his mouth, pleased that she had. But the moment she realized she’d been caught, she dropped that forest green gaze of hers and made a *harrumph* kinda sound and attacked the weeds with lethal efficiency.

“Glad I ain’t one of those darn weeds.”

She offered a choked gasp.

“Got a frog there?” he questioned with barely controlled humor, only to be the recipient of another snort as she renewed her weeding with vigor.

“I’d take a frog over a prince any day,” she countered.

“So I’m not your Prince Charming, then?”

“Charming? Hardly.”

Mac’s chuckle reverberated from deep down in his chest, but he gave Leah a break and canned the teasing and got back to work. She had told him that, left too close to the trunk, the weeds would dampen bush growth. He couldn’t help himself and cast another sideways glance at her. She was so tiny, yet she’d not rested for hours, working precisely and efficiently, explaining only briefly what she wanted done.

Grudgingly, he admitted she'd gained a degree of admiration from him. While Leah worked tirelessly in the grove, and then spent hours with paperwork and marketing work, she always had time for Charlee. For all intents and purpose, Leah Grainger seemed to be a kind and loving mother. But still he watched, waiting for her to put a foot wrong, because she would, eventually. Curtis wouldn't have lied. Would he?

Trouble was, Mac knew Curtis—at least he thought he did. His brother had been a selfish bastard, and leopards didn't change their spots, but for the life of him, he couldn't figure out what reason Curtis had to lie. Working alongside Leah, he found himself more and more aware of her, how she held herself, how she refused to get too close. He remembered too, the feel of her in his arms, the smell of her, lush and clean. The way her hair twined around his fingers and her breasts pressed against his chest.

And the taste of her lips beneath his.

He wanted to kiss her again, but each time he closed the gap between them, she skittered farther along the row they worked in.

Nope, unfortunately kissing Leah wasn't about to happen again anytime soon.

That he wanted to warred inside him. His conscience versus...lust. Leah was his brother's widow, for God's sake and it didn't seem right, but the need to hold her and kiss her wasn't going away, that was for sure.

What the hell was he to do?

Perspiration dripped down the side of his head, and he swiped it away. What was wrong with him? He wasn't here to like her but to test her and protect Charlee. He wrenched another weed. "Damn it."

Leah peered over at him for a moment, then dropped her head, intent once more on her task, but not before he witnessed the change in her eyes. They mimicked the lush grass underfoot.

"Ignore me," he said.

"As if I can. You've stormed into *my* home, taken over. I wonder, does anyone ever get the better of you?"

He tossed her a rueful grimace. At least she talked to him now. "Some have tried," he admitted.

"And failed, obviously." Leah dropped her pruning shears and sat back on a dry sack behind her. "So what's wildcatting like?"

Her relaxed question surprised him. "You know about that?"

Her mouth quirked slightly. "In the...early days, before we married, Curtis talked about you...a bit. He was in awe of you."

"Really? I'm the black sheep of the family."

"Perhaps, but he did look up to you, I think," she said. She offered him a tiny smile, shaking her head. A curl fell free of her pony tail, and she tucked it behind her ear. "Can't imagine him on a rig."

"No, neither can I."

Mac let go of the olive branch and rubbed grimy fingers across his jaw. "It's a rough and tough life," he said honestly.

"A life that seems a tad incongruous for you now, don't you think?"

"What do you mean?"

"That these days, oil rigs are a dim past for you as you sit in your ivory tower." She colored then, a gentle shade of pink tingeing her cheeks, eyes communicating a nervous wariness, as if she realized she'd said too much. She tilted her head to one side, brow creased. "Wildcatting is a strange term. Where did it come from?"

As if on a slow, outgoing tide, Mac found himself relaxing, the tension easing between them. Talking about wildcatting was neutral territory for both of them and had been a way of life he'd loved. "From Texas, originally," he said, remarking on the work that had changed his life. "The drillers would clear prospective fields of feral cats, then hang the pelts in the derrick rigging. Eventually the name wildcatters stuck."

"So it's not just because you're a wild boy."

"Ah..." He chuckled. "Curtis really did talk." His words brought an instant shadow across her eyes, and she turned from him slightly. Mac damned himself for ruining the moment. "I'm sorry. Does it still hurt?"

She speared him with an angry stare. "You think it wouldn't? He died less than two months ago."

"Yet you kissed me," he offered bluntly, wanting to reaffirm everything Curtis had said about her. It would make everything easier.

"No, Mac, you kissed me. You've moved into my house, trying to take over my business and play doting uncle to Curtis's daughter. You aren't a replacement daddy for Charlee, and you will *never* be a replacement husband for Curtis, so forget it." Drawing off her headscarf, she used it to wipe her face, then stood, tapered fingers dusting the dirt from her jeans. Despite her vitriol, Mac couldn't help but wonder what those fingers would feel like sliding across his skin.

She caught his speculative gaze. "Think about what I said, Mac. Enough is enough. Now, I can't stand here all day. Matty is bringing Charlee back from kindy soon."

"I guess since she's attending morning sessions, she's nearly ready to start school?"

Surprised laughter burst from Leah, chasing away the shadow of skittish worry from her expression. "Since when does a wildcatter know about kindergarten?"

"Hey, we wild boys know more than how to get down and dirty." Damn it. The moment the words left his mouth, he could have kicked himself. It wouldn't help his cause if he scared her before he found out everything he needed to know, but hell, it was as if he was walking a tightrope. He was damned if he said the wrong thing and damned when he thought it. Mostly, though, he was damned when his body *and* his head told him to kiss her. "Don't forget," he said trying to keep things neutral, "I'm the oldest by seven

years. I was already at school by the time Curtis came along. I remember Mum taking him to kindy.” But they were sad memories. Times he’d rather not remember, and he left that bit out.

Staring toward the horizon with its clear blue sky thinning to almost white, he remembered the hours spent alone and unloved. Remembered too his mother’s fractured temperament after Curtis had been born, her wailing behind closed doors when she thought no one listened.

He’d heard it all. Had wanted to fix it, but couldn’t. The warm, comforting mother he’d known had disappeared, replaced by a woman who never saw him, never hugged him, always criticized him until all the bad things she said he did, he did for real. The good boy became the bad boy.

Shaking off his morbid thoughts, he turned to Leah. “Oh, by the way I’ve arranged for your Internet service to be upgraded.”

Leah straightened. “But there’s no need, I already have a provider.”

“Slow dialup. I need broadband for my business.”

She dropped her hands to her sides. He could see her frustration in her expression. “So go do business elsewhere.”

Mac’s gut churned. See! Damned whatever he said. “You’d like that, wouldn’t you? Sorry, but that would be too easy.”

“Easy?” she scoffed. “That’ll be the day. There’s nothing remotely easy about having you under my roof. You’re making this sound like a game.”

“Let’s call it a...challenge?” More of a challenge than he ever realized it would be.

From his backpack, he retrieved the bottle of water he’d frozen late last night. He unscrewed the cap and tilted the bottle to his mouth, quenching his thirst with deep gulps of icy water. A dribble spilled down his chin, and he wiped it away with the back of his hand. He proffered the bottle to Leah, which she ignored. He recapped it and gave it a last twist to tighten it. “You’ll learn, Leah, that I never back down from a challenge.”

“Is that so? Well, don’t get too comfortable, Mr. Grainger.”

He couldn’t help but smile at her tenacity. “I’m not worried about comfort, sweetheart, but I never give up.”

“And I won’t play your games.”

Her green eyes glittered on him in return, a heat of sexual desire in their depths. Then she blinked those exquisitely long black lashes, and what he thought he’d seen evaporated.

“You played before,” he said, dropping the bottle into his backpack.

She hugged her weed bag to her chest. “Go to hell, Mac. You may own my debt, but you do *not* own me. I want you out of here, out our lives. And the sooner the better.”

He offered her a lazy, satisfied smile. Good. She was uptight. All the better to see what Leah was really made of, because upset people made mistakes. “Tough luck.” But damn it, he stood so close to her, he could smell her fragrance—earth and the sweetness of nature. His nostrils flared, his arousal instant.

Shit! He clamped his bloody arousal right back down. “It isn’t going to happen, Leah. You know it. I’m here to protect my niece. Curtis—”

“Curtis. Curtis. It’s always been about Curtis. I’ve done nothing wrong. Why would you take the word of a dying man? A man delirious with the eventuality of his illness.”

“Because he was my brother.” But even as he said it, Mac had doubts. Curtis and he had never gotten along, but now he was taking his brother’s side. Why?

“Since when has that been so important to you? Where were you when I was sitting at Curtis’s hospital bed?” And with that cutting retort, which scored deeper than he cared to admit, Leah took off for the house as if the devil was on her heels.

Mac watched her go, saw the swish of her hips and remembered the taste of her mouth beneath his. His groin tightened again.

Sweet Jesus, he was in trouble.

Part of him lusted after Leah, when he knew he shouldn’t. That was when he managed to forget who she was, what she was. But there was his problem. What the hell was he going to do if Curtis’s condemnation proved true?

Stay forever?

Be a single parent?

Hire a nanny?

Hell if he knew.

Work had always proven to be Mac’s salvation, and nothing had changed. With Leah gone, he got back to his task in the grove until she returned carrying a tray laden with two glasses of juice, the ice clinking with each step she took. Mac watched her walk toward him. She seemed a bit different. Calmer.

She’d retied her hair back into a ponytail, but it was the softness around her eyes and mouth that had changed the most. She even offered him a hint of a smile he couldn’t refuse, and he smiled back, the tension in his chest suddenly easing.

“I’m sorry, Mac. This is...new,” she said as she laid the tray down.

He took the proverbial olive branch she offered. “Understandable,” he acceded. “But I’m still staying.” The trouble was, the marked change in Leah spurned a cautious worry deep down in his gut. What was she playing at? And more to the point, could he resist? He’d met women like that before. Women who used their wiles to get what they wanted. Was that what had happened between her and Curtis?

Well, two could play that game.

“This is short term,” she said, offering him a juice.



“By this, I figure you mean a peace offering. We play nice.”

“Until the harvest is in,” she added drily.

“So don’t overstep the line, is that it?”

She brought her glass to her lips but didn’t take a sip. Instead, she stared at him over its rim. “So don’t kiss me.”

Ah...*that* game. Mac sucked in a deep breath, then exhaled, whistling its release. “A hard ask.”

Green eyes darkening by the second fixed on him. “Then try harder.”

They sat in silence, Mac accepting Leah’s effort at appeasement, even though doubt guarded his conscience. Who did he believe? Curtis? Or Leah? His brother had said she was an uncaring leech, taking from him until he had nothing left.

But who the hell knew? He didn’t see that. exactly, but then again, he wasn’t sure what he saw...except for hair that he wanted to run his hands through and eyes he could drown in, lips...

*Shit! Forget that stuff, Grainger.*

Mac slugged his juice, the ice cube hitting the back of his throat. He would watch Leah and wait and see.

It was Leah who finally broke the silence, her question drawing him to a past he was comfortable with, reining him in from his morose doubts and the heated thoughts he couldn’t douse.

“Why did you leave the oil rigs?”

Mac sat back on the grass, twirling a broken twig between his fingers, the contrast between that world and where he sat right now not unnoticed. “I haven’t worked as a wildcatter for quite a few years. I found I liked the luxuries of life too much.”

“Hence the Ferrari?”

Mac smiled, nodding. “A lady who knows her cars.”

“Only in books,” she said, smiling back.

Mac exhaled a long breath. He liked that she smiled at him. Liked the way her lips curved, full and gentle. He remembered their taste beneath his. Damn it. He really wanted to kiss her again.

As they talked, bit by bit his tension eased. “These hands,” he said holding them up, “are used to a more sedate lifestyle these days, though I’m enjoying today. It feels good to work physically hard again.”

“Really?”

Her response caught him by surprise. “*You* ask that? You’re the one working here all hours of the day.”

“That’s because it’s my life, my business. I have to.”

“Yes, but you love it, don’t you? It’s not simply because it’s your inheritance, but because you have a deep love for this land.”

“The land is special,” she agreed.

"It is, and I've seen the light in your eyes when you work. The simple pleasure you gain from undertaking each task." Mac frowned as his statement registered with him. Here was another conundrum that didn't fit the picture his brother had painted.

Leah deposited her empty glass on the tray. "I expect drilling for oil is harder."

"Sure." He shrugged, looking away from Leah for a moment and refusing to let sad memories of danger and death back in. "Nature at its most difficult."

"Do you miss it?"

"Sometimes."

She linked her hands in her lap, then looked up at him, a bleak sadness etched across her face. It touched him, and he didn't know why. Didn't want it to. Mac desperately tried to harden his heart.

"Curtis didn't," she said.

"Didn't what?"

"He never came into the grove, never worked here," she said, her voice laced with bitterness. "Curtis's interests lay only in Curtis. He didn't *help* anyone, except himself."

The twig in Mac's fingers snapped in half. "And yet you stayed."

"We had a daughter."

Mac wished she would look at him. He wanted to see...

What? He shook his head. Damn. He was getting too...sentimental. Too involved. That was the problem. *You're going soft, Grainger.*

Truth? Some of what Leah said about Curtis he would grudgingly admit was true. Curtis had always been a selfish bastard.

As the silence stretched between them, Leah stood and went back to the house, leaving Mac alone. He continued working, though his thoughts remained firmly on Leah and the urgent need building inside him.

He wished he could banish the image of her and stay focused.

Knowing he needed to call the investigator to check on progress but with the cell phone coverage not clear because of the surrounding hillsides, he eventually headed back toward the house.

Nearly to the gateway, he heard the crunch of tires over the gravel drive. As he reached the porch, an SUV drove beneath the rose bramble arch, the dangling faded pink blooms brushing against its rooftop.

No sooner had the engine been switched off than a rear door was thrust open and out popped Charlee, blonde curls bouncing and her little legs running in a lopsided gait toward the stairs, only to come to a halt at the bottom. "Mummy, I need you."

The screen door kicked back against the house, and Leah raced to meet her daughter. Joy lit her face, eyes sparkling with love as she scooped Charlee up.

Mac's stride halted, shock hitting him squarely in the gut as he witnessed the beauty of Leah's love for Charlee. Then it got worse. Charlee's tiny hand clutched onto Leah's, and guilt tugged at his conscience. Mother and daughter. Together. *And you're trying to tear them apart.*

"Oh darling, sorry I wasn't here for you. I was preparing a snack."

The driver's door opened, and a young woman about Leah's age exited. "Sorry we're late. We went to the stream and fed the ducks."

Leah smiled. "How lovely..." But her voice trailed off as she spied him walking forward.

"Hey," he said as he came to stand beside her. He ruffled Charlee's hair, and she stared up at him. Just then another child scrambled out of the vehicle and beckoned to Charlee. "Come on." And together, childish laughter filling the air, the pair raced over to the swing set.

The little girl's mother, a slender brunette with a dusting of fine freckles across her nose and almost violet eyes, held out her hand. "Hi, I'm Matty, and you're...?"

"Mac," he said, purposefully leaving off his surname as he shook her hand. "Leah's...ah..." He hesitated. What on earth was he supposed to say? Brother-in-law? Business partner?

Matty misunderstood the pause, and her surprise couldn't have been more evident. She turned to Leah. "You sneak. You never told me."

Heat infused Leah's cheeks, and he could see she struggled to speak. On the spot, he decided to play along. He wrapped an arm around Leah's shoulders, hugging her to him, and though he felt her stiffen at his intimacy, he didn't let go. He'd been wanting to know how this felt for what seemed like ages.

"Took us both by surprise, really, a spur of the moment thing," he said, giving Matty a cheesy grin.

"Oh, how romantic." Just then, her mobile beeped, and she dug it out of her pocket, answered it and walked a few meters away.

Using the moment of respite, Leah twisted from him, giving him a death glare at the same time. "You had no right to say that."

"What did you want me to say?"

Her jaw dropped.

"See, even you don't know. I could have said I was Curtis's brother. Did you want that?"

Her attention shifted to her friend and then jackknifed back to him. "You're a blackmailer and a..."

"That's Kane," Matty interrupted, smiling, "I have to go. Freddie's ready to be picked up. Just my luck," she said, flicking Mac one of those "darn it, I want to get the gossip" looks. "Later, Leah. I want all the details."

"All?" Mac teased. Okay, so he was a bad boy, but he couldn't resist.

"Well, maybe not *all* the details, but heck, this is the stuff romance books are made of. You deserve that, after Cur... Oh." She scraped her teeth over her bottom lip, head tilted slightly sideways, and she shrugged. "Darn it. I have to scoot, Mum's taxi service is on order, and that, my dear friend and your

gorgeous new friend,” she said winking in Mac’s direction, “is definitely not romantic.” She called to her daughter, then buckled her into the car seat and backed out of the gate, leaving them with only a cloud of dust and the buzz of cicadas for company.

Charlee managed a lopsided skip up the steps, and without saying a word, Leah picked her up and retraced her path into the house. The door banged closed.

About to follow her, Mac halted as a delivery truck trundled to a halt in front of the house. “This place is getting like Victoria Station.”

“Delivery for Mr. Grainger,” the driver said as he exited the truck cab, holding out a delivery note.

“That’s me.”

“Sorry it took a couple of days. Needed to get it from the warehouse. Where do you want the bed?”

The front door slammed back on its hinges. “Bed? I think you’ve made a mistake.” Leah bounded down the steps. “I haven’t ordered a bed.”

“It’s no mistake.” Mac softened his tone. Having furniture delivered to *her* house would not go down well, and his instinct proved correct.

“Tell him he’s made a mistake,” she huffed, pointing to the vehicle. “That bed—”

“Is mine,” he interrupted. “A single bed is not my idea of luxury.”

“Could be cozy,” the driver piped in.

Leah shot him a withering glare, then turned back to Mac. “If you want comfort, go back to your fancy high rise or a hotel or...” She shook her head. “Anywhere. You don’t have to stay.”

“Can’t, and you know why.” He stifled a chuckle as he noted her small hands fisted on her hips. The scowl on her face told him she was about ready to kick the delivery man right back to the city and Mac along with him. She glanced over to the truck, then back to him, eyes wide and glittering.

He knew it. Leah was thinking the same thing as him—there was definitely room for two.

He tossed the driver a grin. “Let me give you a hand.”

“Oooh.” Leah stomped right back up the front steps.

“The missus looks a tad angry, mate,” the driver said as he hefted the mattress from the back of the truck.

“Could say that.”

“Bunch of roses, always works for my wife.”

“You reckon?”

“Yep, then she’ll join you on this new bed of yours.”

Mac’s mouth curled up at the corners. Nice! “Could be a good idea.” He grabbed the other end of the mattress and directed the driver inside.

With his bed in place, grateful he'd not be hanging over the end by at least six inches, he headed back to the grove and worked for several hours without a break. Finally, he went in search of Leah and found her in the kitchen preparing dinner, her hostile mood unabated.

"Today broadband and a bed," she snapped, refusing to look at him. "Tomorrow you'll move into my office."

"My laptop is as much office as I'll bring here," he said, thumbing in the direction of the small case beside his briefcase on the dining room table.

"Good. No need to get too comfortable."

He watched his niece as she stood to get a toy, and noted the stiffness of her limbs, the way she threw her hip and upper body sideways as she moved each leg forward. It wasn't bloody fair. She was just a kid wanting to play and... The lump in Mac's throat choked his airways and he turned away.

At least Charlee wasn't aware of the friction between her mother and him, and he sure as hell intended to keep it that way. He wasn't about to repeat his childhood, but he also wanted some answers.

"When were you going to tell me about Charlee?"

Leah stole a horrified glance at her daughter, wariness walking across her face. When she spoke, her voice was clipped and spiked Mac's suspicions further. "It's none of your business, and," she said, levering herself away from the bench, the short paring knife she'd been using to chop tomatoes still gripped in her hand and pointed dangerously close to him, "don't say one word. If you intend to use that dotting-uncle rubbish on me, then... Well, just don't." With an uneasy swipe, her gaze shifted back to her daughter. "Charlee has a disability, but don't you dare take it out on her."

Damn it. He'd made one hell of an impression. "What sort of guy do you think I am?"

She sniffed, put down the knife and wiped her hands on her apron. "Oh, I know what sort of guy you are. Who you are. Tough. Determined. Single-minded. In some, those are qualities that could be deemed admirable. But in a Grainger? Since I've been married to Curtis, I'm not so sure."

Mac leant against the kitchen bench, hands in his jeans pockets, one ankle hooked over the other. He watched Leah, witnessed her anger and fear, a strange combination when a mother talked about her daughter, surely? "You haven't answered my question about your daughter."

Leah visibly trembled, and Mac knew his instincts were correct. Something wasn't right.

"A year ago, Charlee developed a hip disease called Perthes disease. Mostly boys get it, and usually around the age of six or so."

Mac's gut hit bottom. "But she's only four. I noticed her limp but figured she'd just hurt herself playing."

Tears brimmed in Leah's eyes. "I know. I did too, at first, but the limp didn't go away. She kept saying her knee hurt, but it wasn't until the doctor started talking about referred pain that it all fell into place. Her knee hurt, but the disease is in her hip."

He turned toward Charlee and swiped newly calloused fingertips across his jaw. “Bloody hell. I can’t imagine how hard it is for her.”

“She manages.”

“Manages? But she’s a child,” he said. “Kids are meant to be able to do what kids do. Play rough-and-tumble games, run and jump.” He turned back to Leah. “What’s the prognosis?”

“It’s imperative she keep active to keep the muscle strength up, even though the ball and joint need time to heal. In the past, they would operate, or she’d be in one of those spinal beds for years, encased in a plaster cast from her waist to her toes. I have to keep up her physical therapy.”

Mac heard the desperation in her voice and understood it. He wasn’t that heartless. “Has the therapy been a problem?”

Her mouth parted as if she were about to speak, but she said nothing. He noted her guilt. It scored deep in her eyes and told him everything. “Bloody hell. Leah, what sort of mother are you? You haven’t kept up with the physiotherapy, have you?” Mac knew he was right. Rage boiled deep inside him. “Your child needs help and you...you can’t be bothered.”

“I never said that.”

“You haven’t taken Charlee to therapy since I arrived. Instead, you spend all your time in the olive grove, ignoring your daughter’s most important need. You’re just another mother who doesn’t care enough. A mother like...”

“Of course I care. I love her.”

“Really? It seems to me that the grove so important that you would neglect your child. That you won’t put money aside for the extra therapy.” He fisted his hands. He wanted her to deny it, but she didn’t, adding fuel to the proverbial fire. “Why haven’t you sold the place?”

“It’s all I have. It’s my security.”

“What’s the use of security if your child is ill, hurting? Why can’t you see that? What about Curtis?”

“What about him?”

“He was her father.”

“In name and DNA only. Being a parent wasn’t part of his plan.”

The invisible king hit to Mac’s gut slammed brutally. “Pardon?”

“You heard me. Your beloved brother didn’t care about his family. Sound familiar?”

Bitter guilt resurfaced, and he turned to his niece playing with her dolls in a house made of chairs and blankets. The simplicity of it all tugged at his heart. She was so sweet and innocent.

Though Charlee was his only family, he’d never thought he’d care so much. He hadn’t until now. Watching her stirred a sense of protectiveness in him that scared him.

Mac hadn’t wanted this new responsibility. He’d been content with the way he’d mapped out his life, but something inside him wouldn’t let him walk away. Curtis’s death had forced it. There was only him and

Charlee, the last of the family, and his brother's email had made him face up to that responsibility, made him realise after all these years how important family was.

Leah pulled out one of the wooden chairs from the kitchen table and slumped onto the seat. "I could cope with Curtis hating me," she said, rancor tainting her voice, "but how could he hate his own daughter? It was almost as if he disowned her because she wasn't perfect, because she was disabled." She dabbed at her eyes, angling herself away from Charlee's view. Mac strained to hear her next words and then wished he hadn't.

"He called Charlee damaged goods."

"Shit!" His response flew from his lips before he had time to think. "She's my niece. I'll pay for whatever she needs. Let me know who to send the check to."

Leah blinked, relief washing away the guilt. "Thank you."

Just then, Charlee called out. "Mummy, can you get me a drink, please?"

"You know the rules, Charlee."

"But..."

"No buts, darling," she said, a sad smile pulling at her mouth. "If you want something, you have to get it yourself. Remember we discussed this."

"Woman!" Mac couldn't believe what he heard and threw up his hands in disgust. She couldn't even do something as simple as getting a drink for Charlee? "Are you that lazy?"

Leah rounded on him, her fury instant. "No. I'm not lazy. But you just don't understand. No one does."

"So how about you tell me."

"It's part of her exercise."

"Exercise! She wants a drink, for God's sake." He couldn't handle this. Leah said she loved Charlee, but then she wouldn't even help her with a small task. It didn't make sense, and the more he thought about it, the more it confused him. Bitterness tangled with memories of his own mother's neglect until he felt as if he would explode.

He spun away from mother and daughter. He had to get out. Now! Leah was like his mother after all, saying one thing but doing another.

Without a word, he headed out the front door, seeking the seclusion of the valley and the beckoning darkness beyond, embracing the solitude it offered. Hands deep in his pockets, head down and shoulders hunched, he strode the length of the driveway. But his brain whirled and the memories wouldn't stop. He damned his mother, and he damned his brother for putting him in this predicament, forcing him to have a conscience.

He walked and kept on walking, trying to make sense of everything, anything. His brother had hated his own daughter. What was...had been wrong with Curtis? Curtis had been the devoted son, cosseted and indulged.

Mac scowled at that thought and continued walking and thinking.

The precious son. The *precocious* son. Everything Curtis had done had been perfect. And everything Mac had done had been wrong. The more he'd tried, the harder it had become, until hormones and attitude got in the way, and he'd walked out and not come back.

For years he'd escaped the familial bond and ignored his family. Then Curtis's emails had come. His brother had vilified Leah, and Mac had believed him. No reason not to, he reminded himself, though somehow that thought didn't seem quite as sound as it once had.

He kicked at the pebbles beneath his feet and shrugged his misgivings away. Besides, he thought, trying to subdue the escalating doubt, his investigations corroborated Leah's debts. He'd witnessed her signature as bold as brass on every mortgage document. But—and it was a big but—he'd also seen... What?

Devotion to her daughter?

Something didn't make sense.

Mac swore into the darkness, adding a few extra curses in languages he'd picked up over the years. Damned if he knew what was going on, but he sure as hell would find out.



## Chapter Four

Two nights later, Leah sat at her desk, paperwork scattered across it. It couldn't be right. Just couldn't be. Leah scanned the figure work again, praying the amount of the repair bill was a mistake. Instinctively, though, she knew it wasn't. Rewiring an old villa like hers wouldn't be cheap. And according to the second quote she'd received in today's mail, it wasn't.

With a resigned sigh, she tucked the quote back into its envelope.

"Something wrong?" Mac leaned against the kitchen doorway, hands jammed into his jeans pockets.

"You're back."

"Yeah, a bit of quiet time never hurt anyone," he said, offering a half smile.

Leah's heart did a tandem of butterfly flutters. There was something different about him at that moment. Strong and capable. Unthreatening. And yet she wasn't sure she could trust him. But trust had nothing to do with the heat that zinged between them, a sizzling electrical current connecting them that nothing seemed to be able to break.

"You didn't answer my question," he reminded her. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing." Leah heard the taint of a lie in her voice as she clutched the quote to her chest. If Mac found out more money was required to rewire the house, another problem she couldn't sort out, it would only give him more ammunition against her.

Soon she'd get it done. Soon. When the harvest came in, she would pay him back and get him outta there. Then she could sort out the house's dilapidated wiring. Then life would get back to normal, and she wouldn't be so nervous every hour of the day or have to look at his far-too-sexy face and meet his probing gaze. Then, at last, she could bury her growing attraction to him and keep her secrets hidden.

She tucked the quote into the back pocket of her jeans. She'd have to ignore it for now. Turning away from Mac, needing refuge from his intimidating scrutiny, she stood at her sink and gazed out the window and into the grove of her beloved land.

Mac, thankfully, probed no further and went to play with Charlee. Behind her in her small lounge, she could hear their waves of laughter.

Leah wanted to ignore him, ignore his deep, throaty chuckle, and yet found herself on a knife edge, listening to every nuance of his voice, finding the timbre strangely comforting.

Comfort! Rubbish.

"Hey, why don't you let me order in dinner?"

“What?” Leah spun around. Mac again stood at the entrance to her kitchen. He looked so relaxed, his smile broad and genuine. It took her breath away. “Have you ever applied for a job with the CIA or something? You’d make a good spy, all that silent footwork of yours.”

“Can’t say I have.”

“No, I suppose you haven’t had time; too busy making squillions of dollars.”

His mouth pursed, and he dragged a hand through hair still damp from his shower after their hours in the grove and his long walk.

Leah inhaled. He smelt of ... She frowned. What? There was no cologne and no hint of the musky tang of olives. Just...him. Mac.

No. No. No. She was *not* allowed to think like that.

“Dinner?” he prompted.

“Take-out. No. I don’t think it’s a good idea.”

“Why not?” He dug out his wallet from his jeans pocket.

Leah spied the bulge of folded notes. Money. The man was made of it and thought he could buy his way into... “I said no...thank you.”

“It’s only dinner, not a marriage proposal.”

Leah gagged. “Only? It’s never only. Just like it wasn’t only the bed or the broadband. One thing, then another, until you’ve got your slippers parked by your bed.”

“I don’t wear slippers.”

“Ooh, and don’t you split hairs, Mac Grainger. You know exactly what I mean.”

“And all I meant was did you want a curry or pizza,” he said.

Leah yanked the microwave door open. The less she had to feel beholden to him, the better. She took the defrosted steaks from the microwave and reached for a skillet. “Use what you have, that’s the motto I was brought up with. Waste not...”

“Want not,” he finished for her. “So I guess the answer is no.”

“You guessed right.”

He reached out for the packet of steaks in her hand. “Here, let me.”

The hairs on the back of her neck rose, but the words on the tip of her tongue were silenced when she dropped her gaze for a moment and her attention was captured by his bare feet. They were long, his toes well shaped, nails trim. Sexy.

Oh, dear god. Her gaze jerked back up, and she slammed the skillet on the bench, holding the steak packet to her chest as if it were a talisman against sexy men. Against him.

She really should step well away from him.

Mac leaned forward so that his legs were either side of hers, as were his arms, fingers splayed on the bench top. He didn't actually touch her, but it was a caress nevertheless. Every part of Leah surged to life. She licked her lips and at the same time watched the curve of Mac's mouth.

Bad idea. Because all she wanted to do was kiss him.

She didn't move but finally found her tongue. "I don't need your help."

"You nervous, sweetheart?"

"No." Leah swallowed back the lie.

"Really. That's not how I see it. Do you know you smell good?" And he leaned a tad closer, inhaling. His dark eyes shuttered for a moment, and Leah thought he was going to kiss her.

He didn't.

His eyes opened, humor glittering in their depths, his mouth quirking to one side. "What do you want, Leah?"

Yes, what?

*Kiss me. Now!*

For a horrified second, Leah thought she'd actually spoken the words. But then Mac pushed away from the bench, from her, and she felt a distinct sense of abandonment.

"Okay, so you don't want to order dinner. How about I barbecue? Shame not to enjoy the weather."

Just like that, he'd gone from teasing her senseless to talking about food. How typical of a man!

"You'll need the seasoning," she said just to get him out of her kitchen and away from reach. She reached for the seasoning jar. Hot and sexy. No, that was wrong. She shook her head, having trouble focusing on the spice label. Hot and spicy. She grabbed the spice bottle and passed it to him. Refusing to let him bait her further, she kept her expression glacial, when inside she was burning hot...and that was entirely his fault. "You're not here to enjoy yourself." Besides, she didn't want to even consider the fact that she could enjoy time with him. That wasn't allowed.

"Shame about that," he responded, not even blinking an eye. Opening the back door that led from the kitchen to the brick paved patio, where the trailing clematis scented the garden, he walked outside, whistling to himself.

"Oooh." Damn! Damn! Damn! Leah didn't want him enjoying himself. Or smiling. Or whistling. Or...looking at her. And definitely not with those sexy eyes of his.

Her own eyes shuttered, but it seemed nothing could eradicate the vision of Mac smiling at her, or the memory of their kiss, as if it were yesterday.

Just a little kiss. It shouldn't have mattered, but it did, because it stirred emotions and feelings she had tried to forget and told herself didn't matter anymore.

How wrong she was. They mattered. Mac's kiss had made sure of it.

And she hated to admit it, but only minutes ago she had thought he was going to kiss her again, and had really, really wanted him to.

Trying to keep busy and ignore his whistling or thinking about kisses, Leah gathered the ingredients for a salad from the refrigerator. Then she found herself whistling.

She slammed her lips together. For goodness sake, what was wrong with her?

Within minutes, Mac had the barbecue fired, but what worse was that he'd shucked off his T-shirt to reveal tanned forearms and biceps that would do a football player proud. And abs? Well... Far too much visual.

So what was different? The man stripped in the grove.

Yeah, but this *was* different. This was at home, more intimate.

A sudden uncertainty hitched in Leah's chest as she watched him from the protection of the kitchen, watched his precise movements and found herself wondering...thinking shameless thoughts. Thinking about his hands skimming across her body and arousing her. Thinking about his kiss. About more kisses.

Oh lordy! She grabbed the skillet from the bench. "All the better to hit you with, Mac Grainger," she muttered.

"Mummy, is Uncle Mac going to cook?" Charlee stood at the back door, staring first at Mac and then at Leah, surprise registering in both her expression and voice.

Leah understood that surprise. Cooking was another thing Curtis had never done.

"Charlee, take this out to Mac," she instructed and handed her daughter the skillet.

As the easy laughter between Charlee and Mac once more filtered through to her, Leah realized it was happening, just as she knew it would. Curtis had never been a real father to Charlee, and just as any child did, her daughter soaked up all the attention Mac gave her. Mac had taken on the role of daddy. But Mac was temporary. What would happen when he left? The longer he stayed, the more painful his departure would be—another reason to get rid of him sooner rather than later.

Charlee attached to Mac wasn't a good idea.

You're getting attached too!

The knife sliced into her flesh. "Ow..." Leah squeezed her eyes shut, trying to blot out the instant burst of sharp pain, tears welling. "Charlee," she called. "Get Mac, Charlee."

Mutely she stared as the ooze of blood mingled with the tomato into a garish conglomeration of reds.

"Mummy!" Charlee burst through the back door and came to a grinding halt next to Leah. Her face bleached of color as her gaze fixed on the slash of red now dribbling down Leah's hand. "Uncle! Uncle, come quick, Mummy's..." Charlee slammed herself against Leah's leg, arms wrapped around it tightly. "Mummy, don't die, don't die, please, I'll be good. I promise."

*Oh dear God.* "Charlee, it's okay, sweetheart." Leah ignored her pain, focusing on her daughter's terror. "I'm okay, it's just a cut," she said, a hand caressing Charlee's curls.

“Leah? What the...” Mac’s bronzed complexion paled.

She held up her hand. “It’s just a small cut. Don’t fuss.” But the blood kept on seeping, and Leah didn’t feel too great.

Mac’s mouth thinned, then his gaze dropped to a quivering Charlee. He rested a hand on her shoulder. “Charlee,” he said, stepping between her and Leah so that he blocked Charlee’s view. “I really need your help. Can you get me a towel, please?”

Her daughter’s gaze lowered slightly, but she nodded, then spun away and rushed off in the direction of the bathroom.

Mac reached for her hand. “What were you thinking?” His touch burned, and she wanted to yank it from him, but he held her firmly. “I...” *Yeah, what?*

She’d been thinking about him. And that was definitely the problem, but she sure as heck wasn’t about to admit it. No siree.

He turned her hand over, palm up, and pressed his fingertips to her still bleeding flesh. “It’s only superficial.”

“Tell that to the blood.”

He looked up at her, a fierceness etched into every line of his face, his heat and closeness overwhelming. “You’re not going to faint on me, are you?”

“No.” That would offer him far too much vulnerability.

“Good. I’m not sure I’m up to mopping up wailing females.”

“So much for your bedside manner.”

Mac’s inspection of her injury halted, his mouth twitching into a half smile. “You haven’t seen my bedside manner yet, sweetheart.” His voice had taken on a throaty, sexy quality. *No. Don’t think that.*

Leah shot him a look, and darn it, he was looking right back. Heat stole across her cheeks, her body igniting. Enough! She tried to tug her hand from his hold and failed.

“You asked for my help.”

“Yes, I know, I’m sorry, I’m just...”

It was him, that’s all. She knew it. His closeness. His touch. But she sure as heck wasn’t about to tell him that. She strove for calm and reason. “I’ve been taking care of myself for a long time now, Mac.”

“Haven’t we all, but at least let me at least play Sir Galahad once in my life.”

“What happened to the bedside manner, doctor?”

“Doctors and nurses, now there’s an idea.”

“One you can forget, buster.” She chuckled back, despite the stinging pain in her hand.

“Shame. Could be kinda fun.”

Thankfully, before he had a chance to offer her another of his sexy innuendos, Charlee came back with a towel and passed it to him.

“Are you going to be all right, Mummy?”

“Of course, sweetheart.” With her uninjured hand, she wiped away Charlee’s tears.

“Course she is,” Mac added. “She wouldn’t dare do anything else with me here, would you?”

Leah offered mock meekness and batted her lashes at him. “As if.”

For the next few minutes, he tended her cut, and she held her breath, wishing the moment were over.

“You can look now.”

“What?”

“Open your eyes, Leah.”

Her lashes lifted, and her vision focused immediately on Mac and, blast it all, his bare chest right in front of her. She licked her lips, which was a stupid move because it made her remember kissing him...and want it all over again.

“You said you weren’t going to faint,” he teased, “but then again it could be quite fun. I’d have to keep playing doctor and do mouth-to-mouth resuscitation.”

Oh, dear Lord. “Go put a shirt on, Mac.”

His brows rose suggestively. “Too hot for you, is it, sweetheart?”

Leah shoved herself up from the kitchen stool, not even sure how she actually got there in the first place, shook her head and then tucked strands of hair that had loosened from her ponytail behind her ear. “If you’re going to cook, Mac, please just go and do it.” She needed to be alone, to think. To get back to *normal*... Whatever that was. Because right now she wasn’t sure if she could even find a semblance of normal ever again.

All she knew was this awareness stuff going on shouldn’t be happening. Trouble was, her conscience and body sure as heck weren’t listening to her.

She tried not to compare the brothers, but that didn’t help one iota, either.

She’d been naive when she’d met Curtis, taken in by his easy charm and banter and his good looks. When she walked at his side, they’d receive admiring glances. Oh, she’d known they’d been all for Curtis, not for her. She was the drab young woman at his side, but the attention had made her feel special too, and for the first time in her life, she had felt important. Wanted.

And to give Curtis credit, she believed he did want her, at first, only to realise when it was too late that he’d used her as a personal ego-booster.

Her grandfather had told her that her mother had been a late bloomer, and so Leah guessed that was what had happened to her, but by then she was married to Curtis and suddenly, as her confidence as a young woman grew and her strength and knowledge and passion about the grove increased, she garnered the respect of the agricultural community. Curtis didn’t like it. He wasn’t the kingpin anymore.

Then Charlee came into their lives, and as Curtis’s addiction took over, Leah was once again that insecure girl who had no choice but to stay.

Now, as she watched Mac return to his grill, an adoring Charlee close by his side, she reminded herself not to trust too much in his charm and kindness. They could be as false as his brother's had proved to be.

For two weeks, Mac had been under her roof, and there was no hint of him leaving.

Funny how life had become somewhat of a ritual.

They worked in the grove all day, and while they barely said a word to each other, there was a chemistry, a silent avowal of... The words that came to her mind were mutual respect.

Mac worked hard.

She worked harder. There was no way on earth she wanted him to think she couldn't hack it. This was her land, her home, her livelihood, and she would do anything in her power to ensure it stayed that way.

After too many years of moving from one rented home to another and the uncertainty of life that had scarred her childhood, there was no way she'd ever let that happen to Charlee.

Later that night, with Charlee in bed, Leah relaxed with a book, though she realized she hadn't actually turned a page for some time.

That was Mac's fault.

He sat across from her in the lounge, busy on his laptop, though every now and again he would look up and catch her staring at him. He never said anything. Just lifted one dark brow in acknowledgment, and she would drop her gaze to her book again, having no clue what her characters were up to. It was as if they were a real couple.

When the phone rang, jolting her out of her reverie, for some reason she had an unearthly premonition of disaster lurking.

No one phoned at ten thirty at night, unless the aforementioned disaster was about to strike or had already hit dirt. Scrambling from the sofa, she snatched up the phone and turned away from Mac. "Hello."

"Leah, it's Howard Parker."

"Howard," she acknowledged. She liked Howard, a rough and tough guy whose crew of pickers worked the circuit of small independent farms like hers. He was good value, at a price she could afford—just. "Good to hear from you. I'm just about ready for your crew to start picking."

"Sorry, Leah, but trouble's brewing over at the Wexford property, so it means we're going to get to you too late."

"Late! But you can't. I booked you weeks ago, Howard, I need to get the crop in on time. Otherwise..." Leah looked behind her, noting Mac's attention had shifted directly to her. Great. Now he'd think she couldn't handle things, again.

His brows rose. "Problem?"

She forced her mouth into a tight smile and mouthed *nothing*, then made a quick exit out the front door and pulled it closed behind her.

The scent of wild jasmine wafted up on a cool valley breeze that enveloped Leah as she sank onto a porch step. Beneath the canopy of moonbeams, she could make out the towering lushness of early flowering Pohutukawa, a sure sign the summer would be a good one.

She took in the shadowed beauty of the trees and beyond and sighed. “When can you come, Howard?”

“That’s just it. I can’t.”

“But we agreed.”

“Wexford is bigger. I gave you a discounted price due to your...um...circumstances, but money’s tight everywhere. I can’t turn Jake Wexford down.”

“But you can turn me down.”

“I’m sorry.”

Leah heard true regret in Howard’s tone and couldn’t really be angry with him, despite the fact circumstances threatened to destroy her crop.

She disconnected the call and dropped the phone to her lap. What now?

She had to get that crop in; only then could she get rid of Mac. That was imperative for her sanity. Her... Lordy, she was about to think *heart*. How ridiculous.

Okay, so the guy was sexy, in a devilish sort of way, but she couldn’t afford to play with the devil. Closing her eyes, she tried to blot all thoughts of Mac Grainger right out. She had a bigger problem to solve, but any hope of eradicating that man from the silent video playing in her head vanished the moment she heard him open the door and step up behind her. The hairs on the back of her neck stood to attention, the play of something akin to excitement skittering up and down her spine. She choked back the tumble of emotions rioting inside her. This was not the time for that sort of thing.

“Leah?”

Without looking at him, she shook her head, waving him away. “Go away, Mac. Please.” She pushed herself up from the porch step, not wanting to be forced to look into his too-knowing eyes.

“What’s happened?”

She sniffed, refusing to give in to the tears she knew were so close to falling. “Nothing I can’t handle.”

“Why don’t you let me help?”

“You’ve already done enough. Just leave it.”

“I can’t.”

“Really? Are you trying to play the knight in shining armor? That’s not what I expect from you. A new cap, perhaps?”



“So there is a problem.”

Damn. She should have kept her mouth closed.

He stepped closer, and Leah found herself backing up to the porch railing. It dug into her back, a vicious reminder of reality, of what she could lose, of the situation Curtis had forced on her. Even from the grave, his bully-boy tactics reached out to her. She jammed her hands on her hips. “Like I said, it’s nothing I can’t handle.”

“From what I heard...”

Her stomach somersaulted. “You were eavesdropping?”

“Call it concerned observance,” he said with a nonchalant shrug.

“Oh, cut the caring routine, Mac. I don’t believe it. You’re only out for yourself and what you want. Just like Curtis. Look,” she said, sidestepping him, “I don’t have time for this. I’ve got to book another picking crew.”

“Another one?” His hand snapped around her wrist, yanking her back to face him. “Why the hell haven’t you organized it already? From my understanding, crews are booked a year in advance.”

Leah wrenched herself from his hold, the fingers of her left hand massaging her wrist. “I knew it!” She tossed her head back a fraction, brushing her hair from her eyes. “You think I’m totally incompetent.”

“I didn’t say that.”

“No?” But the fight had gone out of her, and exhaustion took over. Her shoulders sagged. This was far too hard, yet she had to keep going. She had no choice. The alternative was to lose everything. Her voice was a whisper when she spoke. “You sure as heck thought it, though, Mac. As far as you’re concerned, I’m a useless mother, playing at farming and not able to...survive.” One look at him and she knew what she’d said was true. But worse, saying the words aloud broke her heart. Everything seemed to be going wrong, one disaster following another, and Mac’s hesitation sparked her frustration. “I was right. You’ve already convicted me.” Distancing herself from him, she pushed open the front door and stepped over the threshold. “I don’t have time to talk about this. I have to make some calls.”

But his questioning didn’t let up. “What happened to the pickers?”

“Howard has bigger fish to pick,” she said.

“I can work in the grove,” he offered.

“You can’t pick a whole olive grove, Mac. Neither of us can. That’s why I booked Howard’s crew.”

“So book another.”

“I intend to, but...”

“But what?”

“It’s late. As you said, crews are booked months in advance, if not the year before.” Turning from him, she made her way back inside and rummaged in her desk for her list of picking crews. She had to find

someone. Had to. She couldn't fail. If she had to pick the whole damn grove herself, she'd do it, even though she'd just voiced the impossibility of it to Mac.

But three hours and many phone calls later, she'd come up empty. Dropping the phone to the desk, she stretched out, rolling her shoulders to ease the tension in her neck. Her eyes shuttered, and she dropped her head to rest in her folded arms.

Just a moment. A few minutes' rest, then she'd start all over again. There had to be someone who could help.

Mac stood rock still, staring down at a sleeping Leah. Beside the now silent phone was a list of names and phone numbers he presumed to be crews who worked the circuit.

He retrieved the list and skimmed down it. Each one had a cross beside it.

Each one had turned her down.

Even from his bedroom where he'd worked on his laptop finishing up several projects for his new hotel chain, he could hear the plaintive desperation in her voice at each rejection.

He went to drop the list back on the desk and froze. One part of him wanted to be close to her, though God knew why, while the other part of him said—no, screamed—walk away right now. Go far away and don't come back.

Instead, he sank onto the sofa across from Leah. It wasn't so far away that he couldn't hear her soft, fluttery breaths, or notice the blue-gray shadows beneath her eyes or the worry lines etched across her forehead.

He admitted Leah had surprised him. Curtis had painted her as a woman who couldn't be bothered, but Mac had seen her work tirelessly in the grove. He'd wanted to believe his brother, but seeing really was believing, and by witnessing her worries, he had in fact made them his.

Her hair had come loose from the ponytail she always wore, and he found himself battling the urge to walk over and brush it from her face. A sigh ripped through him, the need to tangle his fingers in the silken strands hitting like a thunderbolt.

Shit! He clenched his jaw, aware of the throb in his nether regions. But why her? Anyone other than Leah would be far more suitable. She was his brother's widow, for God's sake.

Still, he watched her. In sleep, she held him captive.

*Only in sleep?*

*Yeah, right.*

He wanted Leah. Full stop.

"Dumb. Really dumb, Grainger." What was he thinking?

He wanted Leah in his bed, to caress her and kiss her. To reenact what he'd felt beneath his fingertips and beneath his lips when they'd been in the grove.

*You're in way too deep!*

"Gotta get it done." Leah's muffled cry snapped Mac out of his lustful thoughts.

Just as well. He couldn't afford to get involved with *this* woman. He didn't trust her. He kept reminding himself of that. Besides, it felt...disrespectful to his brother. *But you didn't even like Curtis!*

Mac cut that thought short and glanced down at his watch, frowning. Two a.m. He couldn't leave her lying there all night.

Not giving himself time to reconsider, he hauled himself off the sofa and walked over to her. "Sleeping like a baby," he whispered, only to hear her gentle snore in response.

Her hair fell across her face, and instinctively he brushed it back, the veil of silk sliding through his fingers, just as he'd dreamed of doing.

He yanked his hand back.

"Come on, sweetheart," he said and bent down, then scooped her up. He cradled her against his chest.

Sleepy eyes fluttered open, only to gaze at him with a half-asleep doe-eyedness. "What you doing?"

"Taking you to bed."

"Oh, that would be nice." And she snuggled into his shoulder.

Mac bit back an oath, realizing Leah's sleep talk was just that—mumbled nothings she wouldn't even remember in the morning.

Trouble was, it played havoc with every part of him, and with one part in particular. *He* sure as heck would remember it all in the morning.

With a sigh, her eyes shuttered once more, and she nestled her head against him, the fingers of one hand splayed across his chest, slipping beneath the open edges of his shirt. Her touch burned. Dear God, he was on fire.

He gritted his teeth and wondered if she was aware of the erratic *tat-a-tat-tat* beat of his heart. He damn well hoped not. Nothing good could come of a one-night stand. "Damn it. Toughen up, Grainger." He must be mad to hold her and touch her.

In her bedroom, Mac flicked on the tulip-shaped glass bedside lamp. It lit up the room with a soft amber glow.

He'd never been in her room. *And should get out right now too.*

He didn't. Instead, he lay her down on the bed, then just stood there, staring, realizing he didn't want to go. One more minute, he told himself.

He reached for the folded comforter at the end of the bed, an antique of quilted flowers, and drew it over her. There was a gentleness in her sleep, a vulnerability that daylight obliterated with the worries of

running the grove on her own, whether the crop would fail or succeed, and yep, having him here too had added to her burden.

Leah never blinked an eyelash, so sound asleep was she. Yet he'd never felt so damned alive in his whole life.

"So alone." Her soft voice drew him from his self-absorption, and he looked down at her. Still asleep, yet her words perhaps told the truth. She'd just buried her husband. Was she looking for a replacement already? Him?

Disgust at this possible truth shot through Mac.

*And you've been hooked into the honey pot so easily.*

Fool!

Spinning away, he stormed from the room, closing the door behind him and making damned sure he closed off his musings too. They were far too dangerous.

*How the hell did I get into this mess?*

Back in the small lounge, surrounded by silence, he found himself pacing across the wooden floor. Sleep, he knew, would be a long time coming, and after finding himself walking to the closed door of Leah's bedroom more than once and then turning abruptly away, he reached a decision.

Scooping up the list of pickers, Mac retreated to his bedroom, and closed the door.

"What have you done?" Leah held the phone in one hand, shaking it at him as she exited her small office, with the list of pickers she'd worked through the evening before clenched in the other hand.

"Morning to you too, sweetheart."

"Don't you dare sweetheart me, or...or anything." She tossed the phone and list to the kitchen table and planted her hands on her hips.

"Not a good sleep?" he asked smoothly.

"As if you don't know!" Her cheeks heated. "Even I realize I didn't sleepwalk to bed last night." She prayed she hadn't said anything...oh, or God forbid, done anything...

Leah stilled. The man looked far too smug and too handsome for this early in the morning, especially after the night she'd had, when every inch of him had been in her dreams. Dressed in jeans and a black T-shirt, the short sleeves cut off, his powerful frame had never looked so good.

Leah refused to look at his feet. She'd been caught out before. Bare feet. Bare body. Naked...

Suddenly, she could do with a strong black coffee.

"So what makes you so jumpy this morning?"

Make that two coffees.

She went to the kitchen and filled the kettle. "You rehired the pickers. Who said that you could do that?"

"You said you had a problem."

"But that's just it, Mac. It's *my* problem."

"Not exactly."

She threw her hands up. "Oh, for Pete's sake, not that again."

"Fraid so. Remember..."

"Oh, I remember your bully-boy tactics, *Mr. Grainger*," she said, cutting him off.

"Didn't seem to worry you last night."

"Last..." She looked at him, suddenly very worried. What was it she had done and couldn't remember? Nerves getting the better of her, she chewed her bottom lip. She glanced over his shoulder and out the kitchen window, grateful when she spied Charlee happily picking daisies from the garden.

She refocused on Mac and found herself twisting a tea towel into knots. He stood with his back to the window, the sun's rays haloing him from behind, his hair still damp from a shower pearlescent droplets at the end of a few curls.

Lordy what a sight for sore eyes. Her nostrils flared at the scent of him. Of musk and soap. Of man. Him.

*Don't be a fool, Leah. Fools get burned.*

She refocused. "What do you mean, last night?" *Please say nothing.*

"Such sweet whisperings."

*Oh, hell.*

"I'm sure you must be wrong. I never talk in my..."

"Are you sure?"

Was she? Bluffing obviously wasn't going to work. She didn't even remember him carrying her to bed, and yet he must have.

Mortified, she hooked her gaze with his, spying the devilish twinkle in its depths. One part of her wanted him to say joke, even pretend it was April Fool's Day. He didn't, and the only fool here was her. "Even if I did say...something," she said, eying him cautiously, "it means nothing. I was asleep, and people say things they don't mean."

"Not me. I always say what I mean."

"Oh... Look, Mac, don't try and sidestep things."

"Who, me?" And he held his hands up as if surrendering.

*That'd be the day.*

She gripped the tea towel tighter. "You phoned Howard."

"I did."

“Why?”

“Because we have a problem.”

“We? *I* do. You...well...”

His brow quirked.

“Okay, so there’s a problem,” she snapped, folding her arms across her middle. “It’s nothing *I* can’t handle.”

“I’m sure, but I thought I would help out.”

“I didn’t *ask* for your help.”

“I know you don’t want it, but you got it anyway, or do you want me to phone Howard back and say forget it?”

Leah looked through the french doors and out on to the cobbled yard. While it was too soon to actually start the harvest, the help of the picking crew in tidying up the grove would go some ways to easing her load.

“Well?” he prompted.

She couldn’t refuse. Not really. She’d tried everyone on the pickers’ list last night and been told they were already booked, just like Howard. She turned back to Mac. “So how did you get him to change his mind?”

“Money talks.”

“What? You’re mad. I can’t afford a higher rate.”

He smiled at her with a cat-who’d-got-the-mouse kinda smile. And she definitely was the mouse in this game. “But I can.”

“How easily you say those words. You can afford it. Money fixes things,” she said, clicking her fingers in the air.

“It does.”

“But only for those that have the money in the first place,” she said. Then the reality of it all dawned on her. “That means I’ll be...”

“Beholden to me,” he finished for her. His gaze narrowed, hard and discerning. The man could see right through her. “And I guess you don’t like that either.”

“You got that right. Not one little bit.” Leah shoved past him, wrenched the latch down on the french doors and strode out onto the small deck that bordered the cobbles. She might not have been able to remember how she got to bed last night, but she sure as heck remembered every single moment of her dreams. Dreams that were filled with Mac.

Mac said he wanted to get to know Charlee, but every time she found herself staring at him, he was watching her too. She tried to convince herself it was nothing, but “nothing” wasn’t the cold, hard

suspicion she witnessed in his eyes. Nor was it the crawl of uncertainty, or the fine thread of excitement his closeness elicited and which wasn't going away.

Blast the man. He was taking over her life in more ways than one. Damn him. Damn him to hell.

She wanted to be relieved, grateful, knowing that at least the harvest would come in. That in itself would go some ways to getting Mac Grainger off her back. But part of her held back. The suspicious part. Why would he do that? The man wanted to see her fail, prove his point that she couldn't cope, so why help her at all?

Leah hated the blatant gnawing of suspicion, but mostly she hated the fact that Mac Grainger excited her like no other man ever had and that he filled her dreams with thoughts of "what if".

## Chapter Five

A week later, the axe still hadn't fallen, and she still had her livelihood. And her secret.

In a constant state of worry about mounting bills and the ever-increasing list of repairs that an old homestead like Aroha Farm necessitated, Leah could have pulled out her hair when today another bulb had gone, the sixth in a week. The electrician had said it was the outdated wiring which needed a total overhaul. But with finances in disarray, that job would have to wait until the next round of bill paying was completed. Maybe then she'd have the funds to get the work started at last.

And not only that, Christmas was just a week away. Leah was determined nothing would ruin it for Charlee.

Leah fell into bed well after midnight, grateful at least to get a few hours rest...until it would all start over again before even the first chirp of the birds.

The pickers had arrived and, though not picking yet, were an added help in keeping the tree undergrowth at bay. At least that was something to be grateful for. Something she didn't have to worry about. Thanks to Mac.

Little by little the man was infiltrating her life.

*And your thoughts!*

He hadn't tried to kiss her again, however, but from the way he looked at her, Leah knew he must be thinking about it...as much as she was.

Lost in the half world between sleep and consciousness, she wished desperately she could forget everything and give herself over to oblivion. It seemed like only minutes later that, struggling for sleep, she coughed into the darkness, fingers clawing at her throat, willing away the stifling breathlessness.

Something was wrong.

She blinked several times, eyes gritty as she peered across her bedroom, seeing only a foggy mire swathed in the nothingness of night. She wanted to push away that emptiness, but movement proved impossible, her bones and muscles lethargic beyond exhaustion. Her throat burned, and she couldn't focus. She wanted nothing more than to simply lie back and give in to sleep.

The sudden crack of wood against wood charged her awake, and her bedroom door swung sharply open.

"Get out!"



Leah struggled upright, blinking repeatedly but seeing only a blurred human form in her doorway.  
“Mac?”

He rushed across the room and grabbed at her, fingers biting into her shoulder, shaking her. “Come on, get out.”

Fear fired instantly in her chest, and she arched back and pressed herself into the mattress.

“Fire, Leah. The house is on fire,” he said urgently.

Fire! Understanding broke through her panic, and she sprang from her bed. *My God. Charlee.*  
“Charlee?”

“I’ll get her, you get out. I’ve already phoned emergency. Go.” Mac turned and ran into the hallway, and only then did Leah notice the golden gleam of fire.

Go? Where?

Leave Charlee?

She’d never leave without her daughter. Ignoring the desperate need to fill her lungs with oxygen, Leah followed Mac into the hallway. Flames fanned the hall ceiling, the acrid stench of burning insulation making movement nearly impossible. She dropped to her knees and crawled toward her daughter’s room.  
“Get Charlee. Charlee!”

Her eyes burned as she peered through the swirl of thick smoke. There they were. Mac had Charlee. And clasped in her daughter’s arms was her favorite toy.

Her daughter’s cry reaching her through the roar of the fire was the most reassuring and precious sound Leah had ever heard, and her relief surged.

Flames licked the length of her kitchen, windows exploding, the instant flow of oxygen feeding the fire as it burst anew into a vicious coiling lick of death. Leah recoiled into the crook of Mac’s arm, and he dragged her from the horror, pushing her toward the front door. “Keep your head down. Let’s go.”

Leah obeyed, willing the terrifying scene to disappear.

It didn’t. It followed them.

They reached the lounge, but the moment the door opened, a wave of stabbing flames detonated through the doorway. Mac stumbled back. “We can’t go this way. Get down, crawl, Leah. Crawl.” He dropped to his knees, pushing her in front of him while clutching Charlee. “Make for the bathroom.”

Bathroom? Which way? She knew this house in her sleep, but through a thick, choking veil of smoke? She prayed she headed in the right direction. It seemed to take forever, a lifetime of moments flashing through her brain.

Was she going to die? Would Charlee? And what about Mac?

She couldn’t die. She had to survive for Charlee.

Leah bumped into a closed door and crab-walked her fingers upward to the handle, but one touch and she yanked them back, seared from the scalding metal. “I can’t open it. It’s too hot.”

Mac's curse died amid a jackhammer of discharges as windows exploded from the heat. He passed Charlee to her, and for one fleeting moment where fear had no control, she relished the comfort of her daughter in her arms, soothing her sobbing with whispers.

Mac stepped back, then kicked at the door and broke the latch. He pulled Leah to her feet, pushed them into the tiny bathroom and followed, closing the door as best he could.

Safety was theirs, for now.

Leah gasped for air in a room thankfully barely tinged by the lethal smoke. "I want to go back to bed." Charlee's plaintive cry tore at Leah's heart.

"I'm sorry, darling, we can't. We have to get outside." She looked to the closed door. On the other side, fire raged. How had it happened?

*The wiring!*

"My fault. It's my fault." She turned to Mac. "We're stuck, we can't get out. I should have..."

"No time, Leah. Grab the towels, soak as many as you can."

Leah put Charlee on the floor and reached under the vanity for the towels, then tossed the entire contents into the bath. Mac turned on the tap, soaking them within seconds. He laid several at the base of the door to smother the plumes of smoke that had already begun to seep beneath, then passed her two sopping towels. "Wrap one around your head and the other around Charlee's."

"How do we get out?"

"Through there." He pointed to the window above the vanity. It seemed far too small. "Stand back." After he wrapped the last towel around his fist, he punched the window out. The glass shattered, and Leah jumped back, protecting Charlee with her body as her daughter erupted into a fresh onslaught of tears.

"Up you go," he said.

"But Charlee..."

"You go first. Then I'll pass her out." Mac pulled her from her crouching position and took a sobbing Charlee from her arms. He caressed Charlee's head, and for a split second time stood still. His worried eyes captured Leah's, holding her in an invisible embrace. Leah wanted him to caress her too, to calm her. Tell her it would be all okay.

A burst of flames snaked beneath the door, the sopping towels no longer of any use, and the moment snapped apart. She faced the window and then hesitated, turning back to Mac, lips trembling. "I can't get out, it's..."

Sitting Charlee at his feet, he grabbed her hands in his. "You can do anything, Leah. Believe it. You have to. Now do it."

Bitter fumes clawed at her eyes, her nostrils, stinging her skin. The explosive heat was bone-melting

"Climb out, Leah."

Her muscles deprived of energy, she struggled to climb on top of the vanity, then angle herself through the small window, first her head, then her shoulders.

Fresh air. Oh, sweet joy, she could breathe. She wriggled some more, and from behind, broad hands cupped her derriere; then she was out and down on the deck.

Dizzy with relief, she hauled herself upright, one part of her acknowledging the sound of sirens in the distance. She reached back into the syrupy haze and found Charlee's hands poking through the window. Leah prayed for strength, for safety and for survival as she pulled Charlee through the opening.

At last Charlee was safe in her arms, and they stumbled down the few steps and across the paved courtyard and slumped to the ground.

Her relief was short-lived as a ball of fire leapt from the bathroom window. The echoes of other windows shattering and the roar of the fire devouring oxygen intensified by the second. Horror clawed along her skin as she waited for Mac.

But there was no Mac climbing out the window. No shape or shadow of human form. Simply the rage of fire.

Time stood still.

Still nothing, except for the detonation of a fiery rage.

A tiny hand tugged at her side, "Mummy, Mummy, where's Uncle Mac?" Charlee burst into a flurry of tears. "I want Uncle Mac. I want Uncle Mac."

"Me too, sweetheart. Me too." Leah patted Charlee's tangled curls, trying to calm her down. She turned back to the raging inferno that only a short while ago had been her home. Voice raw, she called, "Mac! Mac!" And beside her, Charlee called too, again and again.

But no Mac at the window. Or door. No big, bossy Mac stumbling from the fire. Dear God, where was he?

Backing up to the small garden a few meters away, Leah placed Charlee down. "Stay, darling. Don't move. Promise me."

Fear-filled eyes lifted to hers. *Mac's eyes? Curtis's eyes?*

Leah plopped a kiss on her daughter's cheek and, spinning on her bare feet, ignoring the jagged stab of burning insulation, raced back to the bathroom window, getting as close as she could. She saw nothing except the coat of thick and pungent smoke and the orange haze of fire.

Had Mac dropped to the ground, overtaken by the brutal fumes of melting plastics and burning wood?

A barrage of explosions from inside rocked the house, and the roofing iron of her beloved home began to collapse. Leah's legs buckled beneath her, and she tumbled away from the window.

Tears streamed down her face. Mac. Had she lost him?

No! She wouldn't let it happen.

She crawled along the deck toward the front door, but like the bathroom door, it too proved too hot to touch. She elbowed it, but it held fast.

*Try again.*

She shouldered the door, the heat and pain intense. In the background, she heard Charlee's cries and the wail of the sirens, but not one sound from Mac.

One part of her wanted to run to her child, soothe her, but she couldn't leave Mac, couldn't walk away and let him die.

She screamed at the top of her lungs, kicking repeatedly at the door. Finally it split away from the doorjamb, flames leaping out to greet her. They soared above her head, their greed unchecked. She called out, but it was no use, her voice deadened by the enveloping roar.

Covering her mouth with the sodden towel, she crawled down the hallway a few feet, and then a few feet more, searching in the smoky haze for Mac.

Nothing.

Deeper and deeper into hell, she clawed at nothing. Then suddenly her fingers scraped over bone and flesh. Mac? Thank God. She ranged over his inert form.

Dead?

No, she wouldn't think that. He couldn't be. Grabbing him by the shoulders, she shook him. "Get up. We have to get out. Come on."

He didn't move, didn't speak. Was she too late?

Balancing herself on her haunches, she looped her hands beneath him and tugged. But Mac was too big, a dead weight in her arms.

Dead? The word wouldn't go away. She didn't want to think it, wouldn't let it be true.

"Why don't you do what you're told, woman?"

"You're alive?"

A groan escaped his lips, eyes fluttering. Dear Lord, he even tried a smile.

Hope restored, she tried again. "Come on. Get up."

"Leave me," he choked out.

"Not bloody likely."

He lifted his head a fraction. "Stubborn woman." But it was as if those two words sapped all his energy, and his head dropped back down to the floor.

"Damn right. Now get up, Mac Grainger, get moving."

For what seemed an eternity, he lay inert, and then with a shuddering groan he hoisted himself up on all fours. Holding him as best she could, she directed him toward freedom, rejoicing as they reached the threshold, wrapped in the elixir of fresh air and into the welcoming arms of the fire crew.

"We'll take over now," a fireman said as he took Mac from her hold.

Rescued! Leah gave herself over to the crew, sinking into exhaustion as they guided her across the courtyard.

They were alive. She and Charlee. And Mac. Yes! And Mac.

*Charlee!* Leah spun round to where she'd left her daughter. "Charlee!"

"Is safe and enjoying sitting on one of the fire engines." A fireman close by pointed toward the two engines. Charlee waved from her perch on the shiny chrome front bumper.

Relief tore through Leah, and on blistered feet she raced over to her daughter, scooped her up in her arms and held on tight. "Oh, Charlee." She didn't want to ever let her go again. "I don't know what I'd do..."

"Don't even go there."

Warm fingers caressed her shoulder, and she turned slightly and looked up. Mac stood at her side, offering her an ash-covered smile of reassurance.

"It didn't happen," he said. "She's alive. Happy. We're all alive."

They were, and that was all that mattered.

Working with efficiency, the crew checked Charlee out and then moved to Leah. When it was Mac's turn, he waved them away. "I'm okay. A few scratches, that's all. Nothing that a bit of good fresh air won't fix."

"Can I go back to the fire engine?" Charlee asked, surprising Leah with her resilience. She nodded, and Charlee slid from her arms to hop off toward the crew, who were quickly getting the fire under control and had already started clearing up.

Lashes smudged with soot, Mac focused his red-rimmed eyes on her. "You okay?"

She nodded. "And you?"

He offered a strained smile. "Yeah, it takes more than a few flames to knock me out." Then his gaze darkened, saddened, as he peered over her shoulder.

Despite the surrounding heat, ice suddenly chilled Leah's blood. She spun around, pressing a hand to her mouth and stifled her screams. All gone. Where once there were walls, smoke lingered above charred ruins. The fire had taken everything. Her dreams. Her home. Her past. Her future...

Surrounded by embers that danced through the breeze, she stepped toward the wreckage. "Gone. Everything is gone."

Then Mac was pulling her back into his arms, cradling her from the horror.

She coveted his reassuring warmth. "My house...is gone," she hiccupped.

His hold on her tightened. "You can rebuild."

Her voice trembled, and she looked up at him with tear-filled eyes. "You don't understand," she sobbed, "I have nothing left. Nothing."

"You have your daughter."

The wiring had caused this. It had to be. The electrician had already warned her, and yet she'd put it off. It was her fault, all her fault.

The words taunted, censured, punished her as they reverberated on continual overload in her brain. Her fault. Could have. Should have.

Chilled to the core, she curled her fingers into her sodden clothes, wishing to hold on to something, anything, to stop her hands shaking. She blinked several times. She would not cry. Instead, she looked at Mac, and although she tried very hard not to, her heart skipped a fluttery beat. In pain, in exhaustion and in heat, Mac Grainger hypnotized her. It was because of him she and Charlee were safe. They could have died. She'd been exhausted, deep in sleep.

A shivery chill slid along her spine, and she hugged her arms around herself as she imagined what could have been. Her lips trembled, shock setting in as she began to slip in the unreal world of unconsciousness.

"Whoa." Mac made a grab for her, his arm snaking around her waist. He held her tight, his ragged breath grazing her ear, her neck. She tried to smile, but it was as if it were too much effort. "Thank you."

"Shouldn't that be my line? I'd be toast if you hadn't come back for me," he said drily.

"I couldn't leave you."

"Really? I'd have thought that was one way to get rid of me."

Leah couldn't hide her shock at his statement, and her eyes widened. "You think so little of me, that I would let you die?"

"Easy way out."

*Oh, Mac.* Her lips pursed.

"Don't do that."

"What?"

"That pouty mouth thing; that kiss-me look you get."

Heat rushed at breakneck speed to the tips of her toes. With his strong arms around her, she could feel his heat, reveled in it. Her tongue slid along her lips, a silly move, because his fueled gaze fixed solely on her mouth.

"Reminds me of when we...when I kissed you," he teased.

Oh dear Lord.

"Makes me want to do it again."

Leah's heart skipped another beat.

*Get a grip. It's adrenaline, you're grateful, not attracted to him.*

"You shouldn't," she finally said, though she really didn't believe it.

"I know, but it doesn't stop the wanting."

*Definitely not.*

“But you don’t like me. Don’t trust me.”

“I think that’s vice-versa, sweetheart. But as I say, it doesn’t stop the wanting.” He caressed her face with the back of his hand, thumb teasing the outline of her parted lips.

That he knew her so well refueled her shame. She looked away, watching the residue of flames and smoke waft up to the heavens, and whispered a prayer for redemption.

Charlee wandered over to her then and threaded her small fingers through Leah’s. It was a timely interruption, and her daughter’s hold on her hand felt good, real, like a charm to ward off temptation.

The fire chief nodded toward his crew still poking around in the ruins. “We’ve cleared up here, though a base crew will stay overnight, just in case some of the embers decide to start up again.”

Leah wanted to say thank you, anything, but no words would form. All she could do was think of what she had lost. Not *just* a house, but a home. Heritage from the only grandparent she remembered, the only relative who’d ever really cared. Now all that was left was a scarred pile of ashes.

Mac shook the fire chief’s hand. “Thanks, for everything. Any idea what started it?”

“Wiring, most likely,” he said, his gaze shifting toward her.

Leah’s breath stilled. The man knew. Knew *she* was to blame. She should have paid the deposit, got the wiring underway. Asked for help. But oh no, she held back because of stubborn pride. And dear God, that pride could have killed them all.

“It seems the place was past due for some major rewiring,” the fire chief said as he lifted his helmet and rubbed his brow.

Leah caught Mac’s probing stare.

Acknowledging the shouts of the other firemen as they reloaded the hoses and climbed aboard the fire engines, the chief said, “We’ll be off. You’ll get a copy of my report.”

“Thanks.” Mac waved him away and then turned to her, blocking out all but the smoking ruins of her home behind him. But he didn’t, couldn’t block out the guilt searing a raw path straight to her heart. “Wiring, Leah?”

“I...” Words snarled across the tip of her tongue, along with guilt that rode shotgun, and she clammed up.

“Why didn’t you tell me? I could have helped. We could have died.” He grabbed her shoulders, fingers biting into tender flesh. “Charlee could have died.”

Tears streamed down her face. Tears for life, for death, that she could have lost Charlee. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to. I just...” If she told him she couldn’t cope, would he use that against her to get Charlee? “You’ve come here, run roughshod over me. I didn’t know what to think...” *Or if I could trust you. You’re a Grainger.*

For the next few moments, neither said a word as they watched the remaining fire crew inspect the rubble for any hint of fire beneath the ashes, then, unexpectedly, he reached out a hand to her. “Come on.”

“What?” She held fast, refusing to budge.

“We can’t stay here. We’ll go to my place.”

Leah rocked on the balls of her bare feet. “No!”

Mac dragged a sooty hand through his ash-sprinkled hair, his expression pure exhaustion. “You don’t have a choice.”

“You expect me to come with you?”

“Leah.” Her name was a husky whisper between them, and for just the briefest moment she thought he was going to kiss her. She felt ashamed for thinking it and wanting it. But she did. She wanted his reassuring arms around her.

He tugged at her hand. “I’m knackered. My lungs are choked, and I need a shower. Ready?”

She looked to the smoldering ruins of her house. Go? Or stay? She had no choice. That had gone up in flames.

“You can’t stay here,” he said, reiterating what she’d been thinking. “Think about Charlee for once.”

Leah squeezed Charlee’s hand in hers, gaining strength and reassurance from her daughter’s warm touch. A tear slipped down her cheek. This was too hard, too much.

The tip of Mac’s finger tilted her chin up, giving her no alternative but to look at him, look at the full mouth that had felt good beneath hers. Then he did something different, so unexpected and unlike Curtis. Without a word, he brushed away her tear. Such a gentle action, caring, even. It unnerved her, breaking down the walls she’d steadfastly erected to protect her heart.

“You know I’m right.”

“I don’t want you to be,” she countered.

He leaned forward, his face just a few millimeters from hers. His breath was warm, and she found herself leaning toward him.

“I know.”

Leah stole another glance at the sad remains of her house, a sad shadow of what once had been, haloed by the full moon. “I want to slip inside the house, punch that nightmare down where it belongs, and curl up and go to sleep.”

“I know, sweetheart,” he repeated. Roughened thumb tips caressed her cheek in a comforting gesture, and her breath stalled and her throat thickened. With the fear of letting him too close warring with her need for comfort, Leah walked with him toward the garage at the back of the property.

“Where’s your car?” she asked.

Mac levered the garage door open.

Inside the garage wasn’t the fire-red Ferrari she expected, but a sleek gray Mercedes, top of the range and obviously expensive, but sedate compared to the exotic beauty.

“I swapped it,” he said.



Leah's brows creased. "Swapped? Why?"

He nodded toward Charlee.

"You changed your car because of my daughter?"

"You can't get a child's car seat in a Ferrari, and I have more than one car. It doesn't matter which one I drive."

Leah's jaw dropped. "How many cars do you have, exactly?"

He shrugged. "Doesn't matter. What we need to do is get home, get cleaned up."

"You don't have a car seat."

"But you do," he answered. He strode to her battered pickup and tried each door in turn. They were locked, and the keys were more than likely a puddle of molten metal and ash by now, but Mac was a man on a determined mission. He checked the ground either side of him, kicking at smoldering bits of wood until he found what was looking for. Grabbing a rock, he tossed it up and down a couple of times as if gauging its potential, then aimed it at the rear side window of the vehicle. It shattered first hit, and he reached in and unhooked Charlee's car seat, shaking any shards of glass off it as he strode back to Leah. "We have one now."

Within minutes, the car seat was installed, and gathering Charlee in his arms, he placed her in the car and then secured the seat belt. He turned to Leah and offered to help her in.

Leah wanted to decline, but even saying no took too much mental and physical effort, so she just climbed into the passenger seat. Once she was in, he closed the door and took his place behind the steering wheel.

"We'll be home in thirty minutes," he declared as he fired the engine.

*His* home. Where was it? Leah struggled to think, to remember, and then realized she didn't exactly know where "home" was. In fact, she knew very little about this enigmatic man who had bulldozed his way into her life.

The hubbub of Auckland, the City of Sails, with a harbor known as sparkling waters because of the way the sunlight shone over its lapping waves, welcomed them as Mac drove them toward the downtown. Even now, as night gave way to the earliest rays of dawn, its nickname seemed entirely appropriate as the jewel-like stars glittered above its inky blackness.

Yet none of its beauty captured Leah. All she could think about was her home and what she was going to do now. Answers to the unspoken questions crowding her brain, however, remained elusive throughout the drive, and while Charlee slept as only a child could after such an event, Mac's omnipotent silence doused everything.

Then they were home.

"But this is the Mackenzie International building," Leah said, sitting up and finally taking notice of her whereabouts.

"That's right. I live in the penthouse."

"The penthouse?" she parroted.

"Yep. Top floor. Not scared of heights, are you?" he asked, offering a tiny smile.

The slight inflection in his voice sent a row of goose bumps along her spine, and she swallowed back a bout of nerves.

"If you are, I promise I'll hold your hand."

"I might take you up on that."

"Promise."

"We'll see," she said, realizing that his teasing humor was Mac's way of calming her down after the horrendous events of the last few hours.

"I guess you don't think wildcatting and penthouses go hand in hand."

For a moment, she wasn't sure if he was joking or not. "They do seem complete opposites."

"Just like you and me," he responded. But this time he didn't look her way, and Leah had no idea of his intention.

"Like I said," he continued, "wildcatting was a stepping stone."

"Some step." Leah exited the vehicle, but before she had time to reach for Charlee, Mac scooped her daughter up in his arms. He made it seem so natural, murmuring soft words to soothe the little girl as she stirred. A lump closed off Leah's windpipe, but her emotions weren't closed off. Seeing Mac with her daughter, an imitation of father and child, she felt her eyes glisten with tears once more. How she had wished for a real father for Charlee—something Curtis had denied his daughter.

*But Mac?*

Leah shook her head. Stupid. Stupid dream. What if the brothers were alike...?

He strode in front of her, leaving her no choice but to follow.

Hah! Choices. That word again. She had no choice. Not now. Not yet. But soon... Soon she'd pay him back, and then she could choose. The fire hadn't touched the olive grove, and somehow tomorrow she'd have to find a way to carry on with the season and her work; otherwise it was all lost, and she wasn't prepared to let that happen.

The elevator proved silent and swift, the height of luxury with its three padded walls and one chrome-and-glass feature.

Leah screwed up her nose when she sighted herself in the mirror.

Black soot-covered and bedraggled. And homeless. She and Charlee had the pajamas they wore, and that was all. No clothes. No...nothing. Photos. Furniture. Just thinking it caused a wave of panic to threaten.

The sudden touch of Mac's hand covered hers, warm and comforting as it soothed her nerves, and a sigh eased from her chest.

"It'll be okay, Leah. I promise."

They said dreams were free. Were wishes too? Because if so, she really wished she could believe him.

Within seconds, they reached the thirty-first floor and Mac's home.

She stepped through the wide double door entrance and came to an immediate halt. Windows encased the far wall from ceiling to floor, offering a spectacular view, from the pink-washed building of the sugar refinery set amidst its lush park-like grounds on the city's northern shore, and spread out across to Rangitoto Island, rising up in volcanic splendor in the Hauraki Gulf.

Mac came up beside her, still cradling Charlee. One broad hand smoothed across her sleeping daughter's tangled curls. Leah watched the action, almost hypnotized, and suddenly wished it was her that Mac caressed.

"Betty, my housekeeper," he said, snapping Leah back to what she should be thinking about, "is away for a few days. She lives in, though it's more in-building than in-house. She has a private suite two floors down. Your rooms are this way." He nodded toward a row of closed doors at the far end of the grand room. Feet silenced by the velvety-thick carpet, she once more found herself following him. He opened the door farthest away from the windows and flicked on a light. A sparkly chandelier graced the ceiling with shimmering dots of light above a bed dressed all in white.

Murmuring soothing words to a dozing Charlee, he placed her on the bed and stepped back.

Just then, Charlee stirred. "Uncle Mac, will Santa know how to find me now the house has burned down?"

For a breathless minute Leah just looked at Mac, wondering what he would say.

He bent down to Charlee, smoothing a damp curl from her forehead. "Sure he will. You know, my secretary's little boy has written Santa a letter. How about we do that tomorrow night after I get home from work, then I'll post it. That way you can be doubly sure Santa won't get lost on his way here."

"Really? Do you think he'll get it?"

"Well, it's a long way to the North Pole, but heck, I heard they've got a special Santa mail box these days."

Charlee's eyes widened. "Wow!" She looked at her mother. "But what about our decorations and tree and..." Charlee's eyes glistened, tears about to fall.

"Now don't you worry about that, we can sort it out. Santa wouldn't dare miss this delivery," Mac said as he levered himself from the bed and stood. He gave Leah a lopsided grin. "I'll leave you to it. Come and join me when you've finished."

As the door closed behind him, Leah finally exhaled a long-held breath, grateful with the way Mac had handled Charlee's disappointment. Working quickly, she removed Charlee's wet clothes and settled her

drowsy daughter beneath the covers and tucked her in. But instead of heading back to the grand room and Mac, she could only stare down at her beloved daughter and wonder “what if”.

What if she had died?

What if *they’d* died?

Guilt clamped around her heart. She should have fixed the wiring. Should have...

Hadn’t.

And what now?

She wanted to collapse and give way to the uncertainty that gnawed in her gut, the horror of the fire, but she couldn’t. She had a child to care for, a business to somehow keep afloat, and a debt to repay.

She brushed a kiss across Charlee’s forehead and decided on a shower, then sleep. She needed a clear brain to get herself out of this mess.

Tiptoeing from the room, she pulled the door closed and walked back into the expansive lounge, only to find the room empty. “Mac?”

The distinctive sound of running water echoed from one of the other nearby rooms.

A shower.

Heat stole across her cheeks as images of Mac beneath the water rampaged through her brain. Hot. Sexy. And...naked.

She shook her head. “What’s wrong with me?” She’d never seen the man naked, for goodness’ sake.

*Yeah, but imagination is a wonderful thing!*

It had to be the shock of everything, these thoughts. Stress made people irrational, made them think irrational thoughts, didn’t it? Her silly thoughts had to stop.

Suddenly, the watery echo ceased, and she heard the faint click of a shower door closing. Leah scampered across to other side of the room, as far away from a naked body—and her darn thoughts—as she could.

Minutes later, Mac stepped out of his bedroom wearing only pajama bottoms. Tiny droplets of water slicked his bare chest.

Oh lordy!

He looked up, and a fleeting glimmer of surprise colored his eyes. “Sorry,” he said, mouth tugging with that tiny little flick he did. “I thought you’d still be with Charlee.”

“She’s asleep.”

“I guess that’s the luck of the young—sleep can cure anything. Would you like a drink...or something?”

“Something?” Leah swallowed back the sudden ache in her throat. “A...um, shower would be good.”

“I bet. Your bedroom is next door to Charlee’s,” he said. Next door to his too, but he didn’t say that. Didn’t need to. She thought it loud and clear.

“There are towels and, well, not much else, but we can get new clothes in the morning.”

Leah stiffened. “I’ll pay for my own things.”

“I never thought otherwise, as long as you let me sort out Christmas.” About to protest, Leah witnessed something soft and caring in Mac’s eyes.

“Pretty please,” he said.

How could she say no to that? Believing retreat would prove best, she headed back to her own room and the small side bathroom next door to take a shower. The therapeutic pulse of the jet spray shower was like manna from heaven as it washed away not just the stench of smoke and destruction, but thankfully went some way to eradicate the horror of the night as well.

Shame it couldn’t wash away her heated thoughts of a naked Mac too.

With no other clothes or bedclothes, she wrapped herself in a toweling robe she’d found hanging on the back of the ensuite door. In her bedroom, she glanced at the illuminated bedside clock. Sleep would be elusive, despite her exhaustion. Too many dreams lay waiting. Her fractured nerves had returned full-force, and the tide of emotions crowding in on her brain was uncontrollable. Impulsively, she walked to the closed bedroom door, but her hand stilled on the handle, and she cocked an ear toward the living room on the other side and listened.

Silence replied.

Confident she wouldn’t have to face Mac, which went a tiny way to bolstering her flagging spirits, she opened the door to be greeted by darkness and, surprisingly, something akin to disappointment. She chided herself for being stupid. She didn’t want to see Mac. The man disturbed her, unsettled her with his testosterone-filled ego.

She walked across the grand lounge and stood in front of the panoramic view, glorying in both the darkness and stillness of the ocean, yet entranced by the glittering light show of a city unable to sleep. Just like her.

Taking respite from the chilly windowpane, she rested her forehead on the glass, one finger tracing the shadow of Rangitoto in the distance. The island rose as if a protector of the harbor, towering over all it surveyed, and yet it was in fact a dormant volcano, waiting to pounce.

The island. Mac Grainger. Both protectors. Both predators.

In the distance, the muffled wail of a fire engine echoed, and Leah’s heart skipped a beat, her body stiffening. She wanted desperately to block the sound out, but it drowned everything, even the roar of her heart, until all she could hear was the wail of the siren, screeching, warning, bleeding her dry.

“Leah? Leah?”

A voice clawed at her subconscious, a strong, confident voice, and a hand on her shoulder. Her eyes sprang open.

*Mac!* He was here. Holding her safe.

“It’s okay.” He ran a hand the length of her back, murmuring soothing words in her ear.

“No, it isn’t.” She pulled away, shaking her head. “It will never be okay again. I heard a fire engine. There’s another fire.”

With his free hand, he tilted her face up so that she looked at him. “Sweetheart, there’s no fire here.”

The heat of Mac’s touch burned through her robe, stealing across her flesh. Dark eyes stormy with desire held hers in an unspoken embrace. Unthinkingly, she brushed the tip of her tongue across her lips.

He clasped her face between his hands, the flat pad of one thumb brushing across her mouth. Her lips parted. She wanted to taste him.

“If you do that again, I’ll have to kiss you,” he growled out.

“Is that a warning?”

“A promise. But then again,” he murmured, “I really don’t want an excuse not to.”

## Chapter Six

Did kisses have memory DNA?

Mac's lips on hers proved it to be true. Leah remembered every nuance of the taste of him, the sweet and gentle touch. She savored it, giving back willingly, unable to refuse him or herself as her hands found their way around his neck, fingers threading through his still damp hair.

His warm breath whispered against her ear. "You don't have to." He pulled back a fraction, such a small distance, yet it felt a vast and lonely gulf. She didn't want to be lonely. Not tonight.

She offered him a tentative smile. "Oh, yes I do." The tips of her fingers grazed along his unshaven jaw. "No more talking, Mac. Kiss me."

"Can't say I don't do what I'm told." His voice was thick and heavy, a sensual reverberation. Then he kissed her. Deeper. Longer. Joyful kisses that had her clinging to him and never wanting to let go. Kisses that left her breathless, feathering goose bumps along her spine.

Mac's urgency matched hers low down, in a place where such feelings had long been stifled.

And still he kissed her, her cheeks, her eyelids, dotting butterfly-soft kisses along her jaw. A heavy sigh slid from her lips, her body relaxing as never before. She wanted them to go on forever.

But then he stopped.

Drugged by his lovemaking, she lifted her lashes, curious as to why he'd stopped.

In their passion, her robe had fallen open. His desire-filled eyes stared at her nakedness. He leaned forward and brushed a kiss across one nipple.

"Heaven," she whispered with a throaty sigh.

"Sweetheart, we haven't even started yet."

That thought stirred Leah. "I want to touch you." Her request surprised her. It had been so long.

Mac dropped his hands to his sides. "Be my guest."

She didn't hesitate, and raising a hand, she touched him, oh so softly at first, trailing her index finger across a pectoral muscle, circling one nipple, then the other.

His breath hissed, the sound exciting her, the knowledge she could turn him on powerful. As if her hands had their own will, she continued her exploration, reveling in the texture of the dark hair that caressed his tanned skin.

"Leah?" His shattered gasp drew her from her task, and her mouth went dry. "As much as I want to make love with you right now, here, we need a semblance of privacy, sweetheart." His gentle words

captured her, both emotionally, and physically. It made everything all right. Being in his arms felt good, natural. It had been a long time since sensuality had been part of her life, and she'd never experienced this sense of power. "I can read your body, Leah." His hands slipped beneath her robe, skimming her length, up, down, all over. She reveled in the sensation of skin against skin.

Her robe fell to the floor, pooling at her feet. Heart thudding, excitement tingling to the tips of her fingers and toes, she stood naked in front of him.

"Let's not wait."

He scooped her up and cradled her in his arms. Several long strides later, they were in his bedroom. This was it. No turning back. With reverence, he lay her down on the bed, and for one heartbeat he simply stood there, staring at her.

Leah cocked her head, and her bubbling laughter echoed around the room. "Are you inspecting the goods?"

A twinkle spirited across his eyes. "Looks mighty fine to me."

"Glad you think so, but it doesn't seem fair that you're clothed and I'm not."

"Easily remedied." And he shrugged his pajama bottoms off in double quick time, kicking them aside to stand in all his naked glory before her.

*Hallelujah.* Leah's cheeks flushed, and she raised one brow. "Very nice."

"Looking is fun, sweetheart, but enough of talk."

Mac joined her on the bed, raining kisses from her mouth, down the curve of her throat, sucking one pebble-hard nipple, then the other. Leah arched, aware of his body against hers, his arousal. She reached for him, trailing the tip of a finger along its length, and felt his shudder.

"Sweetheart! You talked of heaven. This is paradise. Now it's my turn." Leveling his weight on his hands either side of her, he teased his tongue down each rib, circling across her belly, heading lower.

Leah was lost to Mac's touch. Her eyes shuttered as his tongue delved amid the tiny curls at her apex, and he sucked her sweet bud. Her legs parted, and he hooked each over his shoulder, then dipped his mouth to her wetness.

Oh dear God. This surely had to be that heaven he talked of. Her body arched as Mac's mouth suckled her over and over until her orgasm burst.

This moment had been so different from what she had expected, from what had happened before. "Oh, Mac." And for that, Leah felt not only relief, but joy. Joy that it had been with him.

"Are you..."

She cut him off. "Fine. It was beautiful."

"You, Leah. You were beautiful."

Her mouth curved into a tiny smile. Beautiful. No one had ever called her beautiful. Not even Curtis.



For a fleeting moment, a wash of guilt splashed across her heart. Then she looked at Mac. The man. So different from his cold-hearted brother.

She reached for his arousal and wrapped her hands around it. “I think it’s time we got down to business, don’t you think?” She laughed and gave him a wink.

Leah couldn’t believe she’d said such a thing, acted so brazenly. But it felt good. Natural.

“Absolutely.” Mac reached for a condom from the bedside cabinet and sheathed himself expertly.

Leah’s eyes widened. The thought of protection hadn’t even crossed her mind, her body too hot and her need too strong. Oh Lordy! What was wrong with her?

She was beyond thinking, that’s what.

She smiled and lifted her arms in a welcoming gesture, waiting for the heaviness of his body against hers. Thankfully, he obliged.

Nothing mattered except Mac holding her. She scraped the tips of her nails down the length of his back and felt his shudder against her, a testament to his heightened state.

“So beautiful. So perfect,” he murmured as he dotted sweet kisses along her throat.

Leah wasn’t sure she really heard him. Her body and brain didn’t seem connected, the renewed coiled tension of a burgeoning release her only focus. Mac’s mouth silenced any reply as he kissed her over and over till her body craved a breath. Yet still she wanted more of him, the feel of his hardness inside her, branding her, addictive as any drug.

In turn, he suckled at each nipple once more, then he fulfilled her dreams. He slipped inside her, full and potent, their coming together so total, with an urgency that burned deep, until release came in an explosive burst as Mac reached orgasm, and she followed a moment later.

A breathless Mac whispered against her ear, “Open your eyes, Leah. Open them for me, so I can see your soul.”

His request shocked her, scared her.

Should she? Could she? Dare she?

Holding her breath, she fluttered her eyelids open and then was held instantly by exactly what she knew to be mirrored in hers.

True desire. Mac’s desire.

She had just made love to Mac.

*Made love.*

Two silent words that held her spellbound.

Mac’s chest heaved, and his heart thudded a frenetic dance. He dragged in oxygen, desperate to quiet not only his ragged breathing but also the condemnation screaming inside his brain.

What the hell had he done?

Succumbed to pleasure. That's what.

And he was damned, because now he knew irrefutably he'd never be able to walk away. Or look into Leah's eyes and be able to say no, or not remember this very moment.

Part of him chastised his stupidity for letting his libido rule his brain, while the other part, the part fired by simply looking at Leah, desired her again. And again. Would his lust for her ever be quenched?

Sensuality colored every inch of her face. She wanted him just as much as he wanted her, and who was he to deny them both?

But did he trust her? Or himself?

She lay facing him, a drop of perspiration balanced above her top lip. All he could focus on was that droplet. He wanted to lick it. Taste it. Taste her again. Oh, sweet Jesus, he was a goner.

She tilted her head a fraction. "You're staring."

"Hard not to after such a great entrée."

Her brow creased, but that single crystal bead stayed exactly where it was and tempted him beyond redemption.

He cursed silently. He was beyond redeeming. What would she say or do if she knew he wouldn't give up, that custody papers were ready and waiting? All he had to do was sign them.

"Food?" She chuckled with mock horror. "You're thinking of food."

Mac exhaled a steadying breath. *Keep cool. Keep quiet.* "I'm thinking of a different kind of food," he said and leaned in, giving in to temptation, the need to brush his lips across hers far too strong. Finally, he licked at that little bead of pleasure. He trailed a finger down her heated cheek, and her trembling response confirmed what he knew to be true. "There's a color in your eyes, the darkest green that fires every time I kiss you, touch you. Did you know that?"

Her lips parted.

"See," he said, "you want me to kiss you."

She laughed at that, a sweet tinkling sound of pure joy. It delighted him. It was good she smiled, and laughed; it touched a piece of him he had buried a long time ago, forgotten was ever there.

"You're very sure of yourself, Mac Grainger."

"I'm sure of your response," he countered, followed by a caress from her nape and inching down between her breasts, then lower. He got the exact reaction he wanted.

Her eyes closed tight as his fingers traveled lower. He cupped her wetness, enjoyed the feel of her shivers beneath his hand. "See. Told you so. There's no use fighting it. Neither of us can."

Heavy lids opened. "Ah...but two can play this game." And with the softest of touches, her fingers wrapped around his penis.

Mac tensed, unable to stifle a shuddering groan. "Who said it was a game? I'm deadly serious. Mind you, I'll play with you anytime."

“Glad to hear it. Now...” She whipped her hand from beneath the bed covers where it had been doing devilishly sinful things to his anatomy, then propped herself up on one elbow and splayed it on his chest. “Lie back, sir, and think of England.”

“I can think of far more exciting things to think about.”

“Oh, I’m sure you can. So let me see if those *things* can match this.” And with a tiny push, the woman he had earmarked as cold and calculating did those very exciting things to him she promised, starting with his mouth and working her way down, all in a slow motion that nearly sent him over the edge.

“Oh no you don’t,” she said more than once. “Not yet.” Then she’d change tactic, teasing another part of him to distraction where he craved release. When he thought he would explode, she suddenly stopped. “Playtime’s over,” she said.

Mac heaved a relieved sigh. “‘Bout time. You trying to kill me?”

“Perhaps.” She angled herself over him, and he slid into her. They were one. Her thighs tightened around his hips, holding him to her as he thrust deeper into her core.

Sun-drenched russet curls fell in a glorious tangle across her pearlescent skin. His fingers tangled with them. “Lady Godiva,” he murmured as he brushed aside a silken veil to cup one breast.

She bent and kissed him, taking from him more than he realized he had to offer, drawing his hips from the bed as his thrusts became rampant, blatantly ready for release. She took all of him. Suddenly, a rippling peal of pleasure flew from her lips, and her body spasmed, one orgasm following another until his release joined hers.

This wasn’t meant to be happening. This total release. *Making love.*

Leah slumped forward, her breasts cradled against his chest, the fall of her hair hiding her eyes.

No, don’t hide them, he wanted to say. He wanted to see her eyes, her soul, see if she felt the same as he had—for the second time.

He felt good. More than that: total.

But there was one thing her luxurious hair could not hide—her smile.

Trouble was, seeing that, his conscience kicked into overdrive. How could he destroy that smile and remind her they’d forgotten protection?

## Chapter Seven

As if she carried a built-in alarm clock, Leah woke with the first rays of dawn. For a moment, her hazy vision matched the inaction in her brain.

“Morning, sleepyhead.”

A gasp hit the back of her throat, and she bolted upright. Mac lay beside her, the sheet barely covering anything. In fact, all he wore was a smile that did weirdly wonderful things to her the moment she saw it.

“Nice to know I can take your breath away.”

“What are you doing here?”

Unlinking muscled arms from behind his head, he pushed himself up on one elbow, angling his unclad body toward her. “I seem to remember this is my bedroom.”

“Your...” Oh, dear Lord. A bold and brassy heat raced at breakneck speed to the tips of her toes. Her brain may not have woken, but her hormones reacted with unbridled abandon to the man lying beside her. She scooted back on the king-size bed until she rested at the very edge.

His shadowed gaze slid from her face, downward and then farther. She followed it.

The sheet had unfortunately not moved with her, and to his obvious delight, her breasts were bared. She yanked it back in place.

“Spoilsport.”

She snorted and waved a single hand at him as if swatting at a fly. “You need to go.” Cover up. Get dressed. Anything, but lie there beautifully naked.

“Me? Why?”

“Because...” Every single word seemed to tangle with her tongue. Nothing made sense. She wanted him gone, but her body wanted him right where he was, beside her, with her. “I need to get up, get showered. Charlee...”

“Is sound asleep. I checked on her a while back.”

“You did?” Surprise and delight warmed Leah. Curtis never offered to check on his daughter.

“Sure, sleeping like a baby,” he reiterated. “But you’re awake, and it’s still early and got me thinking we could have a lazy morning together.”

Leah hitched the sheet a few inches higher, and Mac’s mouth quirked up at one corner.

Tanned skin, muscled to perfection. Adonis came to mind. Good grief, she’d had sex with Adonis.

No, not sex. Made love with him.

Eyes that had turned from the darkest of chocolate to almost ebony sparkled with the light of diamonds at her, his mouth, so beautiful that she wanted to kiss it right now, curved at the corners. He turned on his side so he faced her, and the sheet slipped completely off.

Her eyes widened as she gazed southward. Mac wanted her, there was no doubt, and Leah knew for dead certain she was ready to jump his bones.

Darn it, things were getting way out of hand. "Sex. You want sex."

*So do you!*

"Sounds good to me."

She poked the tip of her middle finger in the centre of his chest. "Don't be so sure of yourself, Mac Grainger."

He laughed then, a deep, belly laugh. "You couldn't get enough of me." That was the problem. He told the truth. She lusted after him...badly.

But a moment of doubt captured her in its web. Was it him, she wondered? Or could it have been any man, perhaps a reaction to the shock of losing her house, her life? Didn't they say that after disasters, people reacted to the adrenaline differently? And she had sure *reacted*. Just thinking about *those* reactions heated her blood to fever pitch.

For a moment, her gaze lingered on him, watching the play of desire color his expression. There was nothing pure about that expression. It burned for her.

"Sweetheart, I am right."

She wanted to ask him if that were always the case but knew the answer would be a definite yes. Mac Grainger had risen to the top of the business world in a short time. Hard hitting and determined, he took no prisoners.

He nodded toward the edge of the bed where she balanced. "There's nowhere to go, except the floor. Mind you, that could offer some unique experiences. Or," he said, offering her a wink, "you could come closer."

"Or I can leave," she countered.

"But you don't want to."

*True.*

Then close became so close his breath scalded her skin. His lips touched hers. Nothing else. No skin touching skin. It reminded her of what she really wanted.

Just one kiss, she told herself. That was all. Then she'd skedaddle from his bed and take solace in the sanctuary provided by distance.

Fool! She shouldn't have listened to herself. One kiss and she became his.

Mac's hands circled her waist, and he pulled her to him so that she lay along the length of him. Time didn't matter anymore. Only bodies, theirs, together. Nothing could douse the frantic passion as he joined her and began to dot tiny kisses along her ribs.

"So how about this?" He breathed a heated sigh across her skin.

Leah inhaled. She wanted to giggle; instead, her stomach rumbled, and Mac stopped his ministrations, humor-filled eyes glittering up at her.

"Sounds like you need food, not kisses." He tossed the bedcovers back and stood, unembarrassed by his masculine glory. "Come on."

Leah couldn't help but stare. Naked, Mac Grainger was supreme. "Oil drilling obviously did you proud," she quipped, refusing to look away.

"True, it's a hard life, but the boardroom offers another kind of battle," he said as he absently brushed the fingers of his right hand across his left hand.

Leah's eyes widened. "Your hand."

Scars littered his hand, whitened ridges crisscrossing over tanned flesh.

"An accident," he said, his tone suddenly curt. His hand dropped away, and the desire reflected in eyes only moments ago disappeared, replaced by a dark sadness. Concern tempered Leah's confusion. Why hadn't she seen the scars before?

Because hands weren't what she'd actually been looking at. They also wore work gloves in the grove, so the scars had been covered.

"What happened?"

"I got distracted. Love and lust do that to you."

What love? Who? "I'm sorry." She reached out to him, but he shifted away.

"Yeah, well, it's a long time ago now." His mouth thinned, but in the next breath, it was almost as if he had to tell her, the horror softening his face and the color in his eyes. "There was an explosion," he explained. "I wasn't where I should have been. I got hurt. Others died."

"Oh, dear God."

He sank onto the bed, head dropped into his hands, and she reached out to touch him, soothe him, but again he shook off her act of compassion.

"God wasn't there that day, and neither was I." He turned to her, a wash of bitterness marring his beautiful face. "I should have been." Shoving himself up from the bed as if burned by the memories, he cursed, dragging his scarred hand across his eyes, then through his tousled hair. Leah wished it were her hand touching him, caressing, soothing, but with each word Mac uttered, he distanced himself just that little bit more from her.

"Love got in the way. That's why I don't do love. Why business is better. Love means responsibilities, and I failed."

“Is this why you’re here now?” No matter the consequences, she thought. Mac was trying to correct a perceived wrong.

But he didn’t answer. Instead, he strode into the bathroom and slammed the door behind him. He shut her out.

Leah stared at the closed door and cried silent tears. Not just for Mac’s injuries, but for his pain that she couldn’t fix.

Hearing the start of the shower, she took the opportunity to scamper from the bed, glancing back one more time at the tousled sheets. Her cheeks burned, and she scooted out of that room and hunted out her toweling robe, then slipped into it and yanked the belt tight.

Instead of heading to the kitchen, she paused at Charlee’s bedside and reached out to brush a strand of hair from her daughter’s cheek. Her heart ached with love. Thank God she was safe. Things could have been so different.

But it was her stomach’s protesting its need for sustenance once more that forced her back to reality, and she ventured into the kitchen.

Coffee. Food. In that order. She’d deal with Mac later.

But that wasn’t to happen. The moment she turned the corner into the large open-plan kitchen, she walked slap-bang into him. He stood at the stove, a spatula in hand, a tea towel tucked into his jeans.

He was barefooted. She directed her gaze away from his feet...again.

He glanced at her over his shoulder, and the remoteness she’d seen in his eyes not too long ago had disappeared. “Coffee is on, and the eggs are ready. Do you want toast?”

Leah inhaled a waft of freshly brewed coffee and the fragrance of buttered toast. “Yes, please.” She took a seat at the kitchen table while Mac finished the eggs and poured her a coffee. She watched him work, his movements sure and precise, and found herself mentally tracing the white lacerations across his hand. Her heart ached for his pain and his guilt.

After placing a plate in front of her, he sat opposite, and Leah’s pulse erupted into a flurry of haphazard beats.

He smelt good. Clean and tempting.

Darn it, why couldn’t the guy just go to work?

“I’ve ordered some clothes to be sent up for you and Charlee, and there’s a rental car downstairs for you to use.” Leah bristled, but he cut off her answer before she uttered a syllable. “You can forget the ‘I can look after myself’ routine.”

Despite wanting to argue back, she said nothing, her focus completely captured by his chin and what she’d like to do to the tiny bead of butter dribbling down it.

Subtlety wasn’t possible, each aware of the other, yet neither mentioning what had happened in the bedroom. He watched her watching him, the tip of his tongue sliding along his lips, wiping the butter away

and taking her fantasy with it. But then the fantasy returned as he sucked the tip of a buttery finger...and watched her.

Leah's heart stalled. Breathing didn't exist. Only Mac and his finger and the erotic image her mind replayed. Dear God, she was drowning in need.

Suddenly, his lips slid in to a knowing smirk, and he pushed his plate aside. "Right, time for work." The sound of chair legs scraping across the tiled floor dissolved her fantasy. Mac stood, began to speak but seemingly changed his mind. Then he was gone. No good-bye. No kiss. Just left her with memories of his hands skimming across her body, holding her. Memories of making love. But while they'd spent the night in each other's arms, they were really still strangers.

With Mac gone, Leah showered and dressed, then went through the clothes Mac ordered for her and Charlee, surprised he'd got her size right. Surely he must have checked the labels of her smoke-ridden clothes? But then perhaps it was because he knew her body so intimately. He had traced every inch of her.

Oh Lordy. Just thinking it did seriously shameful things to her body.

*This had to stop. Right now. It was one mistake, not to be repeated.*

With Charlee seemingly unaffected by the disaster, Leah gave in to her daughter's pleas not to miss kindly and dropped her off in the rental vehicle. Next, it was time to return to the grove. Her stomach clenched in a thousand and one knots at the thought of seeing all she had lost, but she had to face the damage and her future, or lack of it.

She turned the vehicle toward Aroha Farm, battling to quell the somersault of emotions as she drove in silence.

At the arched gateway where the gnarled vines of the wisteria tangled with the wild rose planted by her grandfather so many years ago, she drew to a halt. She wound down the window and shut her eyes for a moment, thinking, feeling, breathing in the heady fragrance.

Then she blinked her eyes open at the reality. She couldn't smell the smoke.

Funny, that.

It smelt *normal*, of olives and soil and the fragrance of the roses.

But nothing would be normal again.

She scanned the landscape ahead. It looked so peaceful, belying the rage that only a few hours ago had robbed her so brutally.

Minutes ticked by, and still she hadn't made a move, her courage deflated, but she couldn't stay here all day. She had to see for herself what lay beyond the bordering native ponga ferns that flanked the winding driveway.

She put the vehicle into gear and eased down on the accelerator, fighting hard to stem the urge to turn and drive away. She held her breath and continued to hold it until she felt as if her lungs might explode.

Time to go and face reality.



The vehicle inched forward until it rounded the curve at the top of the drive.

Twenty-four hours ago, her stately old villa had graced this beautiful valley. Now, all that remained were charred ruins and memories.

The overnight fire crew that remained to keep an eye on the smoldering ruins had departed. It was just her...and burnt rubble.

Wiping back the flood of tears trailing down her cheeks, she exited the vehicle and picked her way through the blackened debris. She spied her old table, its legs burned to stumps, the top lacerated by flames, and slid her fingers along its worn surface, now coated with a slick of smoke and ash.

Gone. Everything was gone.

Making her way to where the porch had been, she sat on a remaining battered step and hugged her arms around her chest, lost in self-pity and the injustice of it all.

Just then, the call of a fantail above drew her attention, and she sought out the bird as it flittered from bough to bough, seemingly testing each branch until it found one that felt like home.

Leah choked back a sob. Home. Her home was gone and with it her security. All she had ever wanted was to be safe, secure, and to be able to give that to Charlee too.

Now it lay in tatters around her.

Across the acres, her precious olives glistened under the sunlight, soaking up nature's warmth, still growing, fulfilling their promise. At least she still had her olives...she hoped. She'd need to test them first, make sure there was no smoke damage or singeing from the heat.

Leah pushed herself from the step and strode over to the entrance to the grove, then glanced back at her house. It was a building. Four walls. That's all. She had to believe that.

Home was what she made it. It could be a tent or a mobile home, as long as she and Charlee were together. Like the fantail, she could choose any bough she wanted.

Seeking solace in the familiarity of the grove, she wandered each aisle, plucking one olive, then another and another. She sniffed them, bit into a few and checked the actual trees for any hint of damage.

Nothing! She rejoiced. They had survived nature's worst.

As she came to the gate that led back out of the grove, she tilted her head back and looked to the heavens, glorying in the heat of the sun, drawing all her determination and courage to the surface. Her heart swelled with pride at all she had achieved, would still achieve. "I will survive. I will." Her voice echoed across the silent valley, a powerful testimony to what she believed, what she would do, had to do. "I will not give up."

They were strong words, courageous. Yet, despite it all, a niggling thought tugged at her. What about last night? What about Mac? And...what about tonight?

The moment Mac opened the door to his penthouse, the sweet fragrance of Tandoori chicken engaged his senses, followed in hot pursuit by a churning twist of disquiet in his gut.

Home, sweet home.

He bit back an oath, dropped his briefcase on the ormolu-engraved table and sidelined his conscience when he thought of the legal papers his lawyer had sent him to review.

Then he saw Leah in the kitchen and his body jerked alive. Correction: his body had been in torment all day long, and things just got a lot harder.

Last night had embedded the touch and feel of her in his psyche, his body a combustible force of desire as memories of lust and of skin touching skin replayed in his brain, a video on constant rewind.

She wore a pair of black leggings and a floaty top. He cursed the top. He could see right through it. See her delicate lace bra beneath. See her skin.

His eyes closed as the image of the soft blush of that skin beneath his fingertips replayed too.

He hadn't even said a word, and yet her hazel-green eyes flecked with tiny amber darts widened, and her chin tilted upward with that "don't you dare" attitude he'd come to recognize.

He swallowed back every word he had been about to utter, though in truth, words weren't really on his mind. However, kissing definitely was. And more.

As she wiped her hands on a tea towel, he found himself staring at her beautiful fingers, remembering their ministrations. He remembered too the glistening sheen of her skin as he'd brought her to climax. God, he wanted her.

He cursed his raging libido. All day he'd been on edge, in heat. Yet, fool that he was, he'd dragged up every reason to stay away, rereading Curtis's last email and forcing himself to commit to memory why he was playing happy families in the first place. Why Leah was here.

Right now, though, that detail diminished with every breath he took. "I don't expect you to cook," he finally said, recognizing the inane words as a jumble of nothing. Tough, it was all he could think of right now.

And damn it, she heard the cut in his voice, because he witnessed the light in her eyes darkening. "I'm presuming you want to eat," she shot back.

Guilt soured Mac's taste buds, and he dragged a hand through his hair, then yanked at his tie and undid the top two buttons of his shirt at the same time. He needed to breathe. Relax.

*Hard ask, buster.*

"Sorry. I've had a hard day." Hard? Hell, he'd had a hard-on all day.

Her eyes widened. "Really? *You've* had a hard day. I've lost everything I possess. That's called hard." She stepped up close, and his nostrils flared as he stole a deep breath, relishing the lingering fragrance of olives and the earth, such an integral part of her and very sexy. Mostly, though, he could just smell her, the perfume he had dreamed about all day.

He spun away. What the hell was wrong with him? He was fantasizing, for God's sake. He ground his teeth as his struggle to win the war of common sense over lust reached a pinnacle. He wanted to hold her and desperately wanted to kiss her. Just to see...

What? That he could turn around and walk away? That he could subjugate his conscience?

Who was the fool now? He had to get it together, fast. He turned back to her. "I'm sorry," he repeated, trying for an added dimension of sincerity. "But seeing you in the kitchen, well... I didn't expect it. I mean I don't expect you to cook. Betty will be back soon."

"I cooked at the farm. What's the difference?"

"Nothing," he admitted.

"But you expect me in your bed."

*Hell yeah!* He tried to analyse the tone of her voice. Was it wistful or in denial?

In truth, he didn't have a clue. Instead, he found himself smiling, and his tension eased a fraction. "Touché. You can't deny last night was good."

Heat traced a teasing path up her throat and cheeks, the light in her eyes sparkling. Her mouth twitched. He focused on that twitch. So kissable.

"A repeat performance would be kinda fun," he prompted.

"Sorry, but that was a one-time-only performance."

Mac clamped down his disappointment and shrugged, offering an indifference he certainly didn't feel. "If you say so."

"I do."

"I guess I deserved that. Our...ah...living arrangements are a bit new," he offered as an excuse.

"Don't worry, they're temporary."

"Shame. It has its perks. I mean a meal, and..." *Shut it, Grainger.* Mac cursed his libido once more. He didn't want Leah to retreat from him. Perhaps if her defenses were lowered, he'd see the real Leah, the real mother, then the custody would be signed, sealed and delivered right into his hands.

That he was so devious should have shocked him, but it didn't. If needs must, he reasoned privately. And he wanted answers.

Standing beside her, he lifted up the pot lid and inhaled. "Smells good." What he wanted to say was she smelt better.

"It's nearly ready."

He heard the clipped tone in her voice, noted the slightly shaking hands. She twisted them together.

"How's Charlee," he questioned, looking toward his niece, who was coloring in. "She looks okay."

"She is. She's resilient."

"Just like her mother?"

"If you're asking am I okay, then yes I am. I went out to the farm."

"Alone? Why didn't you wait, I could have come with you."

"Why? It's not your home that burned down."

"No, but, hell, Leah, I could have been there for you."

"Waiting with open arms, no doubt, when I fell to pieces."

"What? I just said I reckoned you were resilient. Isn't that something?"

"I suppose so," she acquiesced. She turned the elements off, reaching for the dinner plates from a nearby cupboard. "Go through, Mac. I'll be there in a moment."

"I know you didn't ask me to go, Leah, but I would have."

Sad eyes stared up at him. "I know. But, well, like you said, I'm tough. I can handle it."

As much as he'd built walls around himself, it was clear she'd built up her own too, and he yearned to pull down those walls, show her she wasn't so alone after all. He went to turn away, but found his gaze focused on her lips again. A beautiful mouth, tempting and sweet. "I want to kiss you, Leah."

Nervousness skittered across her green gaze. "I know."

"But if I touch you right now, you'll run a mile."

Surprise lightened her expression. "You can read me that well?"

"I know how your body hums for mine," he murmured, mindful Charlee was nearby.

"You've got that wrong, Mac."

"Really? Want to try again and find out?"

"No. I told you, it was a lone performance." She lowered her gaze from his then, turning away to dish up dinner, and Mac decided it was best if he retreated. He had to take his time, something he wasn't used to doing. Patience had taken him to the top in life. Now, impatience scored deep. However, if it meant Leah graced his bed again, he'd wait. Making love with Leah would definitely be worth waiting for.

In the lounge, Charlee lay sprawled on the floor, paper and coloring pencils surrounding her. She gave him a wave and a sweet smile. "Hiya, Uncle Mac."

*Uncle.* Mac's heart lurched, and for a moment jealousy soured his gut. This was Curtis's family. For the first time he felt jealous of his brother for what he'd had and yet, according to Leah, hadn't really treasured.

Mac pasted on a smile. "Hey there, kiddo, what's this?"

"Mummy brought me a coloring-in book, since the fire took everything."

"So you like to color in?"

"Yep. Mummy and I color in all the time."

He plopped down on the floor with Charlee, and the years seemed to slip away.

A mother who played with her child wasn't neglectful. He tried to remember when his mother had played with him. Had she? Ever? He remembered her disinterest, her wrath.

He wasn't perfect. Not like Curtis. Not like the golden boy.

"Penny for them," Leah said as she ambled over.

He dropped the green crayon he'd been using to help Charlee color in a dinosaur and pushed himself to his feet. He tried for a smile, but his mouth wouldn't obey. She stood a few feet away and looked at home, which surprised him given that she had protested about coming here in the first place, and that she'd said it was *definitely* temporary.

Staring at her, he wondered about her life, her family. He remembered his, and bitter thoughts colored his tone as he spoke. "You really wouldn't want to know what I'm thinking right now."

"Try me?"

His jaw tightened. "Leave it, Leah. Let's eat." He marched past her, an unknowing Charlee skipping at his side.

"Where do I sit, Uncle?"

Distracted, he pulled out a chair for the child. "How about here."

"And you?"

"I'll sit here." He indicated the chair at one end of the mahogany dining table.

Charlee hopped up onto her chair, her cherubic face creasing into a frown. "Daddy used to sit at the head of the table too. He said it was because he was the boss. Are you the boss, Uncle Mac?"

Mac's gaze crossed to Leah. She watched him right back, unblinking, her teeth worrying her bottom lip. It was an action he recognized she did when uncertainty reigned. Charlee's question repeated itself in his brain? Was he the boss?

*Hell no.* Leah had him and his libido running in circles.

"Nope. Don't think so." He chuckled and tossed a quick smile in Leah's direction. "I reckon your mother has that job. She can boss me around anytime."

Even from across the table, he witnessed her heightened flush, eyes sparkling, the tilt of her chin. Oh, how she dared him. And he wanted that challenge, because he had something to prove.

"That's not what Daddy said."

Charlee's reply pulled Mac up short. So what did Daddy do? "Really?"

"Eat up, Charlee," Leah cut in, her voice taking on a near-panic tone.

Mac shifted his attention from Charlee to Leah. What was going on here? Again he realized she was hiding something. Something about Curtis.

Sadly, he had to admit he knew little of his brother, the adult, as Curtis had been barely in his teens when Mac upped and left fifteen years ago.

"Daddy used to yell that he was the boss, and Mummy and me should just do what he says."

"Charlee!"

"But..."

“No buts, Charlee. Enough.”

Worried, dark eyes that mimicked his brother’s lifted to Leah. “Mummy, now Daddy’s gone, does that mean the bad man has gone too?”

A sudden quietness fell over the table as all color drained from Leah’s face. For a fraction of a moment, she said nothing, wary gaze darting to him, then stealing away again. She shuffled closer to Charlee, hooking an arm over her daughter’s small shoulders. Charlee hugged into the curve of Leah’s body.

“Don’t you worry about that, sweetie, he’ll never come back.” Gathering up some cushions Charlee had plopped on the floor, she said, “I know, how about you have a picnic?” She held the cushions out to Charlee. “Take them to your room and make a secret cave with the blankets and the bedside chair. I’ll bring your supper in, and you can pretend to be camping.”

Charlee’s face lit up. “I love camping.”

Once Leah had Charlee settled, his niece’s bubbling chatter echoing from the bedroom, she returned. Frustration burgeoned inside Mac. He wanted answers. “Who the hell is the bad man?”

Leah refused to look at him, busying herself with dishing up the dinner. “Nobody.”

“I heard Charlee talk about the bad man the evening I arrived. Are there other men in your life I need to know about?”

A plate slipped from her fingers and clattered back onto the bench. “And I told you, no.” With shaking fingers, she righted the plate and wiped up the spilled food.

Mac’s gut churned; his suspicion spiked. “Is that why Curtis called you neglectful? The night I arrived, you’d left Charlee alone while you worked. You abandoned her. Hell, maybe you go out on the town looking for fun.”

“Charlee was asleep.”

“She was alone,” he corrected.

“I was outside. I had work to do.”

“Ah...work. The all-important.”

“Yes, Mac, it is important. It brings in money so we can survive. But then, you’ve got so much, you don’t have to worry. You haven’t a clue.”

“Don’t try and turn it around, Leah. You left her *alone*, just like Curtis said you did.” The thought sickened him. He sank onto his chair, and for a moment he stared ahead, at nothing really, while memories plagued him. She’d left her child alone. It reminded him too much of his childhood, of being alone, sometimes not physically, but emotionally, cut off and separate.

He didn’t want any of it to be true, for Charlee’s sake. But it was. He could see the guilt etched across Leah’s beautiful, kissable face.

"I only go out at night when I know she's asleep. The work has to be done. I'm never very far away. And," she said, stepping forward and towering over him, "let me tell you, I do not go out and have fun, as you call it." Her chest heaved, her breathing rapid. For several silent seconds she just stood there, then suddenly she spun on her heel and hightailed it to Charlee's room, closing the door firmly behind her.

Mac stared after her. This was definitely about Charlee now. She was a Grainger and his responsibility. He didn't want to believe that the woman in his arms last night was any of the things Curtis had vilified, but right now he wasn't quite so sure. Nothing seemed to fit.

However, he would keep his promise, though he realized he'd already crossed the invisible barrier. No matter what he knew, he still wanted Leah in his bed.

Leah needed to go back out and see Mac, face her nemesis. Trouble was, now she'd slept with him, everything had become far too personal.

All day in the grove, he'd been on her mind, and time after time she'd caught herself staring into space at nothing in particular, though her imagination focused on something very particular.

Mac. And the things he had roused in her last night.

Fever-pitch would have been an apt description, one that lasted all night and day, and the moment he'd arrived home, that fever had scooted way up the temperature gauge to boiling point.

Then he'd reiterated Curtis's persecution. None of it was true, not in the sense he wove it. That Mac didn't believe her hurt, but what shamed her was that she still wanted him, lusted after him, despite his condemnation.

Before facing him, Leah decided on a shower and retreated through the connecting door of Charlee's room to their adjoining ensuite, grateful her daughter had finally fallen asleep.

Half an hour later, forced from the soothing cascade before her skin turned to a wrinkly mess, she donned her robe. Trepidation wrapped itself around her nerves.

She had one more job to do before she could retire. She had to defend herself and make Mac understand.

Hands entrenched in the deep pockets of her robe and with her stomach churning, she ventured into the kitchen, only to come to a sudden stop. Shirtsleeves rolled up, a tea towel tucked into the belt of his very expensive designer suit trousers, Mac stood at the bench, elbows deep in soapsuds.

He glanced over at her, clearly aware of her surprise, and chuckled. "I can do this, you know." A plate slipped from his fingers and plopped back into the water, sending a shower of soapy bubbles skyward.

Leah burst into laughter. "Oh, Mac. You could have used the dishwasher."

"Soap suds are easier."

"Are you trying to tell me you don't know how the dishwasher works?"

He shrugged his broad shoulders and offered her a lame grimace.

“You make business deals in your sleep but can’t use a dishwasher.”

He held up soapy hands in defeat. “Never had one when we grew up. Besides,” he said, his rumble of laughter joining hers, “this is kinda fun, doing the normal couple stuff.”

*Couple stuff.*

Doing the dishes hadn’t been the only couple thing they’d done.

He finished off and dried his hands. “How about a nightcap?”

Leah’s breath caught. All day she had wondered what would happen tonight, and now tonight had arrived. While part of her knew she should be setting him straight, defending herself, she found herself hesitating while her heart raced, body zinging. Heck, he only had to be within a couple of paces and she reacted like a wild flame burning.

It wasn’t meant to be this way. She should hate him, but she didn’t. Not really. She didn’t know what it was, but it wasn’t hate.

*Lust?*

Definitely lust, but it felt different too. More than that.

Barely an hour ago, she’d declared last night had been a mistake. Could something so wonderful ever be termed an error?

Tomorrow, she thought. She’d fix things tomorrow.

Without saying a word, she walked past him and kept her gaze fixed straight ahead, staring at the vastness of the inky harbor view. She sat on the edge of the leather sofa, the coolness of the textile doing absolutely zilch to calm her heated body. Every inch of her was aware of him. Excited. On fire.

From behind, she heard the clink of crystal as he poured them both a brandy. Suddenly she seemed tongue-tied like any schoolgirl experiencing her first crush. Except this wasn’t a *first* anything. She was a widow and a mother. And they’d already made love.

This was temporary. She had to remember that.

Mac handed her a brandy, and Leah made sure her fingers didn’t touch his. If she could get through the next few minutes without touching, then she’d survive the night and survive him. She sipped at her drink, and the amber liquid burned as it slid down her throat.

“Funny, this,” he said, sitting down beside her.

“What is?”

“Us. Sitting here.”

“You mean not biting each other’s heads off?” she added.

His dark eyes held hers. “It even feels kinda normal.”

*Normal.* There was that word again. “Oh?”



Head back, Mac swallowed the last of his brandy and placed his glass on the coffee table in front of them. He turned toward her, one knee brushing hers.

*No touching. Not one little itty bit. Zip. Nada. Remember, Leah.*

His cologne snagged at her senses and held her in a sensual trap. So much for ignoring him.

“I like it when you do that ‘oh’ thing. Your mouth goes all round and soft.”

Her breath stilled.

Then he did something she said she didn’t want him to, but really she did. He reached out and rested tip of his finger on her mouth.

Almost of their own volition, her lips curved upward. “Oh.”

His eyes crinkled at the corners, glittering with teasing humor. “You said it again.”

Expectation heightened, overloading sensible thought. “I did.”

“Then,” he said with considered seriousness, “I really have to do this.” And he reached over and kissed her.

“Oh.”

“You said it again,” he murmured against her mouth. “So I guess I’m allowed to repeat it.”

A bubble of joy settled across Leah’s heart. “I guess.”

So he did. He kissed her again, while thought and time and the universe dissolved into nothing that mattered, because kissing Mac was too good to miss.

But an hour later, after a repeat performance of the previous night, which Leah said wasn’t going to happen but did, reality caught up with them.

Mac stretched out, a powerful sleekness, all strength and muscle as he climbed out from the big, rumpled bed. “It’s time I left,” he said.

Leah opened sleepy eyes, her body languid from Mac’s lovemaking. His mouth found hers, and she linked her arms around his neck. His kisses acted like a drug, and she was definitely addicted.

But the moment didn’t last, and he pulled away and straightened. “I’ve a deal to complete with Japanese buyers. It’s the only time I can get hold of them. I have to go.”

Her disappointment surprised her. “What if I asked you to stay?” she said.

“Tempting.”

She answered with a smile “Just call it payback. You’re a tempting man, Mac Grainger.”

He offered a throaty chuckle and bent over to dot shivery kisses across her bare abdomen. “Try this, then.”

The man made her lose her concentration as exploratory fingers found her core wet with wanting. Lost in the erotic pleasure of his ministrations, tension spiraling beyond the here and now, Leah felt her

world blow apart, unable to temper her orgasm that took her to the brink and over. Then one last kiss, a kiss that branded her without words, and he left.

The moment the door closed, Leah realized she felt as if she'd been abandoned, which, to her mind, really was a very bad thing.

*See how quickly you could get used to this man...*

## Chapter Eight

Over the next few days, Mac fulfilled his promise to Charlee and took them out to buy the tallest Christmas tree Leah had ever seen. They spent hours together making paper decorations for the tree, and as she'd watched Mac with Charlee, she couldn't help but remember other Christmases where Curtis had never been involved.

But mostly she found that her brain revisited the passion Mac stirred in her, and her body hummed. These feelings and emotions weren't meant to be happening.

Mac watched her, tested her. It was as if his gaze feasted on her. She tried to ignore it, but the worrying niggles that he still didn't believe her innocent of Curtis's accusations wouldn't go away. Christmas morning arrived, and Charlee woke them before even the birds had stirred, dragging her Santa sack overflowing with presents and promptly unwrapping each one, squealing with delight. Seeing Charlee so happy filled Leah with joy. It wasn't the presents, though Mac had certainly outdone himself in that department; it was the pure happiness on her daughter's face. It had been a long time since Leah had witnessed it.

Pleased to be able to take a few days off from work, they spent them at the beach, having picnics and barbecues in true summer style. But as Christmas and New Year came and went, life got back to normal, and Charlee's kindergarten, which shut down only for the short New Year break, was back in full swing, just like she was at the farm and Mac back to doing business deals.

After the first week back to what had become their normal routine, Matty had phoned on Friday morning to say she would pick up Charlee from kindy for a playdate. Grateful for the respite, Leah settled herself down in the luxurious lounge of Mac's apartment, trying to ignore the distraction of its magnificent views, and used the extra time to get on with the marketing she'd been putting off. Despite having lost most of her paperwork in the fire, she had managed to recreate her client list.

Two hours later, she gathered her scattered notes into a pile and breathed a sigh of relief. She'd booked several appointments with gourmet stores who were interested in stocking her oils. The small success gave her great satisfaction, and with the harvest quota looking promising, the pre-orders for the oil increased daily. Life was looking better. She had a future and could pay off her debt. Soon.

Part of her wanted *soon* to come faster, but the other part of her wished it never would, because then the part of her life that involved Mac would be over, and where would that leave them?

Was there even a them?

Lordy, how stupid could she be? Another Grainger! Shaking her head, she rose from the sofa, stretching out stiff limbs, fingers massaging her neck, only to have the peal of the phone jangle her from such wistful, preposterous thoughts. “Hello.”

“You thinking of me?” Mac’s velvety tone echoed down the phone line, and Leah instantly found herself smiling.

“Maybe.”

“Only maybe. I’m disappointed.”

“Just call it keeping you on your toes, Mr. Grainger.” *A Grainger. Remember!*

“So how about dinner and a show?”

This was new, Mac taking her out.

*Showing you off. Making it real.*

Leah realized this would take their relationship to a new level beyond sex. Sure, they talked. They even laughed. But this was out in the open, in public. Did she want that?

She didn’t know the answer to that question, in part too scared to actually think it through just yet, but found herself answering anyway. “Really?”

“Yeah. I’ve already spoken to Betty,” Mac said of his housekeeper who had returned from her short break. “She loves spending time with Charlee, says she reminds her of her grandkids. She’s agreed to babysit. I’ll be finished here by seven, and I’m already thinking about dessert,” he said and then hung up, leaving Leah with a breathless gasp.

Dessert? She knew he wasn’t talking about crème brûlée or Pavlova, the meringue-and-marshmallow-like concoction that had become an iconic New Zealand classic.

Nope. This was something far sweeter.

With all her clothing destroyed in the fire and wanting to wow Mac, she set off to shop till she dropped.

Thankfully, the Mackenzie International building was in the heart of the city, and she headed to the small cobbled street that housed rather avant-garde boutiques. She wanted something different, something sexy.

Sexy? Really? Leah halted mid-stride and caught sight of herself in a store window. Her hair was in disarray, her eyes wide with excitement.

Just the thought of going out with Mac set off a fiesta of bubbles in her stomach, and her mouth curved into a tiny smile. This would be like a very first date, yet they’d already gone way past first base.

Two hours later, however, she was frustrated. Every dress she tried on, she found herself wondering what he would think of it.

For goodness’ sake, what was wrong with her? Wanting to please him was just so ridiculous.

Then she spied a dress direct from heaven. Waves of scarlet hung in a dream of shiny silk. She couldn't wait to try it on. She knew it would be perfect.

And it was.

It clung to her in all the right places, the diamante straps glittering like tiny jewels. Their sparkle matched the twinkle in her eyes.

"This is it."

"It certainly is, madam," the shop assistance assured her. "He'll love you in it."

Leah twirled, loving the way the handkerchief-pointed hem fanned out around her legs. "You think so?" She hoped so.

"Oh, absolutely. It's a dream."

A dream? Definitely that. Every day and night captured in dreamlike qualities. A fantasy bubble.

*Careful. Bubbles burst.*

By four thirty, Leah had taken Charlee downstairs to Betty's suite. The pair greeted each other like long-lost friends, which went some way toward alleviating Leah's mother's guilt.

Back at Mac's apartment, doubts firmly squashed, Leah determined she would enjoy the moment. She was tired of being on guard and defensive. Surely she could prove to Mac she was a good mother, responsible, by letting him watch her with Charlee. She just didn't have to tell him the truth about the source of the debts, though why she was still trying to protect Curtis, she didn't know. The man had been cruel, heartless, a prime manipulator.

And Mac's brother.

Determined just to enjoy the moment, Leah headed for the bathroom only to be interrupted by the shrill peal of the phone.

Perhaps it was another order. Or better yet, Mac! She missed him, missed his voice, his touch. Their evening out couldn't come fast enough. She snatched up the phone. "Hello."

"Is this Leah Grainger?"

Leah tried to place the voice but came up blank, and a sudden uncertainty hitched in her chest. "Yes..."

"My name is Frank Harcourt. I'm..."

That name! The one she never wanted to hear ever again splintered her world. "I know who you are," she cut in, stomach heaving instantly.

"We want to see Charlee. Have her to stay. She should have come to us, not that loser of a husband of yours."

Leah wanted to scream, to say *no, go away*, but couldn't utter a sound.

"She's our granddaughter," Harcourt reminded her.

Her hands began to shake, and it took all her energy to focus, to drag her mind from the dread she had known would come someday. One day. Today.

Swallowing back the lump that had lodged itself in her throat, she clasped the phone with two hands, closing her eyes for a fraction as she steadied her voice, taking comfort in the support of the wall at her back. "Charlee is my daughter."

A gruff burst of laughter rattled down the phone line to her. "Now you know that's not true."

Denial slammed against her heart. "It is. I'm her mother." Too late. Her past had finally caught up with her.

"But not legally."

A frigid chill slithered down Leah's spine, and she sank to the floor, hugging her free arm across her stomach, pressing at the stab of pain there. "But I've cared for her, got up in the middle of the night. She *believes* I'm her mother. I *am* her mother."

Would this never end? All she wanted was a place to call her own to bring up Charlee and to be left alone. She'd already lost her home. She wouldn't lose Charlee too.

"Curtis is dead," she finally said.

"We know. That's why we want her."

Leah's body jerked as if she'd been stabbed. "I beg your pardon. You just said a visit."

"You heard me, missy. We want, what's her name, Charlee," he said, coughing into the phone, "want her to come and live with us. We can get a benefit from social services if we raise our grandkid."

The old man's words thundered inside Leah's brain, wreaking havoc. Secrets. Always secrets. They would destroy her.

"Ten o'clock tomorrow morning, we'll come and get her."

A hollow gasp slid from her throat. "You can't. That's...too soon." Anytime would be too soon. "Who's we? How do you know where I am?"

"Agnes and me tracked you down. Heard you had a fire. Lost everything. How the heck can you look after the kid now? Besides, if the court hears you ain't got a brass razoo, they'll give us permanent custody. Tina was our only child. Sad for us, alone in our old age and no family."

"Where is Tina?"

"Died of a drug overdose," he said.

Leah heard not one ounce of emotion in the man's voice. "I didn't know."

"Always a wild one. Couldn't control her."

Leah scrambled for a way to forestall him. "This is far too soon. You'll have to give me time."

"Ain't no time like the present. Tomorrow."

"No!" But it was too late. The phone line went dead.

They wanted her daughter. First Mac, now the Harcourts. Would it ever end? She had to do something, anything. No one would take Charlee from her.

Barely able to function, her mind in darkness, she sat on the floor in silence until finally she glanced at her watch, struggling to focus on the ticking hands.

Five p.m. Time was passing. Tomorrow would come too soon.

She crawled back onto her feet. Mac had said seven p.m. She had two hours to come up with a plan.

But an hour later, she still had no idea what to do. She couldn't afford a lawyer or a court battle; besides, that option had already been ruled out when she'd thought she could fight Mac. What she needed was legal status. Guardianship.

Hope rose in her heart. Surely that would work. Somehow she had to become legal guardian to Charlee. There had to be a way.

Leah knew she should have done something about this long before, while Curtis was alive. She'd suggested she legally adopt Charlee, but he'd vetoed any effort on her part. That was how he controlled her. She remembered his victorious sneer when he'd told her she could go, but she could never take Charlee. Curtis knew she'd never leave the little girl. And so she'd stayed in a bad relationship, with her husband who Charlee had called the bad man. Not daddy.

Then when he'd died, there was no money left anyway. Now time had run out.

Pacing the length of the penthouse lounge, Leah dug deep for ideas, only to realise every plan proved futile—except one.

Mac intended to take her out to dinner, but she had no other choice. She and Charlee would be gone before he arrived.

A sad memory twisted her heart. Hadn't he said those very words the day he'd come into their lives? *No choice.*

Nothing had changed.

She raced for her bedroom, then dragged out a suitcase she'd seen in the back of one of the closets and began tossing in her meager clothes. In Charlee's room, she gathered up her clothes and the smoke-ravaged toy Charlee had clutched as they'd escaped with their lives from her burning house. Since then, Charlee had refused to let the toy be washed, taking it to bed with her every night. Case locked, she stood silent for a few moments. Everything fit into the one case. Her life in one suitcase.

She was leaving her new home. Funny, but in a few short weeks, Mac's apartment had become *her home*. It could have been a shack, for all she cared. Being with Mac had made it home. Now it was time to go, to give it all up. People versus things. Easy choice, really.

Mac could concentrate on one thing only: Leah.

God, how he wanted her. The depth and intensity of his desire shook him, making it as real as any feeling he'd ever experienced. More so.

Hell, he was no angel. He liked women. They loved him. But he didn't do *love*.

Absentmindedly, he realized the fingers of his right hand massaged the whitened scars gouged deep into the skin of his other. It had been a long time ago. He'd been young, in love, in lust. Irresponsible.

But death didn't have mercy on the young, and one mistake had changed the course of his life.

Years ago, he'd gotten caught up in the wiles of Carissa, a young Cuban with doe eyes and the sultry voice of liquid heat. She'd enticed him until all he had thought about was her and sex.

*Just like now.*

No! His denial came instantly and easily. Leah was nothing like Carissa. Those days were nothing like now.

*Aren't they?*

Missing the chopper flight back to the rig, not relieving his overtired coworker, had led to dire consequences. Mistakes were made, death the result.

In Mac's mind, lust had a lot to answer for.

Now there was Leah. And lust. But so very different. His need for her ate into his heart, his mind and body. It wasn't just about the sex anymore. It was about...talking with Leah, laughing with her, doing silly little things like coming home from work early because he missed her.

Then there was his promise to Curtis.

Every time he reread Curtis's emails and tried to match his brother's acerbic diatribe to the woman Mac watched every day and slept beside every night, waiting for her to make a mistake, his confusion was exacerbated. It didn't make sense. Not *his* Leah; she wasn't those things.

Dropping the report to his desk, he eased back in his chair, resting tired eyes for a moment. Trouble was, every time he shut them, he was bombarded by visions of Leah. Her smile. The memory of her delicious body sliding against his. The texture of her skin firing every part of him alive.

He could hear her too. Hear her soft moans as he brought her to orgasm and feel the heated flush across her skin, witness delight in her eyes.

Yep. Absolutely in lust.

The staccato beep of his mobile echoed from the inside pocket of his jacket, breaking off his dreams. "Hello." The voice Mac had been waiting to hear ground his world to a halt. "Are you sure the information is correct?" he questioned after his caller outlined his report in minute detail. It had been information Mac had wanted to hear...once. Now? Now, he wasn't so sure. How could good news be bad? "Send me the report," he bit out, and the caller disconnected, leaving Mac alone with his conscience.

Head bent, brow furrowed and deep in thought, he wondered how Leah would react to this development.



Suddenly, it was vitally important he admit to her he'd been wrong. He had to make it right. He had to see her and explain.

Grateful his office was less than thirty seconds away from his penthouse, because right now he didn't think he could wait a second longer, he shot out of the office. Too impatient to wait for the elevator, he took the stairs to the penthouse two at a time. The dinner and show he had been going to take Leah to could wait. This couldn't.

Light suddenly filled the bedroom, and Leah froze.

"Where the hell do you think you're going?" Mac stood at the door, his tie already off, shirt unbuttoned at the collar and his jacketed hooked over his shoulder. She spied a smattering of dark hair beneath the fine silk shirt, and her mouth dried, remembering the erotic feel of it beneath her fingertips. Her heart constricted. She was leaving, and she'd never feel that again. Never be able to hold him, kiss him. Make love.

Enough! Leah pulled herself back mentally as well as physically. She had to do this. She had no choice. She lifted her chin as if daring him to try to stop her. "Away," she answered.

His expression hardened. "Where, precisely?"

Leah's hold on the suitcase handle tightened. "That's none of your concern."

Fury and disappointment colored Mac's expression and fueled her guilt.

"I'm sorry, but... Thank you for your help and everything, but I...we need to go." She glanced at her watch. The second hand ticked...always forward. Time had run out.

"That's where you're completely wrong. I'm Charlee's uncle. It's my job to look out for her."

Leah ignored his fighting words. She had a fight of her own. "I'll phone you when we're settled. Right now...we *are* going." The suitcase in hand she shoved past him, heading for the front door.

"Don't go. Stay."

"Don't ask me that. Please." Leah stole a glance at him over her shoulder. Big mistake. Gone was Mac's usual calm self, the man in control, replaced instead by a desperate darkness and confusion in his eyes, clear disbelief that she was walking out on him without even saying goodbye.

He made a move toward her. "Why? What's going on, Leah? I thought we had something."

"Something temporary," she reiterated, refusing to allow her heart a voice. This had to be all about her head and keeping Charlee safe.

"And the distraction is over, is that it? Or perhaps there's someone else, a bigger fish to fry? A better bank?"

Her heat broke a little more at his accusation. "Oh, Mac. You'd ask me that?"

"What did you expect me to say? I thought we were..."

"Getting along," she finished for him, setting the bag down at the door for a moment. "Sex, Mac. That's all we have. You're still the man who wants to test me, and I won't be controlled. Not again."

"You're running." His accusation cut to the core.

Accusations she could deal with; they were simply words. Leah straightened, pushing her shoulders back as if the action would bestow her with added courage. "I'm sorry, but I won't change my mind." Her hand tightened on the doorknob, lips suddenly trembling and the tears she'd refused to acknowledge brimming. Her courage, or what was left of the smidgen she possessed, slipped precariously. She bent and retrieved her suitcase, but then Mac did what she desperately wished he wouldn't. He reached out and touched her, warm fingers caressing a path along her cheek, the tip of one finger brushing against the corner of her mouth.

Her tremble worsened, and a single tear escaped to trail down her cheek. And damn it...he wiped it away with a gentleness that broke her resistance. The suitcase slid from her frozen fingertips and dropped to the floor with a thud. "They can't do this; they can't. She's my daughter."

"Leah?"

She lifted tear-rimmed eyes to him. "I don't know what else to do. I can't lose Charlee. She's all I have left."

Mac scowled. "What the hell are you talking about? You're not making sense."

"Her grandparents, they want to take her, have her."

"Your parents? I thought they were dead."

"They are."

Mac's hand fell away from her, and he took a step back. "Shit." Disbelief was etched across every inch of his face. "You've bloody lied again, haven't you?"

"No...I..."

He folded his arms across his chest, the edges of his mouth turning downward, eyes reflecting the blackness of hell. "Perhaps you should elaborate a bit more."

Leah struggled to find any words that would make sense. Make it okay.

Unable to cope with his obdurate condemnation, she walked out of the bedroom and into the lounge and took a seat. She tucked her hands beneath her to stem their shaking, praying for calm, all the while knowing her chance to escape closed off with every passing minute.

Mac followed and loomed over her, his presence omnipotent. "It's about Charlee," she choked out in a whispered breath.

"Is she all right?" His tone held a hint of sudden fear.

"She's fine," she said, reassuring him. "She's with Betty."

"But you were about to go get her and run."

It was a statement she couldn't deny.

His scarred hand snatched at her wrist as he hauled her up from her seat. She came up hard against him, felt his heat, but inside she was as cold as driven snow.

“The truth, Leah. For once, tell me the truth.”

“I can’t. It will destroy everything.” Secrets were better. They kept her safe, kept Charlee safe, with her.

“What the hell do you mean by grandparents? My parents are gone too. Whose grandparents?”

Her gaze fell on the soft toy on the floor by the suitcase. How Charlee loved that toy, hugged it to her as she fell asleep. Along with the residual taint of smoke, it smelt of Charlee, that soft baby smell that Leah had drawn comfort from when the days and nights had been so hard before Curtis’s death.

Now she had another fight on her hands. She switched her attention to Mac, refusing to wither under his disarming scrutiny. “Charlee’s mother’s parents.”

“But you’re...”

“Let me go, Mac. Don’t act like a Neanderthal. I don’t need that right now.”

“And I need the bloody truth, or I can’t help you.” But he did release her, and she sank back to the seat behind her.

“Don’t tower over me. It won’t work.”

Mac took the seat opposite her, his granite-like expression not giving one hint of redemption as far as she was concerned.

“Help,” she said, scoffing. “You want to help? Since when? You want to make me out to be the big bad wolf. Well, let me tell you...” But a shuddering sob wrenched from her chest, and she choked back a hiccup. Oh, God, she had to tell the truth. “I’m not Charlee’s mother.”

Disbelief etched Mac’s face. “What?”

Sorrow eclipsed Leah’s pain. “Your golden boy of a brother had an affair.”

Mac started to speak, then stopped.

Did he believe her? Swallowing back her mounting panic, she continued. “We’d only been married a short time. Apparently, his mistress...”

“He had a mistress?”

“Surprised? You shouldn’t be. Curtis was never satisfied with just a wife.”

Mac’s mouth pressed into a thin line. “Go on.”

“His mistress fell pregnant but decided she couldn’t be bothered being a mother. She dropped Charlee off on the doorstep and left.”

Mac cursed under his breath, his jaw tightening. He focused his attention back on her, his scrutiny seeping under her skin. “What did you do?”

“I stayed, of course, blinded by love. More fool me. Besides, how could I leave Charlee? I fell in love with her.”

“I see. And Curtis?”

A harsh crack of laughter caught in her throat. “No, you don’t see. You have no idea. None at all. You traipse across the world, enmeshed in your millionaire lifestyle, and when guilt strikes, you come home and barge your way into my life.”

“So what happened today to make you want to run?” Mac’s voice softened, sounded as if he even cared. He sat beside her, not touching.

Leah itched to take his hand, to hold it, seek respite from his warmth. But it would be a mistake. Touching him might make her stay. Instead, she hooked her fingers together, rested her hands in her lap and prayed for the willpower to resist. “I had a phone call from Tina’s parents. They heard about the fire and somehow traced me.” Leah recounted the nightmare conversation word for word. “They’re old and lonely. Tina is dead,” she said, finishing.

“How?”

“Drugs, apparently.”

Mac stiffened, then shot to his feet. “No bloody way will they get their hands on Charlee. They’ll not take her from me. Not now. Not from us.”

“They want my baby, Mac, and the reality is, I have no say in the matter. I’m her mother, but in their eyes *and* the eyes of the law, I’m no one.”

“So you chose to run. You didn’t think to tell me, ask for my help?”

“Why would I? You only care about having me in your bed, about blaming me for something Curtis insinuated. You don’t believe me; you never have. So why would I turn to you for help?”

For the first time since he arrived home, a tiny smile tugged at his mouth. “Only slightly true. What we have in bed is...good. As for the other, well, let’s talk about that later. Right now, we have to sort this out. Do you think they’ll fight in court?”

“He threatened to and...well,” she said, looking away from him for a moment, “I can’t fight them. Not now.”

“You wanted to fight me. Why not them?”

“Because...oh Mac. My legal status is precarious at best, despite the fact that I love her and have cared for her and brought her up. I’m the only mother she knows.” Leah found herself wringing her hands. “What’s the saying about blood being thicker than water? What would the courts say?”

“No matter what people say, you are her *real* mother.”

That Mac said that warmed Leah right through, yet she couldn’t even manage a smile on her frozen lips. “Thank you.”

He stood before her and rested his hands on her shoulders, his sudden heat real and giving her strength as his unyielding expression at last softened. He said nothing, then turned away and drew an envelope from

his pocket. He stared at it for a moment, and then he put it back and turned to face her, a formidable determination in his eyes.

"I see only one way out of this," he said.

Only one? So much for choices.

"We get married."

Shock hit her hard. No way had she expected that. "Pardon?"

"You heard me, Leah. We get married. Hitched."

She shook her head. "No. No, that is just not going to happen. I can't. Not again." And never to a Grainger.

"You've done it before."

"What about the Ten Commandments?" she threw at him in desperation

"Good try, sweetheart, but you've got that mixed up with thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife. So, now you marry me."

"We don't love—"

"Not necessary," he said, cutting her off. "This will be a marriage of convenience."

Relief surged. It wouldn't be real but a fake marriage. She could face that. Maybe. "A business deal?" she asked, unsure what kind of answer she hoped for.

"If that's what you want to call it."

That was the problem. She didn't want to call it anything. She wanted to run. But then when would the running stop?

"I'm Charlee's uncle, and if you marry me, you'd become her legal relation and mother all rolled into one. We'd be a stronger force than grandparents who have had no contact whatsoever. This way it will become formalized. I'll get my lawyer to begin the paperwork immediately. That's what you want, isn't it?"

"Legal, yes, but married?" That would break one of her rules—never to marry again.

His mouth thinned, eyes dark and disapproving as he stared down at her. "Don't panic. Consider it temporary."

"How long?"

"Maybe six months. It depends on how long the paperwork takes for you to gain guardianship of Charlee." He shrugged as if it really didn't matter.

Maybe not to him. But six months with Mac was six months more than she was sure she could cope with.

"Once your guardianship is legalized, you're free."

Six months. Six months of days...and nights. Then finally free.

But that wasn't quite true. Leah inhaled a deep breath to steady her nerves. "Haven't you forgotten something?" she asked. "You bought my debt. That ties me to you financially. Once we divorce, I'd be no freer than I was before you barged into our lives."

"So?"

"I just want to make sure you understand, Mac. Once the six months are over, once I've paid you, it will be all over."

"I never doubted it, sweetheart."

"Good."

"So it's agreed we marry?" He held out his hand to her, and for some silly, stupid and exciting reason all rolled into one, Leah reached up and took it. Mac drew her from her seat, and she stood in front of him.

Close.

Almost touching.

All of a sudden, Leah couldn't breathe. Marriage meant...screaming. Belittling. Hurting. She squeezed her eyes closed, desperate to shut out the memories. The hurt and pain, and the constant anxiety that hung over her head.

"Leah?"

Her head snapped up, eyes blinking wide open. "Yes... I... Yes." The words were a whisper, while inside her head it was as if a thunderous storm raged.

Married to Mac?

"Tell me when and where, and I'll be there, but..." she said, gathering the last remnants of her courage from a place deep inside. If she were to have any essence of control over her future, she had to make a stand here and now. "You're right. Charlee comes first, and since this marriage is nothing more than a business deal, I have a condition of my own that can be added to our contract."

Suspicion tinted Mac's eyes. "Such as?"

"There'll be no more kissing in this marriage, Mac. No more sex." Leah suddenly wondered if she'd gone too far. Mac had suggested marrying. He didn't have to help her, yet he had offered. If she kept her distance from him, and they didn't make love, it would be easier to walk out in six months' time. "It's only a business arrangement. Got it?"

For what seemed eternity, he said nothing, then at last he spoke, and with his first words, Leah realized her future had already changed. "You're right," he said, shrugging and confirming that it was truly a business deal to him. "This is the best option for both of us. Marry me, and Charlee gets to keep her mother." Then he leaned forward and whispered in her ear. "No more kisses, huh? Are you sure you can resist, sweet Leah?"

Leah jerked backwards, aware of Mac's heat, his scent. It hit her full force, threatening to topple her resolve. She clenched her fists, refusing to give in to temptation and fixed him with a hard glare. "Just watch me."

## Chapter Nine

Conflict soured in Mac's gut. He should have told her about the investigation and the report that still burned in his jacket pocket.

Should have. But didn't.

He'd chickened out the minute he'd seen the suitcase and realized she was about to leave him. Telling Leah would have given her another reason to hate him. So he'd panicked, and that scared the hell out of him.

He would tell her later.

But two days later, after putting his solicitors onto Charlee's grandparents, later hadn't come...and the truth remained a secret. Now, time had run out. He was about to get married.

Snatching up his phone, he punched the number for Connor Jackson. He didn't wait for his friend's response. "Did those pre-nup papers get signed?"

"Well hello to you too," Connor quipped in his usual casual manner.

"I'm not in the mood."

"The nervous groom?"

Mac's stomach bunched in tight knots. "Cut it, buddy." He and Connor went way back. They'd been childhood friends, and normally he'd take his friend's chiding, but not today.

"You still there, Mac?"

Mac quenched the memories that had no place in his life today. "Yeah."

"For a man about to tie the knot, you don't sound too pleased."

"And the custody papers?" he prompted.

"Don't worry, they're on hold."

"Make sure of it, Connor."

"You worried she'll find out?"

"Definitely."

"So tell her," Connor prompted.

"No, not now. Later."

Connor's long, low whistle echoed down the phone line. "She sure must be a looker for you to make the jump, that's all I can say. Thought you were a no-commitment kinda guy."

"I was. Am."



But with a last friendly chuckle, Connor cut the phone line, stamping out Mac's acerbic response.

Mac never thought today would come. Hadn't ever planned on it.

*So why now?*

Okay, so he'd tried to fool himself this was just about Charlee.

Wrong!

It was about him and Leah together. The thing was, he wasn't sure if by marrying Leah, he'd be walking into the biggest mistake of his life.

The elevator doors slid open, and Leah had no chance to back out and run for the hills. Her groom stood inside, handsome as the devil in a charcoal gray suit, crisp white shirt and pink silk tie. "You're here?"

"You were expecting someone else?" He lifted one brow. "Or perhaps you hoped I'd back out?"

Her mouth pursed, her response silence. Mac stepped aside, and clutching her bag in both hands as if it were a shield, she entered, turned and fixed her gaze on the closing doors. Flames of embarrassment colored her cheeks, because despite her vow, they'd made love this morning.

It had been almost a good-bye ritual.

They'd made love, not just had sex, but something quite different, with a slowness to it that was hauntingly beautiful. While they'd taken their fill of each other, neither uttered a word about what would soon take place and bring such a change to their lives.

But despite the beauty of the early hours and the almost regretful aura that hung over them, nothing had abated Leah's rising panic or the dread at what she was about to do.

She was getting married. Again.

"Didn't you want Charlee at our wedding?"

The threat of hysterical laughter closed her throat. "This isn't something I'd want my daughter exposed to. It's a business deal, after all." She tried desperately to relax. She should be happy. She was a bride. But it was because of that exact fact that she struggled to latch on to any semblance of calm.

Married to a Grainger.

Okay, so Curtis and Mac were brothers, but so very different, she reasoned, trying for any semblance of sanity. A tiny part of her, however, couldn't let go of that familial tie or allow herself to totally trust Mac, and she found a ubiquitous sadness corralling any joy because of that reality. A lifetime ago, her hopes and dreams had been decimated, snatched from her heart by a Grainger.

When Curtis died, she had vowed never to marry again. But then she'd vowed lots of things. To keep her daughter safe, to hold on to her haven. She'd failed at both.

A few weeks ago, everything she'd heard of Mac Grainger had been negative.

Bad boy. Rebel. The black sheep of the family. The ultimate male. Arrogant. Powerful.

Now she was ensconced in his bed and about to become his wife.

That was when she'd realized she had to take charge and put in her own rule to safeguard her heart. A rule not to be broken. She knew her reasoning was off kilter, but she'd had enough of being vulnerable.

Marrying Mac was simply a means to protect Charlee. Everything would always be about Charlee.

The door of the elevator opened to the lobby of Jackson and Partners.

"Mr. Jackson is in his office. We're just waiting for the celebrant," Connor's secretary announced as Leah walked at Mac's side into the vast reception area.

He cupped her elbow with a firm grip.

"I'm not going to jump ship," she whispered, which only earned her a hard smile in return, a rebuke that said hell would freeze over before he let her go.

"I didn't think you would. You need me, after all."

To her chagrin, he was right.

Connor Jackson offered a broad grin as he stepped toward them with an outstretched hand. "Right on time, I see."

For a few minutes, he and Mac talked in hushed tones; then Mac's best man exited the office. The moment the door closed, fear pinned her in its clutches.

"Leah?"

Battling to refocus, she found herself staring up at her groom. How come he could remain calm when inside her nerves rioted a thousand-fold? There wasn't a hair out of place, a wrinkle in his suit. Mac Grainger was polished to perfection.

"It's almost over," he said.

"Can't come soon enough," she shot back at him.

His mouth curled at each corner, his dimples deepening. He was enjoying her discomfort, that was obvious. He leaned a fraction closer, the fingers of his left hand caressing the side of her cheek, as he whispered, "Eager for our wedding night, sweetheart?"

Leah almost choked aloud. "This is a marriage of convenience. There won't be one. We discussed it, remember?"

Dark eyes twinkled down at her. "Shame. I kinda liked the idea of a repeat performance of this morning, wouldn't you?"

Leah's throat tightened at the excitement his words prompted. *Fight it, Leah.* "We have a certain rule," she said, breaking his sensual hold on her.

He pulled back and crossed his arms. "And rules are made to be broken."

“Not this one.” This rule had to stay in place. “Sex won’t be part of *this* deal.” He might want her in his bed for a while, but what happened when a replacement came along? Where would her heart be then? Broken, that’s where.

He shrugged. “Okay.”

Just okay? Leah couldn’t hold back her shock and her eyes widened. She knew she should be relieved. And she was. Mostly.

*Rubbish.*

In truth, part of her felt...deflated. Let down. He hadn’t even tried to argue the point, declare he really wanted her.

*But you wanted no sex.*

Just then, Connor and another man walked in—Leah realized it had to be the celebrant—and reality hit hard, a cannonball hurtling around her stomach. This was real. Happening. Now.

Mac’s strong fingers circled her wrist once more. There was nothing subtle about his intention. He leaned into her body, his heat enveloping her. Instinctively, she pulled back, though not far enough, as his breath fanned her skin in an intimate gesture.

Leah squeezed her eyes closed and tried to block out the swirl of activity: Mac talking to Connor and the celebrant, and Rowena, Connor’s secretary, entering the room and flirting with Mac.

The sounds became a chaotic tangle in her brain, firing the threat of a headache. *Concentrate. Get married. Get out.*

“Would the happy couple please stand in front of me,” the celebrant requested.

Happy? Mac looked sideways at his wife-to-be. Standing rigid, shoulders back, white-knuckled fingers clasped tightly in front of her, she stared balefully ahead.

Yet there was a strength of control to her too. The set of her jaw, the glint in her hazel eyes that spat diamond darts at him from the start and now shimmered the deepest of forest greens. That green matched her classy green shot silk suit. He looked closely and almost grinned. His soon-to-be wife wasn’t wearing a top under her jacket.

Mac could imagine a black lace and silk bra, perhaps, or maybe it was white cotton. Hmm. White. Cotton. Pure, but so darn sexy.

He dropped his gaze to her elegant shoes, a shiny matching green patent. But it was Leah’s legs that held him transfixed. Slim. In hose.

He wondered if they were stockings with a suspender belt.

Whoa! Too much right now. Later. He’d think about it later. And maybe, he could coax Leah to show him.

On the outside, she seemed stiff and unapproachable, yet between the sheets, when his skin touched hers, heat overrode common sense, and her formidable control slipped. Mac's memory scrolled back to this morning and the feel of her, the taste.

Hell! And she wanted to play by the no-sex rule.

No way. He would change her mind. He'd take his time, play it his way, because he really wanted Leah back in his bed.

"The ring?" the celebrant intoned.

Mac's head jerked up, a surge of panic taking over for a fleeting second till he stamped it right back down. He reached for Leah's hand and linked his fingers through hers. He took the ring Connor proffered and recited his vows in a strong voice, aware of a deep sense of quiet instilling itself in him and drowning the thread of his guilt.

It surprised him that as he spoke his vows, they meant so much to him, that this moment felt right, and for the first time in a long time, emotions he had kept locked away were free.

Brushing aside poignant thoughts, he went to slip the gold band on Leah's finger, but her fingers were curled into a tight ball. "You have to open your hand, Leah."

Her eyes widened. "You brought rings?"

He tempered his tone. "Just call me a good Boy Scout, hmm?"

One by one, her fingers straightened, and holding still her shaking hand, he gently slid the ring on. "A perfect fit," he said, easing out a long breath.

"For a perfect marriage." Her words held a cutting edge, the tinge of bitterness blatant.

He offered a tight grin anyway. "Could be." Actually, he hoped so. He really did.

"That's a fairy tale, Mac. Perfection is an illusion." Her reply was muttered, for his ears only.

"I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss your bride," the celebrant commanded to a round of applause from Connor and his secretary.

Leah's face bleached of color, and she went to pull her hands from his grasp. He held on tight.

"They're waiting," he prompted as his body kicked into overdrive, imagining kissing her and wanting to a whole lot. "Think of it as sealing the deal," he said, trying to ease her tension.

It didn't. "You don't get to kiss the bride, remember?"

"We can't disappoint them. They think this is love at first sight."

"It's not."

He offered a lighthearted shrug. "Maybe, but it sure is whole lotta hot lust."

Leah's gaze slipped toward the expectant faces, then back to him in double quick time. "I was stupid to agree to this damned charade."

Realizing he needed to get her alone for a minute and calm her down, he turned quietly to Connor and the others. "Leave us for a moment." He caught Connor's questioning look but instead nodded toward the door, grateful when his friend took his hint and ushered the celebrant and Rowena out. The moment the door shut behind them, Mac turned back to his bride.

Framed against the last light of afternoon sun, Leah stood at the window with her back to him. He walked over to her and rested his hands on her shoulders, pleased when she didn't pull away. "We're married, Leah. There's no turning back."

"I know." She turned and faced him, and he saw such desolation in her eyes, it made him want to rescue her all over again, prove to her they could make this work.

You said it was for six months, remember?

Mac ignored that little reminder.

She'd told him of her innocence, and he'd refused to listen.

*Tell her you believe her.*

The silent condemnation slammed against his teeth, and only his breath escaped in a ravaged hiss. "I'm not Curtis."

Her whispered gasp slipped against his skin, tempting him beyond all reason, when reason said walk away. He didn't listen, and before she had the chance to react, he let his emotions rule, and he kissed her.

The urgency between them exploded, and Mac's belief that this was right grew.

Leah sagged against him, arms linking around his neck, fingers threading through his hair. The intimate touch sent his pulse skyrocketing, and he gloried in the sensation.

When her mouth formed a soft moue, he took advantage, the tip of his tongue dancing with hers. She tasted pure, sweet, delicious.

He cupped her face, thumbs twirling in strands of auburn curls, silken smooth against the roughness of his hands. A curl brushed across his scars, an aphrodisiac to his senses. He kissed her till every ounce of his breath evaporated.

Voices echoed from behind the closed door, and Leah stiffened; the spell between them was sadly broken.

Eyes glistening, she lifted heavy lashes and looked up at him. Her lips were still parted, still kissable. Scarlet whorls colored her cheeks. "You shouldn't have done that," she said, wiping the tip of her fingers across her lips.

He couldn't help watch her action and wish it was his fingers there. "Probably not," he admitted, "but you didn't pull away. You can't deny you liked my kisses."

"Kiss," she said, returning to ice-queen mode. "One kiss, and there'll be no more."

## Chapter Ten

That Mac agreed to her rule of a no-sex marriage without a hitch surprised Leah. He could have least tried harder to kick it to the curb.

The trouble was, the moment she announced her demand, she knew she'd weaken.

And she had. Mac had kissed her, and she'd kissed him right back.

The instant her husband led her back into reception, the sound of popping champagne corks erupted along with a round of clapping, and the nightmare became worse.

She had hoped, prayed, she could slip away and go home—which was where exactly? She had no home, not anymore.

"Our Mac's a sly devil. Didn't know he was the marrying kind." Connor Jackson chuckled with a wink in Leah's direction.

Needing respite from her husband's constant scrutiny, she offered Connor's hovering secretary a tight smile and a silent plea for rescue. It didn't come.

Rowena reached over to her. "How I envy you. Mac is a real catch."

Leah bit her tongue. Catch would not be the term she would have used.

"Some bubbles to steady the nerves. I think you might need it." Mac offered her a glass of champagne, his mouth angled in that quirky half smile she'd come to recognize and crave. When he smiled at her, something in her changed. Her heart lightened. *Oh, Leah, you're so weak!*

"There's nothing wrong with my nerves," she said and slugged back the entire contents of her crystal flute, ignoring the teasing tickles as it slid across her tongue. She hiccupped. "Happy wedding day, darling." Grabbing her bag, she headed for the elevator and fixed her attention on the door as someone exited. She scooted over the threshold and pumped the Door Close button. But luck wasn't on her side, and Mac stepped in as the doors were about to close. Her frozen fingers clawed at her bag, anything to stop her from touching him, because the want was there, all the time. And damn it, it wouldn't go away. "I'm going home."

"Curtis called you his addiction."

The shock of Mac's statement king-hit Leah.

"You *are* an addictive woman, Mrs. Grainger." And with that, her husband of barely a few minutes reached over and kissed her, obliterating the very last ounce of willpower she possessed as he imprisoned her in his arms.

And, darn it, she held on tight. In his arms she felt safe, wanted. Desired. Something she'd longed for...since forever.

As he kissed her again and again, Leah willed the elevator to actually stall for a while, give them time, because Mac Grainger was definitely her addiction in every way.

He pulled her so close she could feel his erection.

No! This had to stop. Head tipped forward and resting beneath his chin, her hands splayed on his chest, she drew in a deep breath. Tears threatened, but she held them at bay. She had to be strong. "Please, Mac. Don't," she at last pleaded.

He offered no protest and dropped his arms to his side. Simple as that. He truly was different from Curtis. Curtis never gave up.

Realization slammed into her heart. She loved Mac. Really loved him, truly and deeply. In fact, she'd known it the moment the celebrant pronounced them man and wife. But it was difficult to admit. She couldn't go through loving him, only to be disappointed again, hurt and broken, just like before.

She held herself erect, lifted her chin a tad so that he knew she meant business. "Do not kiss me ever again, Mac Grainger."

But Mac's expression remained steely cool. Heaven only knew what was going on in the man's mind. She locked on eyes that were hidden behind a curtain of heavy black lashes. She'd spent years learning how to escape, and for one mindless minute, because of one kiss, she'd let her guard down. "I want to go home."

"Haven't you forgotten our honeymoon?"

"You're joking."

"Do I look like I am?"

Unfortunately, he didn't. Her husband epitomized the autocratic air of a man in control. He towered over her, his powerful broad shoulders draped beneath the fine cloth of an exquisitely cut designer suit.

"We had a deal."

"Contracts can be changed."

"Not this one," she declared.

The elevator doors opened, and Leah dashed out and out onto the street.

Once again, Mac followed.

"Leah, wait."

And darn it, for some foolish reason she did. She stopped and turned round, only to see the others bundled out of the building.

There was no escape now.

Mac tugged her gently into the crook of his arm, a clear indication that she was going nowhere. His index finger caressed the ring he'd only just placed on her finger, offering a silent reminder that she was married to him. He bent his head toward hers. "I know you're scared, sweetheart. But trust me."

“Trust you. That’s a tall ask, Mac.”

“We can make this work, Leah. We have to, for Charlee’s sake.”

“That’s a low blow.”

She could see he was about to counter-argue, but Connor came up beside them. “You two love birds trying to skip away? I’ve booked a table at Partingtons,” Connor said, mentioning the five-star restaurant not far away.

“Would we do that, sweetheart?” He turned a brilliant smile toward her and then kissed her on her cheek.

At his touch, Leah’s body surged. Oh dear Lord, what was wrong with her? One minute she said no way, Jose, keep away, and the next she wanted to drag Mac behind the closest bicycle shed and jump his bones. She was blowing hot and cold, and there was no way to control it. She had to be insane. Or madly in love.

Time ticked by slowly. What she had prayed would be a quick meal with Connor and Rowena proved to be a long-drawn-out process, and by the time dessert arrived, a French wedding cake which gave the Eiffel Tower a run for its money with its towering concoction of ice-cream-filled profiteroles, Leah had a headache of mega proportions.

Lifting shaking fingers to her temple, she massaged it, breathing in slow, deep breaths.

It didn’t work.

The heat, the noise and the throb of music in the background compounded to push her to the edge. White lights jabbed the backs of her eyes, pain ricocheting to every corner of her brain as an invisible hammer slammed against her skull with relentless precision.

Daring to reopen her eyes, she reached for her water glass, only to knock it over. A pool of liquid soaked into the once crisp damask tablecloth.

Mac’s brow knotted with concern. “Are you all right?”

“As if you care.” The moment she uttered the words, she regretted her terse response. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean that.”

“Yes, you did. You are a woman who speaks her mind. That much I’ve learned.”

Her mouth tightened. Enveloped by a tiredness so heavy she had barely enough energy to lift her lashes, she glanced across the crowded restaurant. “It’s been a long day.”

“Enough.” He gathered her to him and stood. “My wife and I are leaving,” he informed their small group with determined abruptness.

There was a chorus of disappointment.



"It's time for us to go home," he said. He reached for her hand and drew her up into his embrace, the warmth of his body enveloping her in a caress.

"Home?" What was wrong with her that she repeated everything he said?

"You've a headache. You can barely open your eyes."

"You noticed."

His mouth quirked downward at one corner, and the brush of his thumb against her cheek elicited a nervous flurry in the pit of her stomach. "I notice many things. Your hair, the way you brush it back, hook it behind your ear, the way your skin glows when..." He cut his sentence short, though Leah knew exactly what he'd been going to say. When they made love. Love. Not just sex. "You do have a headache, don't you?"

She nodded, wincing with even the smallest of movement. She wanted desperately to go home, to seek refuge in the comforting darkness of her bedroom. *Alone*. She squeezed her eyes closed. Even the word sounded so sad. So very...alone.

"Let's go." With a quick wave to his friends, Mac guided her through the throngs of diners, and they reached the welcoming evening coolness within seconds. Drawing in a lungful of air, she exhaled long and slow as pent-up nerves dissipated. "Where's your car?" he asked.

"Down by the Viaduct," she said, nodding in the direction of the regenerated wharf while she rummaged in her bag for her car keys.

"Good. It'll be safe until tomorrow. I'll arrange for it be delivered back to the apartment in the morning."

Her hand stilled their search. "I beg your pardon?"

"You can't drive with such a headache."

"I'm not sick."

Mac ignored her. "Come on." And with that, he clicked the opener on his set of keys. A light flashed on a silver Mercedes right beside them.

Leah rolled her eyes. "I might have known you'd have parking right outside."

"I had it delivered while we ate. Come on. Let's go home."

He opened the door for her, and Leah stepped past him, angling her body so she didn't touch him, though for a moment she wished she could give in to the overpowering temptation to lean against her husband again, let him take charge. Give in.

*Silly girl!*

Even thinking about relying on him was out of the question. She wasn't going to let anyone take charge again, ever! She had too many memories, too many hurts. She had to protect herself and Charlee.

Yet the niggles taunting her subconscious reminded her she'd already let Mac take charge. He'd talked her into marriage, and how easily she'd given in to the one thing she'd said she would never do again.

Mac had talked about trust. He'd said they would divorce in six months. Would he let her go then? Would he truly help her gain guardianship of Charlee?

She had in fact put so much trust in him, a man she still barely knew. She could only pray she hadn't made another terrible error.

Her eyes shuttered as if it would block out the nightmarish day, but the moment Mac fired the Mercedes, they flashed open. The car purred, a low rumble that bespoke its exorbitant price. "Another expensive car," she commented for want of something to ease the silence.

"Comes with success."

Despite her headache, his answer piqued her interest. "You've an impressive business record."

"Thank you, but it's not just me. I have a good team around me. We work hard, just like you." His gaze diverted from the dancing headlights of oncoming traffic. "Why did you marry Curtis?"

A bubble of air blocked Leah's windpipe, shocked at what he asked. "Of all the things you could ask me on our wedding day, Mac, that wasn't one I was expecting."

"Probably not," he conceded with a slight tilt of his mouth.

"I married because I was naive and believed I was in love."

"So that's why what we have will work."

"Pardon?"

"You yourself said this wasn't a love match. And you're older, wiser, now."

"Gee thanks," she said, unable to stem a slight smile.

"Well, you know what I mean. Look, Leah, I said you can trust me."

"And I said that was a hard ask." Leah closed her eyes then, the rush of the oncoming traffic, the glare of their headlights too much.

"True," he answered with a light chuckle. The sound tugged at her heart. "Given the last few weeks," he continued, "have I ever done anything that wasn't in Charlee's best interests?"

"That's debatable."

"Yeah, well, you know I love her."

Oh, dear God. If he loved her, how would he give her up? Just like her. She loved him, and she already knew how damned hard it would be to walk away in six months.

Mac glanced at her sideways. "What exactly did Curtis tell you about me?"

"Not a lot. You hadn't come home in a long time, and Curtis didn't talk much."

"About me?"

"About anything. Sorry, but you weren't part of any conversation, really."

"That figures. I wasn't wanted."

"Pardon?"

"I'm the bad boy of the family. I didn't fit my parents' ideas of what I was meant to do, to be."

“To take over the Grainger family business?”

He gave her a curt nod. “Yeah, just like my brother, the Golden Boy. So, what happened to it? Last time I heard, the import business was a roaring success.”

An uncomfortable tension wormed its way through Leah. Was this somehow part of a test? “It...went,” she said, hedging her answer.

“Just like that?” he asked, his censure explicit.

“The business world has changed, Mac, you surely know this.”

“Yeah.”

“Well, your father had a hard time changing with it, and then when Curtis took over, he made some...um...bad decisions. Graingers couldn’t compete with the big box stores and their cheap imports.”

What she hadn’t told him was that Curtis had borrowed deeply on the land from bank managers and loan sharks taken in by his charismatic joie de vivre, but not one cent of the money had come within an inch of Aroha Farm or the ailing Grainger business. Curtis had thrown it all away.

Leah held back her tears, turning away from Mac’s inspection. The man seemed to be able to read her far too easily, a distinctly unsettling and frequent occurrence.

Staring out the window, she renewed her pledge for Charlee. This time it would be different. This time there was no way in hell she would open her heart. She would conquer love.

The moment the car slid beneath the still opening grille to the underground car park, Leah reached for the door and unbuckled her seat belt simultaneously. “Thank you for bringing me home.”

Mac switched off the engine and sat back. “Just doing what a good husband does.”

Dear Lord, she needed space. The cocoon of the sleek car and Mac’s powerful presence were too much testosterone. She was grateful her friend Matty had offered to have Charlee for the night, though she’d been unable to tell her friend she didn’t want to be alone with Mac.

Now she was—alone and worried she couldn’t hold out against his charm, or his kisses. She scrambled from the car and made for the bank of elevators.

Mac strode up beside her. “Leah, I’ve got to tell you something...”

She waved a hand at him and shifted from foot to foot, wishing the darn elevator would hurry. “Not now. Later.” She couldn’t listen to any more; his voice was far too sexy, the throaty timbre constantly edging beneath the armor she’d tried to surround herself with.

She wondered if she could hold out. Making love with Mac meant losing her heart.

*Stay strong. Don’t give in.*

The elevator arrived, and Leah stepped in. Mac followed.

“Welcome home, sweetheart,” he whispered in her ear.

## Chapter Eleven

Leah tried to sleep and failed. Instead, she'd spent the last few hours tossing in bed, going over the day in vivid detail. Magically, her headache disappeared the moment she stepped inside the apartment, but she'd been left with a sadness that wouldn't dissolve. Tonight was supposed to be her wedding night, and despite her avowal of no sex, she wanted Mac beside her. With her. But it had to be her choice.

On bare feet, trepidation pitted against excitement in her chest, she walked from her room to Mac's.

The curtains hadn't been drawn, and the full moon bathed his room in a swathe of golden-hued moonbeams. A prickly indecision heightened in her chest as she stood silent, watching him. Her heart hammered a thousand-fold. This was a mistake. It was stupid to break her own rule, to give in.

But there was no way on earth she could stay away from him. Not tonight. Tonight she would forget about her rule.

"Leah?" Her name on his lips sounded soft and gentle and tugged at her heart.

Leah exhaled a sigh. There was no going back now he'd seen her. However, she said nothing. One heartbeat passed. Then two. Feet gliding over the luxurious carpet, she walked toward him, aware of the increasing surge of her excitement. Her nipples pebbled beneath her robe, and her lips parted. She wasn't even close to him yet, but she could almost feel his mouth on hers.

She found her voice, albeit haltingly. "I...I came."

"So I see." He pushed himself up the mattress so that his head and shoulders rested against the velvet-buttoned headboard. The sheet barely covered his hips, and she could see the rise and fall of his chest.

When he reached over to switch on the bedside lamp, jagged panic cut across her thoughts. Her hand clamped over his. "No. Leave it off."

"Why?"

"It's easier if it's dark." She didn't move her hand from his and welcomed his warmth. "Easier to tell you," she added. In the dark she couldn't see his rejection. And he couldn't see her desperation.

"Tell me what?"

Leah held her breath, and then the words rushed as if unleashed from a chasm deep down inside her. "I've changed my mind," she said with a sureness that surprised her.

"About?"

"I want to revoke the rule."

"The no-sex rule?"

She had expected jubilation or at least satisfaction that she'd come round to his way of thinking, but even in the shadowed room, she witnessed his obvious distrust. Her throat thickened, and she snatched her hand away. "You're not making this easy."

"Ditto, sweetheart. I've had a hard on since..." Mac winked. "Well, forever."

Leah resisted the temptation to let her gaze travel down to that part of his anatomy and see for herself.

"This was meant to be our wedding night," he reminded her.

She cleared her throat. "That's why I'm here."

"Who for?" His tone held a hint of warning, and Leah fidgeted with the edges of her robe.

"You and me."

"Really? Yet you've made it quite clear you didn't want to marry me. *You* wanted to call it a business deal. So I'm sorry if you're horny. When you want me for me, Leah, when you accept what we have for what it is, that we enjoy each other's bodies and you want me without imposing strictures, then..."

"You want me, Mac," she reminded him.

"I do, but you made the rules. Go take a cold shower. I have."

This wasn't working. She had to do something.

Finally, she allowed herself to look, and her gaze slid down Mac's length in one easy glide. Her mouth curled upward, her confidence boosted by the power she finally understood she had. She would seduce him.

In slow motion, she untied the belt on her robe, and the edges of the garment fell aside. Mac's breath hissed, the irregular throb of a pulse point at the base of his throat clearly visible in the soft moonlit glow.

She slipped the robe from her shoulders, down her arms, baring her breasts, delighted as her actions drew a ragged groan from Mac.

"Woman."

She could do this. "Tell me, Mac. How much do you want me?"

The robe pooled at her feet, and his gaze roamed across her nakedness, arousing her without a single touch. She craved that touch.

Offering a silent prayer she hadn't destroyed the one thing she knew about him—that he desired her more than his ability to resist—Leah leaned over him, lips touching lips. His warm breath passed from him to her.

"You sure about this, Leah?"

She pulled back a fraction, her heart singing with all the pent-up love and emotion she'd denied she felt for this man but knew to be true.

He cared enough to ask if she was sure. Surely that meant he cared for her a little bit?

Love? Maybe not. But caring was a start.

“I’ve never been more sure of anything in my life, Mac Grainger. Now, are you going to make love to me?”

His broad smile was worth a thousand wishes. “You betcha.”

Days and nights passed in a blur. While Leah found her routine hadn’t altered much—she would drop Charlee at kindergarten and then spend hours working the aisles of her grove alongside Howard’s pickers—it was her nights that had definitely changed.

They were spent in Mac’s arms. Touching. Holding. Making love. Some said that marriage didn’t change a relationship, that marriage was only a piece a paper, a formality. For Leah, it felt better, more special. But that, she believed, was because it was with Mac. He made all the difference in the world. He’d made her not frightened anymore of marriage. He’d erased Curtis.

The word *love* had slipped into her conscience too. She loved him. But she kept it a secret.

Mac wined and dined her. They visited art galleries and attended the latest shows, enjoyed picnics in the park with Charlee and sailed the gulf islands in his super yacht.

That he played with Charlee filled her with joy and renewed hope.

He’d said he wasn’t Curtis. Surely this proved it.

But most of all, he made love to her. He had changed, softened a little.

Did that mean he finally believed her and not Curtis? Or perhaps he believed *because* of their loving?

*Sex, Leah. It’s sex. Not making love. Not even love.* Correction: for her it was all about love, but for Mac...Leah wasn’t sure. She couldn’t but think that, perhaps, he was using her as a way to keep Charlee close.

*The same way you’re using him?* Her smile faded, a sadness saturating her excitement, and she shook her head.

*Don’t get hurt.* She had to remember love didn’t enter this equation on Mac’s side. She had to be careful, take it slow and guard her heart. But that was already a lost cause.

Neither said a word about Curtis or his accusations. It was as if by not uttering those words, their fantasy world was protected.

They’d been married two weeks, and Leah woke to a beautiful late summer morning. The sky was clear. The cicadas hummed with abandonment. All was right with the world.

After only a quick meeting with the other harvesters at the grove once she’d taken Charlee to kindly, she decided to head back to the apartment.

Deciding she deserved a bit of pampering, she headed to the bathroom, and within minutes, the scent of lavender wafted around her, the cascade of hot water quickly turning the bath into a frothy pond of

iridescent bubbles. Shutting the door, she sank into the bath, relishing the instant release of tension as the water lapped around her.

For weeks her life had been spinning out of control, taken over by nights filled with passion, only to wake to days where distrust and fear of the future fueled her hours. How much more could she take? What did she have to do to make it all right?

She wanted peace. Serenity. Just for now...

"A sleeping beauty, no less."

Mac's warm laughter wrenched Leah from oblivion, and she scrambled from beneath the soapy bubbles, only to slip precariously.

"Whoa. You want to break your neck?" Bubbles covered her neck to knee but in no way lessened Mac's heated appraisal. "Nice dress you have on."

"Glad you like it." She laughed with him. Then a bubble floated toward the ceiling, followed by another and another, until they popped.

"I thought you were at work," she said.

"Work? What's that? This is far more appealing," he answered, removing his shoes.

Leah's eyes widened, and a tingling heat stained her cheeks. And still another bubble popped.

"Seems like this dress wants to come off."

She laughed at that. "Is that a fantasy of yours?"

He wrenched at his tie, then the buttons of his shirt, undoing them one by one in slow motion and revealing the smattering of dark chest hair.

Leah's mouth suddenly dried.

"Could be." He offered her a sexy grin, those darn dimples of his deepening. "Fantasy does sound kinda kinky." He pointed toward one of the bubbles. It too burst, and then slowly another and another, and her dress of lavender-fragranced bubbles gave way to silky smooth skin.

His eyes darkened to the richest of chocolate, reminding her of Hershey Kisses. Her husband was hot for her. Leah knew it was lust, not love, but right now, she would accept that, take what she could.

Beneath designer trousers, his arousal strained for release. He definitely wanted her. A lot.

Leah bit her lip. "I thought you had another appointment with the Japanese delegation."

He winked at her. "Cancelled when I saw your car in the basement car park." Then, in slow motion, he stepped back and stripped. Shirt. Belt. Trousers. All landed in a pile on the floor. His boxers were not the baggy kind but hugged every part of him.

Excitement amplified behind Leah's ribs. She couldn't help but look, lowering her gaze slowly and then letting it slide up again even slower, taking in all of his magnificence.

"Can I join you?"

"You think I'd refuse?" she countered with a teasing smile.

“Hell, I hope not.”

She sank back into the bath as Mac removed his boxers. Dear Lord, he took her breath away.

He slid his large frame into the opposite end of the tub. “Have I ever told you how cute you look in bubbles?” He flicked a rainbow-hued bubble toward her. It floated skyward, hit the ceiling, then burst.

This was pure fantasy. Their marriage was a fantasy, a bubble she knew would burst one day, but right now, this particular fairy tale was all she wanted. She reached for the sponge. “How about I wash you?”

“Only if you promise to do it all over.”

She promised, and kept it, losing count of Mac’s kisses as they moved from the bath to the bed, until the acerbic jangle of her mobile playing the long-gone tune of “Girls Just Wanna Have Fun” burst their fantasy.

The melody drew a snort of laughter from Mac as she scrambled naked from the bed to answer it.

“Mrs. Grainger, it’s Molly from the kindergarten.”

Leah sank back down on the bed. “Oh no.”

“What is it?”

She waved Mac away. “It’s past one, Mrs Grainger,” the kindy teacher admonished. “Charlee’s been waiting for you to pick her up. She’s very upset.”

“I’ll be right there.”

After snapping the phone off, she raced for the bathroom and grabbed clothes off the tiled floor, not giving Mac another thought.

“Leah?” He was right behind her. “What’s wrong?”

“I forgot, damn it. I forgot to pick up Charlee.”

“What the...”

Struggling into her jeans and T-shirt, Leah stilled. “Don’t you dare say a word, Mac Grainger.”

“I wasn’t, I was just going offer to help.” He snatched up his own clothes. “We’ll go in my car.”

Tears streamed down Leah’s cheeks, blinding her. She didn’t stop to brush them, shoving her way past him as she headed to the door.

“Leah. Wait.”

She didn’t listen.

Through the apartment door, she headed for the bank of elevators.

A breathless Mac came up behind her. “It’s not your fault. We both forgot.”

“But I’m her mother.”

“I know. Now, let’s go. You’re in no state to drive.”

Within a minute, they’d reached the basement. The grille on the basement garage had barely opened when Mac gunned the engine and they scooted into the burgeoning downtown traffic.



Leah sank back on the seat, unable to ignore the real leather smell. There was nothing cheap or vinyl in Mac's life, but then everything about his world spelt luxury, money, power.

And control.

Everything she didn't have. The no-sex clause had been her way to protect her heart, retain a semblance of control. Yet she'd given in just like that, and now, because of sex, she'd forgotten the most important person in her life.

True to his word, Mac had them at the kindergarten within fifteen minutes. She hadn't even reached the security gate before she heard her daughter's cries of delight.

They, however, weren't the words she was expecting.

"Daddy, Daddy. I knew you would come." Charlee turned to a blonde-haired woman Leah knew as Molly. "See, I told you he would come. This is my daddy. He's big."

Daddy? Lordy, what was she going to do now?

Molly suddenly seemed brighter than Leah remembered, smiling up at Mac, and he, darn it, played charm personified.

"Nice to meet you, Molly."

Molly blushed to the roots of her bottle-blond hair. For a few minutes Mac and Molly chatted, but Leah didn't feel so well.

The shock. It had to be that.

Her head felt woozy, sounds going in and out, crashing across her brain. She tried to shut it out and hold on to something...anything. She parted her mouth and ran her tongue over lips that seemed as if she'd never drunk in her entire life, while a sweaty sheen coated her forehead and another trail trickled between her breasts.

"Leah?" Mac took her elbow, and Leah's eyes opened, reading deep concern in his expression.

"I'm..." She tried to wave him away. Then nothing. She could hear voices—Charlee's crying, and Mac soothing her. Her eyelids fluttered open, and her gaze connected with Mac's worry-darkened eyes staring back at her. She struggled to get up.

"Stay where you are. You're not going anywhere." Mac's hand rested firmly on her shoulder. He meant business. "You fainted."

"Rubbish. I don't faint."

"You did."

"Let me up." Leah twisted sideways, seeking out Charlee. Pale-faced, her daughter stood with Molly's comforting arms around her. She turned back to Mac, whispering, "Charlee. She's frightened. She doesn't need to see me flaked out. She's only recently lost her father."

But it was as if Mac hadn't heard her. He smiled a big broad smile that reached right up to his eyes. Heck, even they were shining bright, and his dimples only added to the joy that lit his face. "She called me Daddy."

## Chapter Twelve

Daddy!

Charlee had called him Daddy.

Mac digested the emotional tug that that one word elicited. He'd never thought of being a parent before, had actively ensured none of his girlfriends got too comfortable.

*Daddy.*

Funny how that one word seemed to change things. Change him.

"Daddy, can we get an ice cream. Please?" Dark eyes stared up at him. Curtis's eyes. Family. He bent and picked Charlee up, and her small arms curled around his neck. Mac swallowed back the sudden lump in his throat.

It felt good, this daddy thing. Wonderful, even. But it also scared the hell out of him.

Her little brow furrowed as Charlee glanced over her shoulder at Leah, who, though still ashen-faced, distressed that she had forgotten to pick up her daughter, seemed to have recovered from her fainting.

"Mummy has never been late before."

"Mummy's got a lot on her mind at the moment," he said, trying to pacify his niece's worries. "Let's go get that ice cream."

"Yay. Ice cream! I bet Mummy's mind will be all better," Charlee offered with childish clarity.

Mac found himself nodding toward Leah, watching her. "I reckon so too."

They spent the afternoon along the waterfront, Charlee having a swim, and together they made a sandcastle.

It was simple fun, and Mac knew that anyone passing them would have thought they were a normal family enjoying themselves.

Only he knew different.

In bed, he and Leah were a union of heaven and pleasurable bliss. But there lay his dilemma, something that had snuck up on him, surprised him.

There had to be more than that in a marriage. In his marriage... The one he'd never wanted.

Now what?

Back at the apartment as the sun began to set, Mac determined they should eat dessert before dinner, which brought peals of laughter from Charlee. After dinner, he left Leah to deal with showering and bedtime stories.

Left alone, he viewed the car headlights in the distance as they crossed the bridge to Auckland's northern shores—workers going home to their families.

And his family? Who exactly was his family? Charlee? Leah? But for how long?

He didn't have to see Leah to know she had walked back to the lounge. His skin sparked as if a live current arrowed across its entire surface.

"Thank you for taking me to pick up Charlee."

He tried to shrug off her thanks.

"And for the afternoon at the beach. It was fun."

He smiled at that. "Yeah it was, wasn't it? We should do it more often."

"You don't have time," she said, and Mac couldn't help but notice the wash of sadness in her eyes.

Did she want him around? Was that it? "Heck, I'll make time."

"That's not what I meant, Mac. She called you Daddy. She can't do that."

Mac's gut churned. Damn it. And things had been going so well. "Why not?" *Yeah, why not?*

Leah stood so close to him his body ignited into overdrive, and his breath hissed. He wanted to hold her, kiss her and make love to her again.

"Because you and I are only temporary," she finally answered.

Hell! He'd forgotten that. He was in too deep, and somehow this wasn't a business deal any more.

Seemed to him, though, that despite the nights they spent together, Leah was hell-bent on reviving their business deal and keeping him at arm's length.

She'd recovered from her faint and the color in her cheeks had returned once she'd realized that Charlee was okay, though he couldn't say the same for him. Having her pass out on him kinda hit him hard. Made him start thinking things through.

Leah nodded toward the ethereal lightshow blanketing the cityscape. "Every time I see the city lights, it brings back lots of memories."

"Good ones?"

"For the most part. Seeing the city's lights was something I looked forward to every year when we came back."

"Back from where?"

"Oh...everywhere. My parents were modern-day hippies, gypsies of sorts, and we moved around a lot."

"Sounds idyllic."

"In some ways it was—the freedom of the open road, new beginnings, though being a child, I didn't see the hardships like the lack of income, the way some people would look at us as if we were...dirt. We didn't belong anywhere."

"Is that why you love the farm?"

"The farm is steady, and steady is better than not knowing where you'll be next week or month or tomorrow. In the winter months, when there was no fruit picking, we would come back to Auckland. It was then that my mother would weave stories about those lights."

Mac snorted. Mothers! "Lucky you."

"Back then, the lights became fairy lights, and in my mind thousands of fairies turned them on at nighttime just for me. I wanted to believe it so much. I would dream of how my life would be."

"And then you grew up," he said, hating the sudden bitterness clouding his tone.

Leah tilted her head slightly, looking at him as if she were trying to figure him out. "What's got into you?"

He wanted to say it was her, but he knew it wasn't just that. It was talking about mothers, and sharing his past with Leah meant relinquishing control. He wasn't sure he was up to such exposure.

Breaking eye contact, he headed straight for the brandy, poured one and downed it in one long, unyielding gulp. The alcohol burned into his belly. "Some of us didn't live the fairy tale."

"Really? That's not what Curtis said."

"Now why am I not surprised?" He refilled his glass, this time offering her one.

For a few minutes, she sipped her drink, her shell pink lips perched on the edge of the cut crystal holding him captive. Mac did his best to cauterize the ache hurtling through his body. Then she spoke, her voice so quiet he strained to hear, and instantly wished he'd been deaf.

"Curtis said his childhood was...fun." She hesitated as if it pained her to speak of her dead husband, and her eyes glistened with tears about to fall. Mac cursed silently.

"My brother was the long-awaited second child. While I was the...disappointment." Voicing it made it real but no less painful, even after all these years. "I was the one who broke the sainted Grainger mold, who dared to want something different, while your beloved husband played his cards right. Curtis did what was expected of a Grainger son."

"You mean Grainger Imports?"

"Grandfather built it up after...well, after he lost something of great value. After the second world war, he got into a bit of debt and thought he could win it back."

Leah's face bleached white. "Your grandfather was a gambler?"

Her shock surprised him. "Are you about to faint on me again?"

She shook her head.

"Leah?"

"I'm all right." She brushed him away, uncertainty washing across her haunted face. "All that gambling really didn't do the Graingers any good. Tell me more about your childhood." He sank onto one of the sofas, Leah sitting on a padded stool opposite him. She leaned forward, resting her elbows on her thighs, chin cupped in her hands. "Tell me. Please."

He stole a look at her. How could he refuse her pleading? “I was so different, I used to wonder if I were adopted.”

“You’ve the same eyes as Curtis. The same as Charlee’s.”

“You’ve noticed?”

She answered him with a slight smile, and his heart surged.

“They say the eldest child always has a hard road. Parents are new at the job, unsure, probably stricter until they get the hang of it. Unfortunately,” Mac said as the memories bombarded him, “my parents were no different. But Mum had several miscarriages.”

“I’m sorry. They’re never easy.”

“No.” He closed his eyes for a second and then reopened them, not really wanting to relive those particular memories in vivid Technicolor. “I still hear her cries, pleas to God that she would do anything, be anything, if he just gave her another child.”

“The desperation of motherhood.”

“But she already had me, Leah. I used to wonder why I wasn’t enough. Today they would give it some politically correct term, but it went on and on and on for years. She shut down, shut me out. Then the longed-for baby came, and I became obsolete.”

“You’re joking?”

He shook his head, downing the remainder of his brandy, wanting another but knowing it wouldn’t do anything to ease the ache he’d long tried to ignore.

Mac hauled his sorry arse from the quagmire of his musings. What a fool he was, nearly caught by soft green eyes and a body he had memorized. He pushed himself up from the sofa and stood over Leah. “Nice try, but it won’t work.”

“Pardon?”

“The soft soap, playing psychobabble with me. Get me to lower my guard.”

“You think...” Leah’s cheeks turned scarlet. “Of all the conceited, lowdown stupid comments to make. It has nothing to do with ‘soft soaping’ you and all about caring, or trying to care, trying to understand. But really, it doesn’t matter anymore. I forgot, you don’t do caring.” She rose from the ottoman. Eyes that had turned icy hard fixed on him. “There’s a saying about apples, that they don’t fall far from the tree. Well, in this case it really fits you and Curtis. You’re from the same mold. You do what you like, think what you like, and to hell with the consequences.”

“Like hell.” Shit! What was wrong with him? He turned away from Leah, dragging his hands through his hair, eyes shutting for a moment as he tried to get his head around what she’d said.

Maybe it was the liquor talking, breaking down his walls, but suddenly he was tired of the games between them and wanted to have it out with her once and for all.

But before he had a chance to try, he heard Leah's heavy sigh. "You don't like hearing it, but it's true. If someone tries to get close, you shove them away."

Mac bit off a curse in Russian. "Addictive, Curtis called you," he muttered. No matter what he thought of her, he wanted more.

"Curtis said lots of things, most of it a load of rubbish. He was an expert in trying to win me over every time he came home with his tail between his legs, saying it wouldn't happen again."

"What wouldn't happen? Did Curtis have other affairs?"

"Oh yes," she choked out with a brittle, almost hysterical laugh. "Your darling brother had many affairs, but definitely only one mistress."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. Curtis knew what he was doing, but, well, you can see now why I'm on guard, Mac. I won't let anyone hurt me again."

Leah lay awake alone in her bed, the passing hours interminable. If only they hadn't argued, she would be in his arms. If only she could trust him. And if only she didn't love him.

But she did, and she couldn't tell him because only hurt would come from being honest. She'd opened her heart when she married Curtis, and her heart had been mutilated in the name of love. When he died, she'd vowed never again, believing it better to keep her heart safe.

When morning finally arrived, she felt and looked as if she'd not slept a minute. Her body ached and her stomach knotted, a swirl of nausea clamoring for attention and fighting with her desperate need for sleep.

After hauling herself from bed as the sun broke through, she showered and dressed as fast as she dared. No way did she want to face Mac this morning. There were too many emotions battling for superiority when he came near.

But fate wasn't on her side.

"Coffee?" He held out the coffee pot, his smile relaxed and calm as he stood by the stove, dressed in his usual Armani. It suited him in a refined, devilish way.

Leah's stomach somersaulted. Her nerves were shot. As he poured her a coffee, he didn't mention last night, nor was there a hint of the angry words they'd thrust at each other, or that she'd chosen to sleep in her old bedroom and not with him. Idly, she found her fingers tracing her lips, as if she could feel him there.

She ached for that. A kiss. A hug. Love. A *real* marriage.

"So what happens now?"

His sudden question caused her to choke on her coffee. She held her cup in both hands and glanced across its rim at Mac. He leaned against the bench.

Suspicion, circled her heart. "What do you mean?"

"Business, Leah. The harvest is coming. I'm asking when, exactly? How much yield do you expect?"

Leah relaxed a smidgen. She could talk about business, just not her feelings. "Worried about your investment?"

"I only ever bet on a sure thing. You should know that by now."

"Oh, I know what sort of man you are. You have no concerns on that."

Dark chocolate eyes held her spellbound. Bedroom eyes. Every woman's dream. Her dream.

*Fool!*

To her right, in the media room, she spied Charlee watching morning cartoons, and her heart melted. As long as it didn't melt where Mac was concerned, she'd be okay.

"There should be about twenty kilograms per tree this year," she said, answering his query. "They've at last reached maturity."

"How old is that?"

"Most are well over ten years, some fifteen. My grandfather planted them. Don't worry, you'll get your money."

"I didn't expect less. Is there any lasting damage from the fire?"

He asked the question that had plagued after that awful night. "I tested the olives when I went back to the farm. There doesn't seem to be any smoke damage to the trees or residual smoke in a sample of the final product, so your investment is safe."

"And then you'll be able to get rid of me in double quick time."

Ah, so he hadn't forgotten their argument after all. Reality scored deep across her heart. She hardened it. "Isn't that we both want?"

He said nothing. Not one hint from him that he loved her. Wanted her. "Talk me through the process."

"Why?" Curtis never wanted to know anything about the grove.

"Humor me. I'm trying to be nice. As part owner, I have a vested interest."

Leah shrugged. He did seem truly interested, something so vastly different from his brother. "The olives will be harvested in a couple of weeks. The fruit is stripped by hand, though some use a small plastic rake, others a mechanical 'flapper' that shakes the branches."

"What do you use?"

"Oh, I'm small fry. We can only afford the old-fashioned way."

"Would you go to the mechanical method if you could afford it?"

"Easy answer," she said with a tiny laugh. "No. I like the labor of it. It's reminiscent of the past, and continuing to use a similar method is, to my way of thinking, honorable."



“And hard work.”

“I’ve never been afraid of hard work.”

“Another misconception,” he mused.

Leah picked up on his innuendo immediately. “Or another of Curtis’s lies.”

He ignored her counterattack. “What’s next?”

Leah shook her head, surprised at how easily he could sway her into talking about her beloved olives and to relax her guard. She wanted that, to feel normal and be able to tell him her thoughts, her fears and, one day, of her love.

She stared into dark eyes. Curtis’s eyes. *Remember him. The man who hurt you.*

As if her body followed her brain’s silent command, Leah folded her arms across her chest. “The olives have to remain well ventilated and are transported for processing, the sooner the better, no more than four to six hours after harvesting. The paste is then stirred, decanted via centrifugal force, the oil one side, the pomace, the wasted paste, on the other.”

“It’s quite a process.”

“It is. But unlike wine, which needs to be stored, once the oil is put through the separator, removing the sediment, it’s pronounced clean and dry and ready for storage.”

Leah took a breath, which was of little use, because Mac smiled and that smile did funny, quirky things to her insides, as it always did.

Their conversation seemed to get them back on track, the pall of Curtis’s accusations kept at arm’s length, and for the next few days, Leah buried herself deep in work, preparing the grove for harvest—a bit of light pruning, making sure the pickers were organized and would arrive on time. She buried herself in work, and from dawn to dusk, she ignored the ache of loving and being unloved.

If nothing required doing at the grove, she stayed at the kindergarten, helping out. And whenever Mac was home, she would keep her gaze averted from him, scared he could see what was in her eyes. If he found out, it would break her heart.

Mac wine and dined her, telling her stories about his wildcatting days. They laughed, and then they made love, a time that held her in its beauty, where nothing else mattered, just the two of them.

But as the days passed, her frustration grew. She couldn’t get beneath the veneer he held erect all the time. He wouldn’t let her in.

Tonight they were to go to an opening for a rising artist Mac supported. She reached for the exquisitely wrapped lace and silk underwear she’d not dared wear yet. It was a present from Mac she knew he’d been dying to see her in. Tonight would be the night for the scarlet and black lace panties and bra, with the fishnet stockings adding an exotic air.

Eyeing her reflection in the gilded antique mirror in the dressing room, Leah acknowledged she looked sexy. Hot.

Not wanting to put her dress on yet, she threw on her robe and sat on the chaise in front of the large windows, enjoying the radiant heat from the setting sun. Lethargy wrapped itself around her. Her eyes shuttered. Just for a minute, she would rest, let the world pass her by, and dream.

“Don’t they say there’s no rest for the wicked?”

Her eyes shot open, and she scrambled to sit up. Heat stole across her skin, and her nipples beaded beneath the silky concoction. A flush of desire pooled in places that ached for Mac. She pulled at the edges of her robe as inconspicuously as she could. “Why do you keep doing that?”

Mac sat on the end of the chaise, lifted her feet to his lap and began to massage one foot. “What, precisely?”

“Surprising me.”

“Ah...but the art of surprise is the ultimate tactic of good business.”

“Just as well, then, that our marriage is a business deal, isn’t it?”

Her words yielded a faint shadow across his eyes, but then it vanished. “You’re wearing them, aren’t you?”

Aware of his diversionary tactic, Leah swallowed. “And *you’re* meant to be at work.”

His mouth flicked up at one corner, and needlelike pricks of excitement skittered down her spine and raced back up in double quick time.

“I decided to play hooky and leave early.”

“Why?” Last time he’d played hooky, they’d had sex. Leah’s body heated, and she couldn’t help but smile. Maybe...

“I’m the boss. Besides, I wanted to see you.” He stood. “So, are you wearing it?”

His reached out a hand to her, and she took it, his scorching heat sprinting from his fingertips to hers. The tip of her tongue moistened her lips. “That’s for you to find out.”

He pulled her from the chaise to stand only a few inches away from him. “Really?”

Leah unhooked her arms and let them drop to her sides. “Absolutely.”

Then he kissed her. Thoroughly. Beautifully. Oh so wonderfully. He made her toes curl.

A moan of pleasure slipped from her lips, and she couldn’t keep her hands from him. She slid them over his shoulders, trailing fingertips through his hair. “We’ll be late,” she said, though in truth she couldn’t have cared less, if it meant more time in Mac’s arms. More kisses. More loving.

“Tough.”

*Yes!*

He nibbled the curl of her ear, and Leah tilted her head to one side as he dotted butterfly kisses along her neck. “What about your artist?”

"I'll send a check."

"Mac!" she gasped through a smile, though secretly delighted.

"Just as well Betty wanted to take Charlee to the movies, and with the added bonus of a sleepover with Betty's granddaughter, I have another kind of business in mind."

Leah clamped back a bubble of laughter. "Funny business?"

"Oh, yeah."

Unable to hold back her laughter any longer, nor the joy and excitement, or the urgent need of having Mac inside her, Leah spun out of his embrace and dashed toward the bed. "Race you!"

Leah didn't want to wake up from the fantasy. She snuggled down in the bed, pulling the sheet up, aware of Mac's enveloping warmth. She kept her eyes closed, wanting to enjoy the moment a bit longer, relishing his big hard body next to hers.

"Morning," he said with a smile.

"Do you have to sound so chirpy first thing?" And look so darn sexy too.

"Hey, I'm waking up with a beautiful woman. What else could a man want?"

Lying against him, warm in his arms, Leah conceded there was nothing she wanted more than to wake up with him every morning. But their time was merely a string of beautiful moments that had to end. Sometime. Soon.

A deep sense of dread and the knowledge that their fantasy was drawing to a close insinuated itself into Leah's conscience. Soon she would harvest; then it would be over. Over too because the letter she had received yesterday from the social worker had informed her that Charlee's maternal grandparents had withdrawn their submission.

Leah looked up at Mac and knew what she had fought for so long, that despite the passion they created every night, this marriage deal wouldn't work. Even though she had at last accepted he was not the same as his brother, it wouldn't be enough to keep them together.

She loved this man. Loved his smile. Loved the little creases feathering at the corner of his eyes. But Mac had to learn to trust, to believe her and to love her.

Suddenly, she had to get him gone. "Aren't you going to work?"

"Trying to get rid of me?"

*Yes.*

Narrowed eyes pierced her soul. This wasn't what she wanted but how it had to be. She pasted a false smile on her lips. "Since you're going to play lazybones, I better get going." She scooted across the bed before he could grab her and gathered the robe she'd dropped to the floor. Beside it lay her underwear. After gathering it all up, she entered the bathroom and closed the door, then took refuge beneath the

scalding shower spray. She leaned against the tiled wall, wishing the water would wash away the pain that seared her heart, help harden it so she could do what she had to do, before her it broke any further.

“Want some company?”

Leah jolted back from wishful thinking. Water droplets balanced on the tips of her lashes. She blinked them away. “What are you doing here?”

“Joining you.”

“You can’t.”

“Are you going to tell me to leave?” His brows arched, and he leaned over her and slid his fingers over a wet nipple.

“I could,” she teased, reaching up and nipping his ear lobe.

“Just as I thought, sweetheart, you can’t say no.” And he closed the shower door behind him, shutting them into their own watery paradise. “Now,” he said taking the sponge from her hand, “let me wash you.”

*And let me love you,* she thought sadly.

Mac was right. For the love of everything she believed in, Leah couldn’t say no. She had thought she wanted the farm. She loved it. Loved her daughter.

But she loved Mac too, even though right now all he wanted was her body. How could she make him understand that would never be enough for her? How could she make him love her?

An hour later, still smiling, Mac left for work, giving her a chance to get her head straight, to think without the enticement of having him so close. She needed a plan. Mac wouldn’t see her as an equal until she was exactly that, debt-free and not owing him anything.

But thinking didn’t work. It only made things harder. By midmorning, she was about to give up on the promotional materials she’d been designing when the intercom for the apartment buzzed.

“Delivery for Mr. Grainger.”

Surprised the delivery man had come to the apartment and not to Mac’s office, Leah let him into the lobby, and a few moments later there was a sharp tap at the apartment door. The courier driver proffered a large white legal envelope.

“My husband’s at his office. It’s...” She’d been going to suggest he drop the legal-sized envelope at Mackenzie International below and then changed her mind, confused as to why Mac would have business papers sent to the apartment. Taking the delivery, she quickly signed the receipt and scanned the sender’s address.

Connor and Partners. Mac’s lawyer and their best man.

Fingers suddenly icy and trembling, she traced the address, then the gummed seal as fragmented accusations whirled across her brain and a sour taste coated the inside of her mouth.

Legal papers. A divorce? Well, it wasn’t as if she knew that day wouldn’t arrive soon. A temporary marriage. A business deal, he’d said.

But it hadn't been *all* business. The sour taste thickened, churning in her belly as old insecurities awoke.

Without giving herself a chance to reconsider, Leah ripped at the seal and tore the envelope open, then drew out a sheaf of papers. She scanned them, and her heart stilled.

No, not divorce—but custody papers with Charlee's name on them...and his. Not hers.

Mac had taken out an application for legal custody of Charlee.

Her hands shook, and in her head, swarms of bees seemed to be buzzing incessantly. He'd said he only wanted to get to *know* Charlee, satisfy himself regarding her care, yet all along he'd watched, waited, tested her, while he'd already made up his mind.

Dear God, it was real. He wanted to take her daughter. He'd planned it.

The fingers of her right hand found her left and massaged her wedding band.

She stared down at the glistening gold ring. It was a lie. A cold, heartless lie. Blinking back tears, Leah wrenched the ring from her hand and tossed it across the room.

Sixty seconds was all it took to reach his office. The longest sixty seconds of her life. She stormed past his startled receptionist and into his office, the papers clutched in her shaking hand. Then he was right in front of her. Mac Grainger. Beautiful. Sexy. Her husband. A traitor.

"You bastard. You lying..."

"Whoa!" Mac replaced his phone in its cradle and stood. There was not even an ounce of surprise on his face, his expression as ruthless as ever.

He knew.

"I wondered how long it would take for you to get here."

Leah tossed the papers toward him, and they hit him above the eye before they fell to the floor. "Do you deny you asked Connor Jackson to draw up an application for custody for Charlee?"

"No. But there is an explanation."

"Really? Do you deny your suggestion of marriage for Charlee's sake was a decoy while you instigated your custody application? You wanted to destroy me, Mac Grainger."

"Connor's secretary made a mistake. I just got off the phone with her. You were never meant to see those papers. Besides, you shouldn't have opened the envelope anyhow. It wasn't addressed to you, Leah. What does that say about you trusting me?"

"Rubbish. You deceived me." She stabbed a finger toward the papers now at his feet. "You accuse me of dishonesty, but buster, have you taken a look in the mirror lately? You stormed into my home making demands, blackmailing me. I knew this would never work."

His mouth thinned, and stared down his haughty nose at her. "It wasn't meant to," he finally said. "We never planned long-term."

“Planned!” Her voice reached fever pitch. “We didn’t plan anything. I didn’t plan anything. But you, Mac, you planned it right down to how you were going to steal my child.” Leah sobbed, furious with herself for being sucked in, for letting her defenses down. For trusting a Grainger again.

As if he ignored what she said, he bent down and picked up the papers, then drew himself upright, all six-foot-plus of powerful testosterone. He gave the legal document a scant glance. Not once did he look guilty, or offer an apology. Then, leaning forward slightly, he rested the tips of his fingers on his desk and fixed an unflinching and resolute gaze on her. “I had to find out the truth. I considered it a precaution.”

“You didn’t even try to believe me, Mac. You just assumed, and because Curtis was your brother, you believed him.”

“I requested Connor to put the papers on hold.”

“When?”

“The day we were married.”

“I don’t believe you. You thought you were onto a good thing, so you stopped anything that would come between me coming to your bed...or not.” Leah shook her head. “It’s too late. How can I ever trust you? You didn’t tell me.”

His expression hardened at her accusation. “I never heard you say no.”

“Oh, but I did. We had rules.”

“One rule, sweetheart, which you broke the first night.”

Oh dear God, what a mess. She’d come in wanting answers about his deceit, and now they talked about what neither could refuse the other every night. A heaviness tightened across her chest at the realization. Mac’s deceit had killed of any hope for love or for a future. Stemming the now familiar ache, she took a step back. She only wished she could shut off her heart as easily. “That’s right,” she finally managed to say. “It was just sex. Not love.”

Mac stilled for a fraction, as if he were about to say something, then changed his mind. “Love has nothing to do with it?”

She wanted to shout no, he was wrong. It *was* all about love. Foolishly, she had begun to hope it was, wanted it to, desperately so. “You’re right, of course,” she said, reigning in every ounce of hurt. She pasted a bland expression on her face that an Oscar winner would be proud of. She wouldn’t let him in again. “Our marriage is pure fantasy, and the bubble has certainly burst. You’ll get your money.”

*Just not me.*

## Chapter Thirteen

Leah dressed with care, no jeans and check shirts or mud-covered boots. Instead, she chose a smart pair of black trousers and matching fitted jacket. Because she didn't have money to waste and hadn't bought many clothes to replace the ones lost in the fire, she didn't have a shirt to wear with it, so she chose a chiffon scarf she hadn't been able to resist and tied it at her neck in a floppy bow.

For several minutes, she studied herself critically in the mirror. Today she intended to present a professional image and announce to the world, or at least the bank manager, that she was a good investment.

Checking her watch, she realized she had to go. It wouldn't do to be late when she was about to ask for money.

Thankful the traffic was steady with no holdups, she arrived with a few minutes to spare. Parked across from the bank, she used the time to gather her thoughts, mentally analyzing every scenario the bank might come up with. Unfortunately, every one was unpleasant and ended with a resounding no. Still, the Growers' Association confirmed all her supporting documents regarding the grove's yield. Aroha Farm would fulfill its true potential, and she could pay a mortgage and survive—just.

But most importantly, by refinancing she could pay Mac back, get out of his life and get him out of hers.

*You'll be alone. Lonely.*

Leah refused to consider that silent prediction.

Twenty minutes later, it was all over and the dapperly dressed bank manager was finishing up the paper work.

"Everything is in order, Mrs. Grainger, but I must say, I am surprised. I mean, your ah...husband," the bank manager said, his already ruddy complexion turning to the color of beets, "has accumulated rather considerable assets, businesses worldwide, and so forth, so why do you feel the need to come to me?"

Leah kept her emotions in check and her smile tight. "I pay my own debts, Mr. Tanner." She pocketed the signed mortgage document and confirmation slip that the funds were already in her bank account. "I do not need my husband to support me."

"But he already does, since he purchased the debt," the man offered feebly.

"Which I intend to pay back in full, now you've agreed to refinance me. Then, Mr. Tanner, you will only have to deal with me, the owner of Aroha Olive Farm."

A few minutes later, with a bank check secure in her hand, Leah walked out. She lifted her head to the sun, wishing its warmth would seep into her bones. The blood in her veins had chilled to ice.

She should have felt happy. She'd achieved what she'd set out to do. Instead, there was a heartbreaking finality to it all. Temporary would now be over.

She hesitated to start the engine. It meant taking the next step. She stared down at the check in her lap. It was a lot of money.

She stuffed it into her bag when her mobile rang, the tune, an electronic squeal of "Love Me Tender" picked by Charlee, tugging at her heart.

Charlee. Always Charlee. She and Charlee were forever, never temporary, and the irony of the song title and what she was about to do didn't escape her.

She flicked open her phone, spying the identity panel before she spoke, a sad sigh constricted her chest as she answered. "Hello, Mac."

"Just thought I'd let you know not to worry about picking up Charlee. I've already done it."

"You what?"

"I was ah...passing and thought why not?"

"Because you can't, that's why."

"Well, Molly didn't mind. She agreed, and since she met me with you, it was okay, seeing Charlee already calls me Daddy."

In the background, Leah could hear Charlee's melodic rendition of "Old MacDonald", and the age-old mother's guilt squeezed at her heart. There'd been a farm visit from the kindergarten today, and at the last minute Leah had to pull out of being mother's help.

"Leah?"

The voice at her ear drew her back from her misery. "I'll meet you at home."

"Done. Don't cook dinner, it's my turn."

Leah ended the call and stashed her phone back in her bag. To her dismay, her mouth watered as she thought about Mac's excellent culinary skills. It was one of several skills he possessed that Curtis had sorely lacked. Damn it, she couldn't help but dwell on the difference between Mac and Curtis. Brothers, but so very different, and yet Mac wanted to control her too.

*Remember the custody papers.*

Leah squeezed her eyes shut as the tears began. She cried for Charlee, for her loss of a father, and now of Mac, who Charlee already called Daddy. She cried for family and for love. But mostly she cried for Mac and herself, for what couldn't be, because he didn't love her back.

This was it. Temporary was over and out. She pressed the back of her hands into her eye sockets, pushing hard, rubbing away the tears.

No more. They weren't allowed. She had to be strong, make a stand for her future.



Ignition on, Leah drove across town, little speeches running through her head. None sounded right, but then there wasn't an easy way to tell someone you wanted a divorce.

The thing was, if she didn't do this now, she'd chicken out and take second best. She deserved better. She deserved to be loved. Mac had to learn that, just like she had.

Back at the Mackenzie International building and in the elevator, she felt a sense of déjà vu wash over her. Their first meeting had been in the elevator, although she hadn't known who he was, and then they met again here on their way to be married.

Unbidden, images of Mac crossed her mind's eye—the way his dark eyes flashed whenever he saw her, the way his dimples creased his cheeks, and how she hadn't been able to stop thinking of him, despite her inner turmoil.

She loved him. Now it was time for a divorce.

Leah punched the button for the penthouse. No business-deal marriage would ever be good enough, nor would a one-sided love affair.

The moment she stepped into the apartment, the rich aroma of tomatoes and olives with the tang of garlic wafted in her direction.

"Mummy, Mummy." Charlee raced for her, jumping and hooking her legs around Leah's waist, arms linked around her neck as she dotted tiny kisses over Leah's face. "Daddy's cooking, pasta and bolo...bolo. He's very clever, don't you think?" Unhooking herself, Charlee slid down and retraced her steps to halt beside Mac. She linked her tiny hand in his, and Leah's heart tore just that little bit more. She was about to destroy her daughter's world for a second time.

With an apron tied around his middle, a wooden spoon smothered in spaghetti sauce, he looked so good and for a moment, though, she couldn't say anything. She simply stared at Mac for one last time. It wasn't Mac the multi-millionaire she saw, but Mac the daddy gazing down at her daughter with adoration in his eyes. She also saw Mac, the lover. He gave her a goofy smile and a wave with the spoon. "Dinner's nearly ready."

She tried to smile back and failed.

His eyes darkened, and a fist tightened around her heart. He knew something was wrong.

"Charlee, sweetheart," she said, dropping down to her daughter's level and reaching out to her. Charlee came into her arms, and Leah rushed her to her chest. Pulling away, she looked steadfastly at Charlee. "Do you think you could go play in your room for a while? I need to have a talk with Mac."

Uncertain eyes lifted toward Mac, then back to her. Leah struggled to keep her emotions in check and not scare Charlee anymore. Then, thankfully, Charlee offered a shrug and a smile as if all were right with the world. "Okay, but I *have* to tell you about the farm. It was so cool, with monkeys and a zebra and llamas. Daddy thinks the zebra is black with white stripes, but I think it's white with black stripes. What do you think, Mummy?"

Farm? Daddy? Leah offered Mac a direct look, brows rising, but he said nothing, did nothing, just stared right back.

“You know, I’m really not sure. We’ll talk later, sweetie. Now off you go.”

Grateful that her daughter didn’t argue, Leah watched Charlee skip to her room and shut the door behind her. The moment the door closed, she rounded on him. “What was all that about?”

“I went on the farm trip.”

“You!”

“Yeah, me. Is there a problem?”

“But you’re...”

“Before you say another word,” Mac said, cutting her off, “you couldn’t go. You asked me to drop her off at kindergarten. I did.”

“That didn’t mean you had to inveigle yourself into the trip.” Leah forced herself to remember it was all about temporary, and she was about to end it.

*Give him the check.*

But damn it, it hurt so bad.

*Toughen up.*

She tightened the lid on her pain.

Leah leveled her gaze on him. He was beautiful in a hard-edged, masculine way, arrogant, and still she loved him. Suddenly everything blurred. She couldn’t stop crying. Sobs hiccupped from deep down in a pain-filled place. She needed to vent, to scream about how unfair it all was, how she didn’t want to hurt, to be alone, or to love when love wasn’t returned.

“Leah?” Mac stepped forward, but she put out a hand to halt him.

“Don’t come any closer. It won’t work, not now.” She couldn’t cope with him so close she could reach out and touch him, hold him, beg. She fixed her gaze firmly on him. “It’s over.”

He dropped his hands to his side, expression unreadable and eyes almost black. “We had a deal and our six months aren’t up yet.”

“Cancelled the moment I found out about your custody plans.”

“I explained. Rowena thought the papers were to be sent to me.”

“So you said. But you don’t get it, do you? I trusted you.”

Suddenly, she couldn’t stand anymore and, spinning away from him, she walked into the spacious lounge and sank onto the sofa, hugging her bag to her chest. The air that slid from her lungs in one long breath held all her sadness, her hopes and dreams.

Mac had followed and stood in front of her. She lifted her teary gaze to him. “I loved once, only to be fooled into believing that in the end it would be all right. But in the end it was nothing but torture and would never, ever be right. I loved a man who only loved and lived for the next fix.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“Your brother.” Even as she said it, a pain burned her chest. “Does it surprise you that your brother was an addict?”

“Drugs?”

She shook her head. “Nothing so visible, but an addiction just as brutal. Gambling, Mac. The family addiction. Your brother gambled his life away, my life and his daughter’s. He couldn’t get enough of it, or enough money, always thinking of the next spin of the roulette wheel, that the next game would solve all his problems, believing he’d be rich.”

Shock and confusion warred for domination in Mac’s hardened gaze. “Are you sure?”

“You doubt it? I lived it. The truth is out now. I won’t protect him anymore. I tried. I’ve made excuses for him, hidden from the bill collectors. Hidden from him too, when he came home, when he had lost.

“Your golden boy brother wasn’t really golden. Well, not in the way he wanted the world to perceive him. He hid his true self. Your brother was flawed, chipped.” Her shoulders sagged. It had been so long since she’d talked, secrets had become second nature.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because of stupid loyalty, though God knows why. I thought I could fix it, fix him, but mostly because of shame... And fear...” She hesitated, then, wondering why.

Funny how it no longer scared her. It was truly over. A brittle smile tempered the strained tension holding her rigid.

“I thought the farm was important, and in a way, it still is, but now only for the income it can provide, and the fact that I love the land and its beauty. In the end, it’s not about the house. That’s gone. Curtis is gone.

“He went from our lives a long time ago. He was a gambler before he was a husband, or even a father. The next money-making opportunity always came first. Then he got sick, and gambling, even a win, couldn’t fix it, and he couldn’t cope with what he’d done. So he drove off the bridge.” She flicked Mac a quick glance. His expression remained distant. Even now she didn’t know if he believed her. “Curtis borrowed heavily on the land, saying it was for developmental purposes.”

“And you believed him?”

“Of course. I was the devoted wife. A gullible fool.”

“But you let me believe you spent all the money?”

“Let you?” He still didn’t understand. “You believed it because you wanted to, Mac. You wanted to assuage your guilt for ignoring your family for years, and decided to believe the word of a liar. Nothing I could have said would have changed that. You’re a clever businessman. You make decisions that cost millions daily. So how come you couldn’t figure this out for yourself?”

"You'd better look at this, then." He retrieved a manila envelope from a pile of papers on a side cabinet and held it out to her.

A sudden flurry of nerves crab-walked down each vertebra. She didn't want to take it. "What is it?"

"You need to read it."

Dread curdled in her stomach as she finally took the envelope and with shaking fingers opened it and drew out a single piece of paper. She scanned the typeface, each word slamming into her brain, recognition sealing her fate. "How long has this been going on?" The paper slipped from her fingers and floated to the floor. She didn't pick up the investigator's report, wishing she could ignore it, willing it away.

"Since the beginning. Did you think I wouldn't?"

"I told you what Curtis said wasn't true."

"I know that...now. And that you're a good mother."

Her hands curled into fists. "You had me investigated."

"I'm a businessman, it's what I do, sweetheart."

"Don't you sweetheart me. I've heard enough." Reaching for her bag, she delved deep, finding what she should have given him the moment she walked in but had, in truth, hoped by some miracle she wouldn't have to.

Again she realized what a fool she'd been to hope and dream where neither hopes nor dreams could flourish. The time had come. Without saying a word, she handed the check to Mac.

For a moment, he simply stared at her outstretched hand, only to jerk back up and snare her with an accusatory glare. "What the hell is that?"

She could have said the obvious but didn't. "Freedom," she answered. "With the proposed profit from the olive yield, I'm able to remortgage the land. I'm paying you back. You have no control over me anymore."

Strong words. Words that would create her future, while inside she cried and cried and then cried some more.

"Why?"

"You need to ask?" She shook her head, curls falling across her eyes. She brushed them away and closed off the gates to her heart. "Now that the upcoming harvest has proved it will be beyond promising, I don't need you."

He stepped close, then, so close she could smell him. Leah loved his cologne, the notes of cardamom, frankincense and the fresh tang of citrus. She braced herself against temptation.

"You're lying. You need me. Your body sings beneath my touch."

"What you're talking about is sex," she countered, knowing full well she lied. "Simply sex."

In one swift movement, he pulled her to him, his body hard up against hers, and wrapped his arms about her waist. “There’s nothing simple about this.” And his mouth covered hers, taking her breath in a kiss that sought to prove her lie.

Leah steeled herself. She had to resist, had to. She arched away from him, missing his body heat instantly. “You’re right,” she said, praying for courage where she knew the frailty of her heart would be her downfall. What she really wanted to do was hold on tight, tell him she loved him, and if he didn’t love her, then that would be okay.

She fortified her flagging resolve. “We are good in bed, but that will never, ever be enough.” She twisted out of his embrace. She deserved better this time, and if she had to wait forever for it, she would. Mac needed not to simply want her in his bed, but need her as much as she needed him. “We’ll be gone in the morning.”

His brows creased, his expression strained. “Gone?”

“Charlee and I are moving out. Temporary is over.”

## Chapter Fourteen

“But I don’t want to go, Mummy. And Daddy will be all alone.”

Leah’s heart broke, but she wouldn’t relent. “It’ll be an adventure, Charlee.”

“Not going, don’t want adventure, don’t want to go.” Charlee stamped her foot, folding her arms as her bottom lip began to tremble. Then the tears fell, and Leah’s heart broke all over again.

Lifting Charlee to her lap, she let the little girl cry until there were no more tears, just as she wanted to cry too. But she had to be strong and resist the temptation to stay.

She opened the mobile home brochure, hoping that if she involved Charlee, it might go some way to appeasing her heartache. “Now, which one shall we choose?”

Thankfully the insurance company had assessed the damage and offered to pay out, but it would be months before she could begin to rebuild.

That had been three weeks ago. Now they lived in a mobile home parked on the property. It wasn’t so bad, as they had electricity and running water and the familiar landscape she loved so much.

In the past, a home meant order and stability. Now, the mere act of sticking to a routine kept Leah functioning at best.

Up, breakfast, kindergarten for Charlee, who, with the extra physiotherapy Mac insisted he continue to pay, progressed daily, and so bit by bit life became normal. She worked with the pickers, relieved as she watched the first of the harvest come in. But was she happy?

How could she be? Her nights were spent lying, watching the stars, dreaming of Mac’s strong arms around her, imagining his kisses and then crying herself to sleep. Sleep, however, only brought lonely dreams, and she would wake with tears streaming down her cheeks, cries for Mac breaking the nighttime silence. Happiness didn’t come anywhere close. She was miserable, lonely, and she missed him so very much.

The morning chill of late March gave way to the first hint of the coming autumn. Leah had often wondered how New Zealand’s pioneers managed with the differing seasons. No familiar gentle landscapes but the harsh bush of a land littered with volcanoes and thermal activity and rugged mountains. No white Christmases, but the blazing heat of summer.

This morning Leah found it harder than ever to crawl out of bed, yet despite the nausea she’d been battling the last few days, it had to be done. After a quick shower in the miniscule cubicle called a bathroom, she scrutinized her reflection in the mirror. The stark changes in her appearance shocked her.

Purple-black shadows gave her that panda-bear look, and she'd already lost her golden summer tan. She spun from the mirror. "Toughen up," she chastised herself.

She didn't need reminding that she'd found love and let it go. And that it was over.

Sitting on the banquette that was sitting room seating by day and at night turned into Leah's bed, Charlee called to her. "Mummy, there's a car coming up the drive."

Leah cocked an ear, and sure enough, she could hear the distinct crunch of tires over gravel, and the grunt as the driver changed down gears and the vehicle took the last steep bend.

"It's Daddy, Daddy." Charlee flung the door wide, and before Leah could stop her, she jumped down the step, her limp no impediment. Leah wanted to be annoyed, but the delight at seeing her daughter making progress filled her heart with joy.

The moment Mac exited the familiar silver Mercedes, Charlee leapt at him. He held her sky-high, twirling her around and around. Charlee's bubbling laughter echoed across the valley, Mac's joining it, a sound that seared across Leah's heart.

She stole a moment to remember it all, hold it close and savor it. Then there was silence as Mac approached, and her skin prickled right through to her scalp.

"Hello, Leah."

He looked...the same. No. Better. Wonderful. Dressed casually in jeans and polo and a pair of Texas-style cowboy boots, he walked toward her. He waved, giving her a tentative smile that didn't quite reach his eyes. They were dimmer somehow, the sparkle gone.

Leah swallowed back the lump in her throat. He tempted her still, and damn it, she shouldn't let him do that. She should have been prepared and shut those feelings down in an instant.

"What do you want?" she asked flatly.

"I've come to offer a hand."

Before she answered, she looked across at Charlee, who seemed intent on chasing a monarch butterfly and, satisfied her daughter was far enough away not to hear her conversation with Mac, said, "I don't need your help. I've the pickers still hard at work."

"I know, but I'm here anyway, and before you refuse, I thought you should know I phoned your mobile the other day. Charlee answered it and asked me to come."

"She shouldn't have done that."

Mac shrugged. "Too late now. Besides, I couldn't refuse her. Can you?"

Damn it, he'd scored a direct hit. "Make sure it's the last time, Mac. It's hard enough for Charlee. She's already lost *her* father."

The hint of a smile that had been present dissolved. He looked to Charlee, then shoved his hands in jeans pockets, shuffling slightly. "I'm fully aware of that."

But he reached out to her, too quickly for her to retreat, and his fingers grazed ever so lightly along her cheek. She held her breath while wanting his touch to go on and on.

"I can't stop thinking about you, Leah. You may hate me, but I'm still the man you want in your bed," he murmured, stepping closer.

Leah withdrew and quickly closed herself and her heart off to temptation. "What we want makes no difference. One of the things I try to teach Charlee is the consequences of her actions. For good actions, there are good consequences, and for bad behavior, bad consequences."

"And not believing you, not trusting, having you investigated, falls into the last category, I guess?"

*Oh Mac.* Not loving her was worse.

A sad sigh slipped from her chest, and she huddled closer into the entrance, taking respite from the hard metal wall at her back as if it would ground her, while all she really wanted to do was throw her arms around him. "Don't forget the custody documents. You chose your actions. The rest follows."

Mac's curse was barely audible as he turned away slightly, dragging a hand through his hair. It had grown a bit since she'd last seen him, and now brushed over his collar, definitely not what went with millionaire suits and business deals. He faced her again, mouth grim, eyes searching hers. "It doesn't have to be that way."

Yes it does, she thought sadly.

"We make a good team," he added as if he'd read her mind and tried to counter her every thought.

"In bed." Dear Lord, she wished she hadn't said that. It was the truth. But it also wasn't enough.

"Is that so bad?"

Leah dug deep, fighting her instinct to accept less and take anything he offered, but that would never make her happy. She wanted it all: the white picket fence, the family, but most of all she wanted a man at her side who loved her for who she was, what she was, and would commit to her for the right reason. For love.

She pointed to the shed that ran at right angles to the entrance to the grove. "Get yourself a bucket and knee pads."

"While you put a spear through my heart?" he chuckled, bringing a sudden lightness to the moment.

"I might, but then I wasn't sure you had one." And with that, she turned tail and retreated into the mobile home, waging an internal war, biting back urge to turn round and fall right back to Mac's arms.

She couldn't stop loving him. Love, however, couldn't get in the way of the last of the harvest. It would be a frantic race against the forecasted rain the Met Office promised in the next forty-eight hours, and it meant she and her pickers would need to work around the clock to get the olives to the factory for processing.

True to his promise, Mac worked hard. But hard work made him strip.



The T-shirt came off by midmorning, his back swathed with a fine sheen of perspiration. Every time he stood, massaging his lower back, he wiped a hand across his brow and brushed away the single curl that enticed Leah beyond redemption.

Then the man caught her ogling him. “Like what you see?”

She gritted her teeth and decided on a different tack. Pasting a cheeky smile on her face, she raised one brow and gave him a naughty wink over her shoulder. “Careful you don’t burn, darling.”

“Burn? Who’s burning for who?” He rubbed a hand across his chin and day-old stubble and winked at her.

Leah spun away, gut churning. And she thought she could win against the testosterone-packed Mac Grainger? Instead, she tried escaping. No such luck. The man followed her through the sentinel rows of olive trees. Just as she reached the far gate, his long fingers snaked around her bare forearm. “No use running, Leah.”

“Who’s running?”

“You. You’re scared of me, but you don’t have to be.” He stepped toward her, his face all serious, and Leah’s pulse snapped.

Resting his big hands stained with the juice of olives on her hips, he lowered his lips to hers.

His kiss was slow, hot, burning. And everything in between. Leah gloried in it, wanting more and more and more, and wound her arms around his neck, nostrils flaring as she inhaled his distinctly male smell. She held on tight until her heartbeat hammered against his, mimicking it. They were one and the same.

Hidden in their world of passion, surrounded by a canopy of olive trees burgeoning with the abundance of sun-soaked life, she gave herself to his kisses. Kisses that grazed across her skin, heated it to boiling point. Kisses that promised and drew from her all she could give and then more.

But as a crow screeched overhead, she jerked back, mortified at what she had done. How easily she could give in. “We can’t...”

“We did.”

“But I can’t...” Oh lordy, it was happening all over again. She stared into dark eyes that glittered. They said so much yet so little, and he still didn’t say the words she desperately wanted to hear. She wanted to say she didn’t love him, put him off, send him away, but those words wouldn’t form, her mouth too thoroughly kissed. She slicked the tip of her tongue across her lips. Another foolish move. He’d branded her. Her eyes shuttered, and she wished she could blank everything out.

At last she found her voice. “Okay, there’s a certain chemistry between us,” she admitted, “but there’s no trust, Mac. Nothing will work without trust.”

He dropped his hands from her shoulders. “So I guess this is it?”

She looked away, not wanting him to see her disappointment that he hadn't tried harder to persuade her, fight for her. "I guess." She shrugged away her disillusionment, and Mac left her then, alone with sad thoughts of what could have been, but would never be.

After hours in the grove worrying about the threat of rain, which thankfully had held off so far, Leah sank, exhausted, into bed, but her sleep was dogged with unending dreams of Mac.

She woke late and, to top it off, with a migraine direct from hell. Already up, Charlee ran about, albeit in the restricted confines of their small home, her incessant chatter about Daddy this and Daddy that driving a nail in Leah's heart with every syllable.

As her accompanying nausea swelled, it took all Leah's energy to bite her tongue. About to head off with Charlee to kindergarten she made a final dash to the bathroom as the combination of headache and unsettled stomach finally became too much.

Her head throbbed, and waves of nausea curled up from her stomach, the acidic wretch burning her throat. Hauling herself upright, she wiped the sheen of sweat from her face with a wet facecloth. Through the damp curls plastered across her face, she caught sight of herself in the mirror.

She looked...dreadful. Sick. But it wasn't the headache that held her captive as reality whirled through the miasma. Headaches from hell she could cope with. But this new reality struck fear into her heart. Her hand fell to her stomach. Still flat. Not even a hint—except for the nausea that visited every morning.

A baby? Mac's baby.

## Chapter Fifteen

Mac stayed away, but every waking moment he'd called himself every kind of fool. Hours, days, weeks, he'd spent hunched over a computer, trialing different marketing plans as the opening date for his flagship hotel neared, drowning his brain in minutiae. Anything to forget Leah.

And for what?

He told himself he didn't bloody care—and knew himself to be a liar.

He found himself dreaming of a woman he couldn't have.

“And whose fault is that?”

His. His. His. His entire fault.

“Bloody fool.”

Somehow, he had to put it right.

Tossing aside the report he'd spent far too long trying to decipher, Mac stared out his office window and across the harbor. His thoughts were chaotic. What should have been a short assessment had become a battle for concentration.

A rap sounded at his door, but before he could answer, Connor barged in. One look at him and Mac knew he didn't have a hope in hell of preventing an imminent lecture.

His friend dropped into the club chair opposite Mac's desk. “What are you doing?”

“Wallowing in self pity,” Mac answered with all honesty.

“Thought so.”

“Pathetic, isn't it?”

“Definitely.”

Mac sniffed his disinterest.

“I know you're not in the mood for a sermon,” Connor continued, far too cheerfully as far as Mac was concerned, “but you're getting it anyway.”

“Nice of you.”

“Hey, what can I say?” Connor grinned, hands palm up as he offered a relaxed shrug. “I'm a nice guy, your best man. I have to look out for you.”

“Says who?”

“Me. Besides, it's in the ‘How to be a Best Man’ advice book.”

Mac scratched his head. “What the hell are you talking about?”

"I'm your mate, so shut up and listen."

Mac offered a mock salute and sat back. He knew whatever Connor said would be right, but he wasn't sure he wanted to hear any of it, didn't know if he was that brave.

"You should be out chasing her down. You're in love, Mac, m'boy."

"Forget it."

A satisfied smile cut the corners of Connor's mouth. "Can't do that."

It was the first time Mac had actually heard the "L" word out loud. It scared the hell out of him, and he hadn't even uttered it. He tried denial. "Your imagination is on overdrive."

"Just like your libido."

"And you think I'm in love?"

"You're exhibiting the classic symptoms."

Mac eyed his friend warily. His gut churned, brain waging a silent battle with emotions he struggled to acknowledge, not sure he even wanted to.

"Let's see." Connor counted off on the fingers of his right hand. "You can't concentrate."

"Where is this going? I'm warning you."

"You care, Mac."

*Oh shit. That's where.*

Mac held back his response. Silence was best. He'd play his cards right, get Connor and his ideas outta here.

"You've got it bad, mate."

"Bad?" Could it be fixed?

Connor offered him a knowing smile. "Very bad. Lust is replete, replaced by love."

That bad! "Tough, I'm not interested."

*Liar.*

He reached for the file that had been sitting on his desk all day that he hadn't even bothered to open and did so now. Maybe *Dear Abby* in drag would get the hint.

"Tell me Leah's beautiful body isn't crowding in on your brain space."

Mac kept his head down, not actually reading a bloody thing, the type print a blurry patch of black on white. "Shut up," he growled.

Connor smiled. "See, told you so."

Damn it. His tactics weren't working, but, and Mac hated to admit it, the man was right. He had it *real* bad.

"So what are you going to do about her?"

“Damned if I know.” He dropped the file back to his desk and found himself staring at the mound of paperwork still to be attacked. Deals. All about deals he’d been concocting, negotiating, building his empire—and for what?

His friend chuckled. “Yep. Very, very bad.”

“Shut up, Connor, I’m thinking.”

“She’s a good woman, Mac.”

He looked Connor dead in the eye. “I know.” And he’d screwed up, taken his cockeyed ideas about a woman he knew nothing about and who his brother had maligned, all to appease his own shortcomings. Then he’d promised marriage on temporary grounds so Leah’s guardianship would be safe.

A half truth.

What he wanted was to keep her in his bed.

What he wanted was to keep her in his life.

Hell! He should have realized then and run. He could do temporary, but now he was thinking permanent.

“Knowing and doing something about it are two different things,” Connor observed.

“Why the hell did I believe Curtis?” Mac couldn’t believe he’d been so wrong. “I’ve screwed up bad.”

“Because it was easier, and he’s your brother.”

“It doesn’t feel good. Believing the worst was less painful in some ways. Knowing I was wrong has caused a lot of bitterness.” Now, he’d never felt so alone in his life. “When I received Curtis’s email, it hit home. He was family, all I had left. Then he was gone, and I was left behind. Because of Charlee, I had a chance to remedy wrongs, but I only made it worse.”

“Admitting you’re wrong is always difficult.”

“Trouble is, now lust will never be enough, and I’ve dug my grave, as far as Leah’s concerned. She sent me packing.”

“So go fix it,” Connor prompted.

Mac stretched back in his chair, resting his fingertips together. How the hell did he sort this out? “She doesn’t want me, Connor,” he said. “Shit! What a mess, and it’s all my bloody fault.”

Connor leaned forward in his chair, his expression suddenly somber. “That’s never stopped you before. I know you, Mac. You love the chase.”

Mac snorted at that particular truth. “This *isn’t* business.”

“Really? I would have thought this is serious business. Something you can’t let go.”

Mac remembered his joking about funny business and, despite his misery, found himself smiling.

“So go negotiate, make a deal, fix it. Make her love you. You love Leah, don’t you?”

The truth? “Absolutely. No hesitation.”

“You know, mate, there’s one positive on the side of both of you.”

“Yeah, what’s that?” Mac wasn’t so sure he believed his friend but was desperate to try anything.

“You haven’t done anything about divorcing Leah.”

“And I don’t intend to.”

“But I think you’ve forgotten one little bit of information. She hasn’t either.”

Mac sat up a fraction straighter. “What?”

“Neither of you have pursued divorce, so perhaps there’s more chance than you realise.”

Connor left him then with a world of memories and a conscience full of blame and “what ifs” until he couldn’t deal with them any longer. He shoved them aside, because he also had a dose of hope. Connor was right. Neither of them had gone ahead with divorce papers.

Mac realized he no control over gamblers and sad childhoods. They belonged in the past, just like Leah had said. He had to make a new future, a new life, one where he would never, ever abandon those he loved. He needed to find a way to get to Leah and make her understand.

Before, the most precious thing in her life had been the sanctuary of the land and a home. The land was still there...

Buoyed by the spirit that he could fix things, he snatched up his phone and made a few calls. He wasn’t about to wait any longer to get this particular deal signed, sealed and delivered right back into his arms. Life without Leah next to him was hell, and he desperately wanted heaven with her. And Charlee. He would never forget the first time she called him Daddy. His heart had swelled with so much pride.

No, he would never give either of them up.

Within thirty minutes, he’d put everything in place and hit the freeway heading toward Leah’s. He gripped the steering wheel, trying to relax, yet every part of him felt taut and pensive. He had to convince her. Had to.

Full-blown autumn dotted the landscape, muted shades of orange and rust tinting the leaves, and the once dried grasslands now rolled lush and green after the first heavy rains. It seemed like only yesterday he had driven along these roads that first night in early summer. Back then, he’d been a man with a specific mindset, blind to his misconceptions, uncaring. Funny how love had taken over from business as his aphrodisiac of choice.

Because of Leah, because of love, all that had changed.

He smiled, laughed. It felt good. Really good.

Then he focused on the last kilometer of the narrowed country lane. He glanced to the passenger seat, checking for the umpteenth time that he had everything in place. Roses. Chocolates. Everything to woo.

The innate businessman in him couldn’t simply leave it to chance, though. Leah wanted freedom, and he was about to set her free. He’d do the right thing for love.

The sun had begun its descent as he ventured past the grove entrance, and the shadowed outlines of the olive trees tugged at his heart.

For the first time in a long time, he felt like he was coming home. He belonged here, not the palatial penthouse or his other homes in Monaco or Switzerland, or the apartments in New York and London, but here with his family.

It all made sense.

He brought the vehicle to a halt beside the mobile home and half expected Charlee to race outside to welcome him. In truth, he wanted it. Being a daddy made life special, but what he wanted more was Leah to open the door and smile at him.

The door stayed ominously closed.

Never more in his life had he felt like an awkward schoolboy on his first date, and fear lodged like a stone in the pit of his stomach. He grabbed the flowers and chocolates and, taking a deep breath, rapped on the door and waited.

The door creaked open, and Leah stood on the doorstep. She took his breath away, although she didn't look well—tired, but more than that, hollow.

"Hello, Leah."

Suspicion colored her eyes instantly to the deepest of green. "What are you doing here?"

"Are you going to ask me in?"

Her fingers curled into white-knuckled fists at her sides.

Mac frowned. "I'm sorry, did I wake you?"

"I wasn't feeling well," she said, averting her gaze from him for a moment.

He could see that, and concern clamped around his heart. He couldn't walk away and try another day. It had to be now. "How's Charlee?"

"Fine." Her tone was clipped, unyielding.

He needed to keep trying. "We need to talk, Leah."

"We've nothing to say anymore. You've made your point quite clear." She took a step back inside. He was losing her.

*You've already lost her.*

Despair heightened his urgency. "I've got some things for you." He brought the large bouquet of old-fashioned pink roses out from behind his back and held out the box of chocolates at the same time. He felt a fool, a fraud, and a husband desperate to make amends.

Tough! He was all those things.

Leah colored but didn't reach for the flowers, so he jabbed them again in her direction. "They're for you." He tried for a smile, failing miserably. "Sorry, it's a long time since I tried to woo a woman."

Her eyes widened. "That's because they usually fall at your feet or into your bed."

“Leah?”

She held up a restraining hand. “No, Mac. Don’t bother. I’m over the Grainger charm.”

“This isn’t anything to do with my family.”

“Really?”

“I mean, it’s not about Curtis. Well, it is, kinda, but not really. Oh damn this courting stuff.”

“Courting? We’re getting divorced,” she reminded him. Her mouth pursed, and for a moment he couldn’t focus on anything else except her beautiful, luscious lips. He wanted to kiss them.

Frustration tightened the noose around his neck, and he threw his hands up, complete with gifts. A few rose petals scattered to the ground, which reminded him of confetti, and that reminded him about weddings and love and marriage. “You’ve got me in knots, sweetheart. I don’t know what I’m saying or doing.”

“So why bother? I thought we had discussed all this, Mac. I can’t go through anymore.”

“And I can’t stay away any longer,” he said with complete honesty. “I know you told me not to come back after the harvest, and I obeyed.”

“Surprise, surprise.”

“Yeah, it is,” he said, finally managing a hint of a smile. “I had to come. I want to fix things. I want to fix us.”

She began to fidget, one bare foot rubbing against the other. Her gaze shifted to the grove then back to him. He was glad of that, wanted her to keep looking at him so he could do the same—look at her and hopefully see a hint of forgiveness in her expression.

“I made a mistake. Can you forgive me?”

Uncertainty flickered across her tired eyes. It held Mac captive. All he wanted to do was hold her, love her, but he knew that if he rushed her, she would run from him.

“You hurt me, Mac. Charlee too. She misses her daddy, and you broke her heart.”

A fresh wave of guilt washed over him. “I know. I’m sorry.”

“But what was worse is that you condemned me without knowing me. You wanted to make me pay for someone else’s lies, and all because of your own guilt. Why?”

Her question was a soft plea, yet its impact on his conscience was huge. “I’m only a man, not infallible.”

Soft silken curls fell forward and shadowed her eyes, hiding her emotions. She offered a strangled laugh. “It’s too late to mend this bridge. It’s collapsed.”

*Damn. Keep trying.* “It doesn’t have to be,” he said, praying for absolution.

“I won’t settle for half of anything anymore.”

His eyes widened. Wasn’t that what he was doing now?

“Oh yes, you offered me your body, but not your...” Leah suddenly clammed up.



"I want you. I do, believe me."

"Maybe you do, but not in the right way. The way that I need you to."

He was losing her. "We could date," he said, desperation taking over.

A soft chuckle burst from her lips, and for the first time, she offered him a slight smile. "Are you that patient?"

"You know me too well."

She nodded. "You could be right." The tip of her tongue slid across her lips, and the tension in Mac upped a thousand notches.

*Tell her. Tell her you love her.*

"There are different types of want, Mac. What's yours?"

*Tell her.*

"I can be patient. I can do whatever *you* want, whatever it takes. Leah, do you love me?"

She gripped the sides of the mobile home's doorway and studied him for a moment. "I thought we had decided what we had was only sex."

"Great sex," he asserted.

"Wonderful sex," she agreed. Her tiny smile scored a direct hit with his heart and gave him a fraction of hope at last.

"Successful marriages have been made on less," he suggested.

Her smile vanished, and she grew serious once more. "But not mine. I've had one marriage that failed because of a husband who couldn't provide what I needed."

"Safety and security," he prompted.

She shook her head, and clutched at her robe, pulling it closer together. He'd never seen her look so sad, and that he had caused it dug his grave into hell. "No. He couldn't love me."

The moment she opened the door to Mac, Leah's heart began to pound, and she had to clamp her lips together to stop her telling him she loved him.

Then she watched the light in his eyes dance with hope. It surprised her, because for a man whose emotions were normally kept well hidden, today they were clear for her to see. Yet she held her ground. He wanted her. But would *want* ever be enough?

Instinctively she knew that this moment would determine their future. She loved him but couldn't let him come back unless she believed him, trusted him, and knew in her heart he loved her.

"Love is useless without trust, Mac. It doesn't matter what we have in bed. I can give you my body, but trust is far more precious. You destroyed it from the outset. I'm not sure if I can let myself trust you." *I've already given you my heart.*

"I know."

With every word she uttered, hope died that bit more; for whatever reason, he couldn't say that he loved her.

Her fingers curled into fists, nails digging into her flesh until the pain dissolved into a raw numbness. She took another step back into her tiny world, closing off her heart, distancing herself. She had to end this now. "My solicitor has the divorce papers prepared. Your copy will arrive in the mail," she said bluntly.

Mac's mouth drooped, and his shoulders sagged. "And that's it?"

"Yes." Tears crystallized, wavering on bursting the banks. She had to get away. She couldn't let him see her cry again. That would be too hard, make her too vulnerable. And right now she needed to hold on to any sliver of courage and conviction she possessed. "I can't go through this again. You have to go."

"There's something else. Something you need to know before you decide."

"I already have."

"I've paid the bank."

"What?"

"Your mortgage. I've paid it off. You don't need to worry about the debt."

Leah's knees threatened to buckle beneath her, and she grabbed hold of the door handle. "I don't want to owe you. I owe the bank."

"You don't, not anymore."

Anger unfurled at every word he uttered. "You bastard, you've done it again. How dare you try and manipulate me. I don't need you, I don't *want* you." *Such lies.*

"I know."

"Good. At last you've got that in your thick skull. What gives you the right to try and take over again?"

"I haven't. I've paid the debt, Leah, not bought it. The debt was incurred by Curtis, not you. It's not right you should pay it."

"Oh." Shock held her speechless. She had finally truly got her freedom. So why wasn't she happy?

"There's another thing," he said as he reached into his pocket and held out an envelope.

"What is it?"

"Just read it, Leah. It's something you want, what you really deserve, sweetheart."

Hearing the endearment, Leah stiffened. "Is this where your actions come with conditions?"

"I don't blame you for being suspicious."

"I have good reason."

"It's the least I could do. I should have listened to my instincts. You're a good mother, Leah. Caring. Loving. A child couldn't want for more."

"Thank you. That means a lot to me." Nervous breathing finally arrested, she took the crisp white envelope with shaking fingers. It was addressed to her with an official seal stamped on one corner.

Edging her fingernail beneath the seal, she ripped it open and drew out a single piece of paper. Her heart froze, gaze glued to the words at the top. Then she looked up at Mac. "It's from the courts."

"It is."

"Oh, Mac. The custody. Charlee's legally mine." Tears stung her eyes, her joy instant.

"She always was. You're her mother, Leah. One hundred percent. I'm sorry our family ruined your life. If I had known about Curtis's addiction, I wouldn't have assumed..."

"My automatic guilt," she finished for him.

"Yes."

Her head spun, and she struggled to take it all in. She'd also made the mistake of painting him with the same brush as his brother, condemning him of being like Curtis. Now he apologized, and she said nothing, offered no forgiveness.

Shoulders slumped, Mac took a couple of steps back. "Good-bye, Leah."

Leah's heart shattered. Mac was going. This was it. The end. No more marriage. No more loving.

"Give my love to Charlee," he said, "and don't worry about her physical therapy. I'll continue to pay for it. It's the least I can do."

Desire and defeat swirled in his gaze. But with the downward fall of onyx lashes, he shielded those emotions. He turned abruptly away from her, but not before Leah spied something she would have never, ever have believed possible. Something so real, so emotive, it ripped at her heart with such force that her love for him swelled.

"Mac." She reached out a tentative hand, realizing at that single moment she believed him, and no matter what, she couldn't let him go.

Why?

Because she had seen the one thing that made her *believe* Mac Grainger truly loved her, even without words.

With the caress of her thumb, she wiped away Mac's tear. Just one tear, but that was all it took. One tear from a hard man was enough to show her he really cared. That he loved her. "What you said... Is that true?" she asked, her heart slowing as she prayed for his answer.

"Sweet Leah. I'm lost without you."

"You can't own me, Mac."

"I don't mean it that way, but if you aren't mine to cherish, to adore, to create a family with, to be with forever, then I am a sad lost cause who didn't figure it out until it was too late."

"And you get it now?"

He lifted his gaze heavenward for a moment, then those same bedroom eyes she had come to love so much, returned to look at her. "Oh yeah, I get it. I love you so much I ache."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I thought I had. The chocolates, flowers..."

"But not in words. I needed you to say those three little words."

"Oh, Leah, sweetheart, I do. I love you, Leah Grainger." He took her hands in his, warm to the touch, a touch she remembered so well. "So what do you say?"

"That depends on the question."

"We've been married," he said with quiet solemnity.

Her stomach lurched. "And are about to be divorced."

His hands tightened on hers. "I want to put all the wrongs right. Curtis screwed up. Our grandfather began a legacy that hit too many road bumps. It needs smoothing out."

"You want to do this for them?"

"No. I want to do it for you. For us. With you, I know what real deep love is, not something half hearted. I want you to love me, and I want to live your passion at the farm with you. I want to be beside you and help you and raise Charlee with you. Will you let me?"

Oh, how she loved this man. She'd never let him go. Ever. "Depends," she said with a teasing smile through her own tears.

"Anything, sweetheart, anything you want. I'll build you a mansion fit for a princess."

"I don't need things." Funny how the land and house once seemed so important. Now, contentment didn't come from owning something. She turned toward the ruins that were once her home. "But there are two things I do need."

"Name them."

"Your love."

"You got it. Forever and ever."

"Good, because I love you too, Mac Grainger, and want you for ever and ever. And," she said, wondering how he'd take the other little bit of news, "we need a baby carriage."

A slow, simmering incredulity washed across Mac's face, followed by a wave of joy and love, wonderful emotions she wanted to see forever mirrored in the most beautiful eyes of the man she loved. "You're pregnant? How?"

Bubbling laughter followed his surprise. "You ask that?" She reached over, took his scarred hand and rested it on her stomach. "I just found out. I was going to tell you."

"A baby," he murmured. His eyes closed and then flicked right back open. "Oh, sweetheart, a family. You, me, Charlee and a baby. I love you, Leah. Will you please, please stay married to me?"

"Forever, darling. You've got us forever."

## About the Author

In books, Author Jane Beckenham discovered dreams and hope, stories that inspired in her a love of romance and happy ever after. Years later, after a blind date, Jane found her own true love and married him eleven months later.

Life has been a series of ‘dreams’ for Jane. Dreaming of learning to walk again after spending years in hospital. Dreaming of raising a family and subsequently flying to Russia to bring home her two adopted daughters. And of course, dreaming of writing.

Writing has become Jane’s addiction—and it sure beats housework.

You can contact Jane via her web site [www.janebeckenham.com](http://www.janebeckenham.com) or email her at [neiljane@ihug.co.nz](mailto:neiljane@ihug.co.nz)

Look for these titles by Jane Beckenham

*Now Available:*

Romeo for Hire  
He's the One

*Virginity is overrated.*

## He's The One

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Taylor Sullivan doesn't trust Cupid, but she plays one for a living. As a successful wedding consultant, she creates a couple's ultimate fantasy—even though she's never managed to create her own. And when her clients start asking her for wedding night advice, she's sensible enough to know when to enlist help.

Cade Harper knows two things about women. They either abandon him, or use him as a walking bank. He doesn't do commitment, and marriage is a dirty word—witness the string of broken hearts he's left in his wake. Yet Taylor's business proposition intrigues him. In exchange for one night of no-strings passion, she'll develop a promotional plan for his business. Who could say no?

Never one to buy anything sight unseen, Taylor tests the waters with a kiss. In an instant she has the only answer she's ever wanted—that Cade is the one she wants.

As business starts tumbling into pleasure, Cade finds himself falling hard and fast.

It's a fantasy come true—if they can turn heartache into forever...

*Warning: Contains explicit, straight-to-the-heart sex between a hopeless romantic heroine and an abandon-all-hope hero. No need to dress up for this party—just curl up with a glass of bubbly and a box of tissues!*

*Enjoy the following excerpt for He's The One:*

"Virginity is overrated." Easy words? She'd said them often enough.

Yet when Taylor Sullivan whispered them, the swell of panic threatened to take hold.

She had to do this.

It was time.

Taylor exhaled every emotion she'd bottled for the past twenty-four hours, ever since she'd seen him: Mr. Perfect-for-the-Job.

As she stood outside the bar, her bravado waned and panic set in. Who wouldn't panic when they were about to make an off-the-wall suggestion to a stranger?

She gripped her assistant's arm. "I can't. This is a mistake."

"No, it's not. You said so yourself, he's the one."

"What do I know? I mean, *who* is he?"

"Cade Harper. Bad boy made good—and one sexy hunk. Is that enough for you?" Nita gave her a suggestive grin.

*Oh, yeah.*

Taylor wiped her sweaty palms down the sides of her skirt. “The fairy godmother sure did hand out good looks at his bassinet.” He’d been the best man at a wedding she’d planned recently. Haloed by the light streaming in from the stained glass window, he’d taken her breath away.

But now, twenty-four hours after that wedding, as the throbbing beat of music threaded its way out onto the kerb where she and Nita waited, Taylor’s wayward nerves vaulted into overdrive. “I should never have told you.”

Nita shrugged. “Probably not, but, hey, I get those calls too.”

“But you can answer them,” Taylor countered.

“So, what are you going to do about it?”

Taylor bit down on her bottom lip, chewing it as if it afforded her the luxury of time. “I don’t want a relationship.”

“Who said anything about a relationship? This is a fling. A one-nighter. Get you past first base, so to speak.”

First base! Taylor swallowed the lump that choked off her breathing. The icy chill that slid along her bones had absolutely nothing to do with Auckland’s balmy May evening breeze.

Her fingers grazed the side of her handbag and snapped back as if scalded when she remembered exactly what her bag contained.

Condoms!

An appropriate reminder: preparation and safety first.

She could do this. She could. She grabbed Nita’s arm. “Okay. Let’s go.”

Nita stalled mid-step. “What? You expect me to come too?”

“I need you. I can’t do this on my own. I need...”

“Cade Harper is who you need, Taylor. You said so yourself. Cade’s a love ’em and leave ’em sort of guy. Now go.” Nita gave her a push toward the entrance and waved goodbye.

Love and leave. Definitely perfect credentials. Cade didn’t know it yet, but he was the answer to Taylor’s prayers.

Battling the raw panic lodged in her gut as every second edged her toward turning and running, Taylor surveyed the patrons. Her hands shook. She wanted to forget the idea. Forget sex. Forget Cade Harper. If she could.

Instead she focused on the entrance, and her pulse quickened.

*The best man. How appropriate.*

Cade hadn’t been at the wedding rehearsal; otherwise she would have noticed him. But at the wedding, dressed in a black tuxedo that molded his broad shoulders and a crisp white dress shirt with diamond stud buttons, he absolutely stood out and, within seconds, she’d made her decision. He was perfect for the job.



Squaring her shoulders, Taylor shoved the bar door open. For a moment, she stood motionless, eyes adjusting to the dim lighting, the noise and heat hitting her in an undulating wave.

This was it.

Taking a deep breath, she clutched her bag and ventured in.

A single length of hand-chiseled wood operated as a bar and spanned one end of the room. Behind it were a medley of liquors and an ornate mirror etched with the slogan of a famous beer. Tables and chairs dotted around the room were mostly already taken. In one corner, a jukebox emitted ear-piercing rock music. In another corner, an eager group of players surrounded a pool table.

All of this was of little consequence to Taylor, because all she could focus on was her quarry—Cade Harper.

He stood behind the bar, a cocktail shaker in one hand and a salt-crusted margarita glass in the other.

Tawny, sun-bronzed hair tapered over his collar, and an unruly tendril dipped across his forehead, seemingly refusing to be controlled. He looked good. Very sexy.

No tuxedo tonight, but a black T-shirt with the sleeves rolled back, stretched taut over biceps that flexed and...

Oh, God.

Definitely a bad boy.

Taylor wiped a hand across her brow and her tongue over suddenly parched lips. The temperature had escalated several degrees in one blazing second.

Partially hidden by a potted ficus, heart dancing on an erratic beat, she watched Cade.

“Can I help you?”

Taylor spun around. “I...”

The voice belonged to a female version of Cade. She had the same coloring and the same dark eyes. Taylor glanced toward Cade over the woman’s head. “I’m here to see Mr. Harper,” she mumbled. *Mister! Good grief!* She wanted to have sex with this man, and she called him mister!

“Cade?” his replica responded, eyebrows quirking upward.

Taylor nodded, relieved the woman didn’t ask any questions, and wondered at the same time what her reaction would have been if she’d said, “It’s about sex.”

“Follow me.” The young woman crooked her finger toward Taylor, turned and wove her way between tables. With trepidation and anticipation colliding inside her stomach, Taylor hurried after the woman.

“Cade.”

“Yeah.” He handed the margarita to a customer, and Taylor’s gaze followed the salt-rimmed glass. It shimmered under the overhead lighting, and she found herself licking her lips, almost tasting the delicious salt.

“Lady to see you.”

The moment Cade turned, *everything* changed.

Cade Harper. Bad boy. One sexy guy.

Taylor's voice stalled in her throat, and she knew, when his smiling eyes captured hers, she was in way over her head.

Cade wiped his hands on a cloth and again Taylor's gaze followed. Long, lean fingers. Fingers that would touch... *Oh, boy!*

He smiled. "You wanted to see me?"

She nodded and felt herself drowning in that smile. His dark eyes twinkled, a swirl of gold and chocolate brown. Just like Hershey Kisses.

Kisses!

Yep. She was definitely going under.

"Lady, I don't mean to be rude, but I've got a bar to run," he said, grabbing a knife and cutting a lemon into wafer-thin slices.

Taylor shook herself. *Okay. Come on. Just say it.* "I've got a favor to ask."

"Ask away then," he said, not looking up.

Taylor burned and eyed the milling crowd. "Actually, it's a proposition."

He definitely looked then, and his gaze focused on her. He placed the razor-sharp knife on the cutting board. His mouth quirked at one corner, smiling, gaze assessing. "Sounds intriguing."

*She's a dreamer. He's a realist. Somewhere in the middle is love—and danger.*

## Where Dreams Begin

© 2011 Phoebe Conn

After her husband's death, Catherine Brooks is ready to go back to work—almost. She volunteers at a shelter for homeless teens, Lost Angel, thinking it will ease her return to the classroom. There's nothing easy about irascible shelter manager Luke Starns, though. His cool detachment rubs her the wrong way, especially when he warns her not to get too attached. Still, the soft heart she senses beneath his stern exterior keeps her coming back—and his face pervades her thoughts.

It's not that Luke finds Catherine's easy charm and free spirit unappealing—quite the opposite. Life on the streets is hard, and discipline is the only ladder that'll get and keep these kids out of trouble. He knows what it's like to care too much, only to have the rug yanked away. He tells himself he's simply trying to save her the same heartache.

Yet Catherine has him rethinking his approach to life. Just as he lets his guard down, though, a murderer begins stalking the mean streets near the shelter, putting everything they care about at risk. Including their lives.

*Warning: This book contains a gritty setting, a serial killer in a red satin dress, and a couple who think sizzling sex is the only kind worth having.*

*Enjoy the following excerpt for Where Dreams Begin:*

On Wednesday, Catherine visited the charity thrift shop and dropped off the clothes and shoes she and Joyce had sorted. By Thursday morning, her garden looked beautiful, and she'd run out of excuses to stay away from Lost Angel. She drove on over to Hollywood, but she was determined to avoid Luke Starns and felt certain he would do his best to avoid her.

Pam again put Catherine to work opening the mail, and when she finished, she carried the stack of new flyers over to the hall to post. She'd nearly completed the task when a slender girl in a fuzzy pink sweater and tight jeans came up to look over her shoulder. Catherine turned to smile and found the girl had the remarkable prettiness of Alice in Wonderland, with startling blue eyes and long, blonde hair.

"Hello," Catherine greeted her. "I hope if you recognize anyone, you'll encourage them to call home."

The girl shrugged and slid her hands into her hip pockets. "I don't see anyone I know."

Like so many of the teens Catherine had seen on Friday, the girl looked painfully young. Catherine doubted she would have approached her if she hadn't wanted to talk, but uncertain how best to initiate a conversation, she adjusted the angle of a bright pink flyer and kept quiet.

"You're new here, aren't you?" the girl asked without glancing Catherine's way.

“Yes, I am.” Catherine offered her name as she posted another flyer, but she had a lengthy wait before the girl responded.

“My name’s Violet. I just come here sometimes to look at the books, but I didn’t find anything good today.”

Catherine had noticed the sagging shelves which contained the center’s paperback library. “I’ve got quite a collection of paperbacks at home,” she said. “What sort of books do you like?”

Violet shrugged again. “The ones with pretty covers.” She reached out to finger the rolled corner on a faded orange flyer that had been on display for several months. “You know, the ones where there’s a couple dancing or just staring into each other’s eyes?”

“Yes. Those are romances. I love to read them too. I’ll bring in some of mine on my next visit. Do you come here often?”

Violet began to inch away. “No. Like I said, I just come by to check out the books.”

Catherine hadn’t meant to frighten Violet away, but as she turned to smile, the girl bolted for the door. When she found Luke blocking the way, she simply turned sideways and slipped by him with a hasty wave.

Luke didn’t look pleased, but as he walked toward Catherine, she couldn’t imagine what she’d done wrong this time. She inhaled deeply and vowed to hang on to her temper, regardless of how easily Luke Starns lost his. Choosing to ignore him, she admired her neat arrangement of new flyers, which was a vast improvement over the last volunteer’s haphazard posting.

Luke stopped so close to Catherine their shoulders were nearly touching. “Thanks for putting up the flyers,” he offered in a hushed whisper. “I hope Violet didn’t give you any trouble.”

It hadn’t even occurred to Catherine that Luke could have been annoyed with Violet rather than her. Feeling very foolish, she forced a smile. “Why no. We merely exchanged a few words about books, and I offered to bring in some of mine.”

“Oh, great. Come on. I’ll walk you back to the office.” Luke grabbed the stapler off the adjacent table and gestured for Catherine to precede him.

Catherine moved toward the door with a purposeful stride, but even then she felt as though Luke were rushing her. “Is there something wrong?” she asked as they moved out into the courtyard.

Luke caught her arm and with a gentle tug pulled her to a halt while they were still out in the open. “I’m positive that during the orientation I stressed that we never make promises we can’t keep. That goes for something as simple as a few used books.”

His chambray shirt had been faded by a hundred washings, but there was nothing soft in his manner, and Catherine found it difficult to look at him. Fortunately, the stone courtyard possessed the tranquility of a cloister, leading her to believe the dull gray granite probably possessed greater warmth than Luke ever did.

"If I tell someone I'll bring in a few used books, or a bucket of dirt, for that matter, I'll follow through," she insisted. "It's a shame you've apparently been disappointed in your other volunteers, but I always keep my word."

Catherine took pride in how positive she sounded, but in truth, she was deeply offended. "Violet is little more than a lovely child. Do you honestly believe that I'd disappoint her?"

Luke swore under his breath. "You mustn't allow yourself to become attached to any of the kids, and that goes double for Violet Simms."

He paused to make certain he had Catherine's full attention. "Violet's father abused her sexually while her mother pretended not to know about it. Violet left home as soon as other men began to notice her. Now she's living with a mechanic who calls himself Ford Dolan. That son of a bitch is as bad as her father, and she comes in here more often than not with a black eye."

"Can't you have him arrested?" Catherine asked.

"There's no point in it when Violet won't swear out a complaint against him. Don't encourage her to depend on you for books or anything else, Catherine, because she'll surely break your heart."

Catherine's heart was already broken, but despite the lack of risk, she couldn't agree. "I'm sorry to argue with you again, but I truly believe it's imperative for these kids to know someone cares about them."

Luke kept his voice low, but it failed to disguise his irritation. "I didn't say I didn't care. If I didn't give a damn, I wouldn't be here, but there's an enormous difference between a professional offering effective guidance and a misguided volunteer creating more harm than good."

Catherine didn't understand how the man could be so incredibly dense. "I'm not trying to challenge your authority here, Dr. Starns. Do you have an objection to volunteers donating paperback books for your library?"

"No," Luke snorted. "Of course, not."

Catherine waited for him to realize how senseless their latest argument truly was. With his only child dead and his wife gone, she could easily understand why he'd walled up his heart, but she had no desire to emulate his chilling example.

"Are you seeing a therapist yourself?" she asked.

"That's none of your damn business, Mrs. Brooks."

Luke left Catherine standing in the middle of the courtyard and entered the office alone, but she wasn't ashamed to have asked the question. He might have the professional credentials to run Lost Angel, but she considered him pathetically lacking in empathy.

The cloudless sky was the same vivid blue as Violet's eyes, and she stood there a long moment simply to enjoy it. The frantic flight of a hummingbird drew her attention to the honeysuckle growing up the side of the granite church. Since Sam's death, she'd learned to treasure such sweet distractions, and she took it

as an omen that any kindness she showed Violet, or anyone else at Lost Angel, would bring only good results.

It wasn't until that evening when she'd sunk down into a hot bubble bath that she recalled the slight break in Luke's voice as he'd spoken her first name. There'd been a whisper of hurt in that instant, but if she wasn't mistaken, there'd also been a husky hint of desire.



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