
Sell Me A Dream

by Leigh Michaels

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CHAPTER ONE

The wind had grown stronger, and brightly colored leaves showered down from the thinning trees. Stephanie Kendall stood on the front steps of the sprawling new house and stared out across the rolling hills. She felt a little like an autumn leaf herself, with her auburn hair blowing in the cool breeze.

Behind her, a woman spoke. “Stephanie, thank you,” she said, her voice a little breathless. “I had to come out and look at it again, now that it’s mine.” Her gesture took in the whole front of the house. “It’s always been my dream to own a house like this, and today it’s become real. Thank you for helping me to find it.”

Stephanie smiled, and her face lit up. “It was my pleasure, Mrs. Bruce.” *I don’t make my living by selling houses, she thought, but by selling dreams.*

Real estate wasn’t just a business to her. The joy of making dreams come true—of fanning the flicker of tentative interest in a house until it grew into a passionate love for four walls and a roof—that was the work of a good real estate agent. It was work that Stephanie loved.

Silly, she told herself. Selling houses is just another job.

It was easy to be enthusiastic on the day a sale was closed, she thought, when the papers were signed, the cash handed over, the commissions paid. The rest of the time—the seemingly endless hours that she spent with Mrs. Bruce and the dozens like her, inspecting every new listing—it was more difficult to be cheerful about the job of a real estate agent. But a day like today, and a sales commission the size of this one, made all the hours worthwhile. She could go home today with a clear head, knowing that she could pay her bills for the next few months, until the next sale was finalized and the next commission was paid.

“I’ll send you an invitation to the housewarming!” Mrs. Bruce called, as Stephanie reached her car. “You and Tony both. I heard him say he was taking you out to dinner tonight, so we won’t keep him long over the rest of the paperwork!”

Stephanie waved back. Then she maneuvered her little car down the winding drive and out on to the wide street. It was one of the best neighborhoods in town, and one of the more expensive. And it was her first really big sale. Until now, she’d handled the tract houses, the bungalows, the ageing apartment buildings. But

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Tony, the broker she worked for, had said that she was ready for bigger things. With his help in the last few months she'd sold several newer houses. Yes, she thought, the career that had started off so quietly three years ago was finally taking fire.

And there was Tony. She glanced down at the ring on her left hand. The diamond set in the gold ring was small, but it was good quality. Besides, Stephanie thought, it was childish to want the flash and display of a big diamond to show off. She was just as much engaged with a small stone as with a full carat. Good, solid quality would last.

The diamond in her ring was a little like Tony himself, she thought. He wasn't handsome, and he was quite a little older than Stephanie. But he was dependable, and reliable, and honest—and those were the things that mattered in the long run. Tony would never betray her, never leave her, because she would be the most important thing in his life.

The momentary vision of another man's face formed in her mind, and she shook her head, trying to force it to go away. But the image of dark hair and eyes the deep blue of a tropical bay refused to leave her.

Why was she thinking of Jordan so much these last few days? It had all been over long ago, when he had left her, and there was no reason to think about him any more. She would think about Tony instead.

She squashed the fleeting thought that Tony's reliability was hardly the stuff that passion was made of. "I will never let myself be betrayed again," she said firmly, and stopped the car in the driveway of her parents' house. "And I will not think of Jordan any more."

A thread of smoke rose from a pile of leaves near the curb. Her father, standing near the pile with his rake, raised a hand in greeting. A tiny figure in a bright orange jacket extricated herself from another, deeper pile of leaves and came running to the car.

"Mommy!" she squealed in delight. "Grampa's burnin' leaves, and Gramma's bakin' cookies, and—"

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Stephanie picked up her squirming daughter and held her close. The child's rounded cheeks were pink with cold, and her big blue eyes were bright. Under the hood of her jacket, tendrils of dark hair peeked out.

And suddenly Stephanie realized why she thought of Jordan so often these days. For Katie was his daughter, too, and now that the chubbiness of babyhood was leaving her, she was growing to look more like him every day. The change had crept upon Stephanie so suddenly that the abrupt realization was almost like finding a different child substituted for her own.

Why, Stephanie thought, why couldn't she have looked like me? It isn't fair that I must be reminded of him every time I see her.

No, she told herself. It isn't important who Katie looks like. No matter who her father was, she is my daughter now. That's the only thing that matters.

"Did you sell any dreams today?" Katie asked, practically.

Stephanie laughed. "Yes, darling. One very large dream, and we are—relatively speaking—rich. For the moment, at least."

Katie looked puzzled. Then she wriggled out of Stephanie's arms. "Does that mean I can have a bike now instead of that silly old tricycle?"

"Not quite. You're still a little young for that." She swung Katie's hand high in hers as they crossed the lawn. Her father was putting out the fire, and billows of smoke rolled out of the pile of leaves.

"Not having much luck?" Stephanie asked.

Karl Daniels laughed. "They're too wet. But burning leaves smell so good that I just had to try it anyway. I understand from the little news network there that Grandma is baking cookies."

"If anyone would know, Katie would. She can smell chocolate chips from three blocks away."

"I vote we go in and try a few," he suggested.

The big kitchen was heavy with the aroma from the oven, and for a minute Stephanie thought she had walked back in time to the days of her own childhood. Coming in after school to the smell of bread or cookies or chocolate cake—if it

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wasn't for the child chattering beside her she could almost have forgotten the passage of years.

She kissed her mother's cheek and picked up a cookie fresh from the baking sheet. Anne Daniels smiled. "You were always good at that trick," she said.

"Dad taught me to always kiss the cook before I reached for a snack."

Karl snorted. "She's giving away all my secrets. Come on, Katie. Let's go clean up."

As their voices died away down the hall, Stephanie draped her jacket over a chair and pulled up a stool. "How was Katie today?"

"She's never any trouble, Stephanie. You know I love to have her around."

"I know that you always say that. But I worry about asking you to keep her, Mother. She's a handful for me, and I know that you—"

"Are you implying that I can't keep up with a four-year-old?" But Anne's voice was light. "I'm happy to help out. I took her downtown today, by the way. Ingall's had a sale, and I found a lovely snowsuit for her. Now we just need boots and she'll be all ready for winter."

"Mom..." Stephanie bit her tongue. They had had this argument a dozen times, and her mother always won. And, Stephanie had to admit, the financial help was hard to refuse. It took years in the real estate field before any kind of steady income was assured, and with Katie growing so fast it was hard to keep her clothed. But, at the same time, Stephanie's pride rebelled at the idea of anyone else being responsible for Katie. She had made that choice, had taken over that duty. It was her job, and hers alone, to be sure that her child was properly cared for.

And now that her father had been forced into early retirement when the company he worked for had closed, her parents' budget was just as tight as Stephanie's own. Her mother didn't have the money to spend that she used to have, but she was still buying things for Katie. It made Stephanie uncomfortable.

"Did the closing go well today?" Anne asked. She took another tray of cookies from the oven.

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“All according to plan. Mrs. Bruce has her new house, and I’ll get my commission check tomorrow, after Tony figures up his share.”

Anne sighed. “It doesn’t seem fair, does it, that you do all the work of selling a house and then he takes so much of it.”

“But he pays for all the office expenses, and for all the advertising, and for all the telephone calls.”

“I’d think that he’d work out a better deal with you than with the other salesmen he has. After all, Stephanie, you are a little different.”

Stephanie laughed. “I may be engaged to him, but he is still running a business, after all, Mom. He has to turn a profit.” She bit into another cookie, and said indistinctly, “He’s taking me to dinner tonight to celebrate.”

“Will wonders never cease.” Anne bit her tongue, and then said, “Sorry, that slipped out.”

Stephanie finished off her cookie, and asked curiously, “Why don’t you like Tony?”

Anne was silent a long time. Then she said, “Where is he taking you for dinner?”

“You aren’t going to answer my question, are you?”

“I wish you hadn’t asked it.” Anne’s eyes were troubled. “If Tony is what you want, then Karl and I will welcome him into our family. But..”

“But you don’t like the idea, do you? All I want to know is, why? What is it that you don’t like about Tony?”

There was a long pause. “Stephanie, I don’t want to have resentments build up. It will be hard enough for you, starting out on a second marriage, without any tension between Tony and us.”

“I need an answer, Mom.”

For an instant, they were squared off, like boxers in a ring, as they had done in the days of Stephanie’s teenage rebellions. Then Anne sighed, and said, “I don’t

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have anything against Tony, really. It's just a feeling. He's so darned inflexible, Stephanie. Every moment of his life is planned and detailed and mapped out."

"He's very well organized," Stephanie conceded.

"That's what I said. Inflexible. Nothing impromptu—nothing on the spur of the moment. He's obviously in no hurry to marry you."

"I should think you'd see that as a point in his favor."

Anne seemed not to have heard the interruption. "And he's always so darned neat. I'll bet he never went on a picnic in his life, because they're too messy."

"Lots of people don't like picnics, Mom."

"That's not the point, Stephanie, and you know it. Children don't fit into molds. I'm afraid for Katie—that he'll try to make her the perfect little girl, according to his rules."

"Mother, he adores Katie. He's very willing to be her father."

"But Katie already has a father, Stephanie."

"Some father. He's never seen her, never shown any interest in her.." *Or in me*, she told herself, to soften the pang of conscience that gnawed at her. She had never told her mother the truth, that when Jordan had left he hadn't known about Katie.

Then, irritably, she defended herself. She hadn't told him she was going to have a child because she hadn't known it herself. And he had never contacted her again, so there had been no chance to tell him. He didn't care...

Then, suspiciously, she asked, "Why are you suddenly sticking up for Jordan, Mom?"

"I'm not," Anne denied softly. "I think what he did to you was dreadful. But Katie needs him, and you could stand the help. He should at least be sending you some money for her."

"Mom, I don't need Jordan's help. Not his money—in case he has any—nor anything else. I'm earning my own way now. This commission today is the turning point. And as for Katie, she doesn't need Jordan, either. She'll be a lot better off

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with Tony as a stepfather than with the random support money that Jordan might be pushed into.”

“But he should be responsible.”

“I wouldn’t bet that he’d take it seriously. Jordan was never wild about the idea of kids. I can’t imagine that he’d worry himself about Katie just because I told him he should.”

Anne was shaking her head. “He wouldn’t feel that way if he once saw her. She’s such a charming child, Stephanie—no father could turn his back on her.”

If you’d think about that, Mother, Stephanie thought, you would know why I don’t want to ask him for money. I think you’re wrong, but I’m taking no chances.

“And I think Jordan would do the right thing,” Anne went on. “After all, during the divorce, he offered you a settlement.”

“Some settlement,” Stephanie muttered.

“I will never understand why you wouldn’t take any thing from him. You were proud, yes, but you should have taken it for Katie if nothing else. It was a generous offer.”

Stephanie sighed. “To refresh your memory, Mother, he offered me a percentage of his earnings. It sounded generous, but, if you’ll remember, he had left me for a job in that rinky-dink outfit where they skipped paydays altogether just to save the paperwork when the check bounced. Jordan, the man who was going to set the world on fire, was working for the fun of it.”

“But perhaps then you could have finished school,” Anne said wistfully.

“Not quite, Mom. Twenty per cent of nothing is still zero. It was an empty offer. He could have given me half of everything he made, and I’d still have gotten zip, plus a lot of aggravation in trying to collect. No, thanks. I’ll take care of myself—and Katie— without Jordan.”

Anne said tartly, “It couldn’t have been much more uncertain than what you’re doing now.”

“It takes time to get a start in real estate. But I’m there now, Mom. If everyone will just be patient with me, with Tony’s help I can make it.”

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“Accept his help. But please don’t marry him, honey.”

“I’ll marry whoever I want, Mom.”

“I know you will, dear.”

“Just what does that mean?” Stephanie asked suspiciously. “You and Dad didn’t want me to marry Jordan, either.”

“That’s right. We’d scarcely met him. And look what happened!”

Stephanie counted to ten, and then she said, quietly, “I’ll try to forget that you said that. Now, I need to take Katie home so I can feed her and get ready to go out myself. Thanks for babysitting.”

Her mother said, “I’m sorry, Stephanie, I shouldn’t have said it.”

Stephanie paused in the doorway, her spine rigid. Then she walked on, as if she hadn’t heard.

Her own little house looked snug and inviting under the spreading branches of the maple tree. Most of the leaves had dropped. “That’s our weekend project, Katie,” she told her as she released the buckle of the child’s safety belt. “Cleaning up the yard and getting it ready for winter.”

A wisp of smoke curled from the chimney. The day had grown steadily colder, and now the furnace was running. *’Tis the season for high utility bills*, she thought, and then remembered the size of the check that Tony would be giving her tomorrow at the office. How she would have liked to have that money last winter! There had been so many things she had wanted to do in the house— put a dishwasher in the kitchen, for one thing, and hang new curtains. Maybe put down carpeting in Katie’s bedroom. The hardwood floors were so cold on small bare feet, and the child simply would not keep her shoes on.

But this year, with the house on the market, there was no point in investing in any of those things. She would sell it just as it was, and let the new owners dream of the improvements that she had planned for so long. Then she and Tony would use the money left over after the mortgage was paid as a down payment on a bigger house for all of them.

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She was surprised that her mother hadn't asked if she had found a buyer for her house yet. But then, she thought, perhaps it wasn't unusual after all. Anne Daniels probably didn't want to know the details; she probably included in her prayers every night a special request that Stephanie's house would not sell, for she knew as well as anyone that, until it did, the wedding date would not be set.

Her mother was right about one thing, Stephanie admitted. Tony wasn't in any hurry to be married. Postponing the wedding had been his idea. Stephanie had wanted to go ahead with the ceremony and have Tony move into the little house. It would be cramped with all three of them, but it would only be for a little while, and they could save the rent he was paying on his apartment. But Tony had put his foot down. He would not, he said, be confined in a two-by-four house for the winter....

She paused on the porch as the teenager who lived next door came out with a rug to shake. "Hi, Julie!" she called. "Can you babysit tonight?"

"Sure. Where are you going?"

It was a friendly question, not a nosy one, and Stephanie didn't hesitate. "Tony's taking me to the country club for dinner."

Julie grinned. "Aren't we getting to be quite the social butterfly?" she laughed. "Are you still going to speak to us little people, after you marry him and start going out to dinner every night?"

Stephanie laughed, but it was hollow. Tony belonged to the country club because he considered it necessary for someone in his position, but in all the time that she had worked for him, he had taken her there to dinner just a couple of times.

She was thinking about that as she started Katie's supper, explaining to herself that Tony was, like all good real estate people, simply careful with his spending in order to stretch his income over the low periods.

How different it had been in her first marriage, she thought. With both of them in school, money had been hard to come by, but when they had a windfall they had enjoyed every penny until it was gone...

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And I am thinking about Jordan again, Stephanie realized, and told herself firmly to stop it.

Katie came into the kitchen. Her blue eyes focused on the single hamburger broiling in the oven, and she said flatly, "I don't want Julie tonight."

"Oh?" Stephanie looked down with mild interest at the small figure, hands defiantly planted on tiny hipbones, in the middle of the floor. "Is this something personal against Julie, or are you objecting to babysitters in general?"

"I'm not a baby," Katie said, with dignity.

"Pardon me. I'd forgotten that you're four now."

"And I don't want Julie! I want you." Katie's bottom lip was pushed out.

"That's a lovely pout, dear. You're doing it very well," Stephanie applauded. "As a matter of fact, you will have me all day tomorrow."

"All day?" Katie asked suspiciously.

"That's right. I'm taking the day off to reward myself for today."

Katie's big blue eyes summed up her victim. "Tonight, too?"

"No. I am going out tonight."

"I don't want you to go."

"That's very flattering, love. Now, are you ready for supper?"

Katie looked thoughtful for a moment, as though she might begin a hunger strike and refuse nourishment altogether. Then she climbed up on her chair. "I'm not hungry," she announced.

"I'm not surprised, after Grandma's cookies." Stephanie brewed herself a cup of tea and sat down across from Katie, who was arranging her green beans in a perfect line.

"Are you going out with Tony again?" Katie asked.

"Yes."

"To sell dreams?"

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Stephanie almost regretted sharing that phrase with Katie. “No, dear. To have dinner.”

“I don’t like Tony.”

For a moment, the stubborn line of Katie’s jaw, the firm set of her eyes, was so like Jordan’s that Stephanie thought she was seeing a ghost. “Kathleen Kendall, you are suffering from an attack of the wicked green monster,” she told Katie.

Stephanie hadn’t dated many men; her schedule was too unpredictable and Katie too much of a responsibility for most men to stay interested very long. But Tony was different. He was the first man who had kept coming back, and Katie had reacted firmly, badly, and predictably.

It was Stephanie’s own fault, she told herself. She had spoiled Katie—she had been the child’s world for too long. But Katie would get over it. She would grow to love Tony, as soon as they became a real family. Once she had a full-time father, she would quickly adjust.

Just as, she told herself, Katie always fussed when Stephanie went out for an evening and told her that she didn’t want Julie to babysit. But once Julie was in the house and Stephanie was ready to leave, Katie would be perfectly agreeable. Unless, of course, Tony was there. In that case, Katie was capable of throwing a tantrum that could rock the whole west end of town.

“Monster?” Katie asked. Her blue eyes had grown even larger.

Stephanie wished that she had put a closer guard on her tongue. “Nothing, darling. I was only thinking aloud. What would you like to do tomorrow?”

Katie was still considering her answer when Julie knocked on the back door. “Sorry I’m late, Stephanie,” she said, shedding a dripping yellow slicker.

“I hadn’t even noticed that you were. When did it start raining?”

“Just a few minutes ago. It’s coming down in buckets, though.” Julie ruffled Katie’s hair and pulled out a chair at the table. “I’ll sit with her while she finishes eating,” she offered. “Go get dressed. A glamorous date deserves a little special attention.”

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Actually, it took very little time. Stephanie's wardrobe didn't run to glamorous; most of the things in her closet had been selected to coordinate with the dark blue blazer that was the standard uniform in Tony's office. The apple-green dress she put on had been a birthday gift from her mother the year before, but it still fitted perfectly. It brought out the green flecks in her hazel eyes and accented the auburn waves of her hair. She was putting on her wristwatch when she came out of her bedroom, and she stood in the center of the living room, struggling with the catch, as she gave Julie her instructions.

"Katie doesn't have preschool tomorrow, so she can stay up a little later than usual. Mother sent homemade cookies for a snack."

Julie nodded. "Chocolate chip, I hope," she said. "She makes the best ones in town. You forgot your earrings."

Stephanie's hand went to her earlobe. "Can't do that."

Katie looked up from her building blocks. "Let me pick," she demanded.

"Very well. But hurry."

Katie wasn't listening. She had danced ahead into Stephanie's bedroom, and her small fingers were already exploring her mother's jewelry box by the time Stephanie caught up.

The child took her time, considering each earring, her tongue caught thoughtfully between her teeth. Then she picked up a set and put them into Stephanie's hand. "These!" she said.

Stephanie looked thoughtfully at the delicate gold trinkets in her hand.

Katie had good taste, she reflected. She had chosen one of the few pairs of good earrings that Stephanie owned; most of her stock had come from the sale rack.

Julie had come in, too. "I've never seen you wear those," she said. "They're pretty, Stephanie."

Stephanie's fingertip stroked the delicate filigree, and then she deliberately fastened the hook through her earlobe. She couldn't remember the last time she

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had worn the earrings. They held too many memories, because they had been a gift from Jordan in one of the rare times when they had had money.

But it was silly to leave them hidden away in a drawer, she told herself. They were the prettiest things she owned, and it was time to put the memories away.

Memories, she thought, as she looked down at Katie, absorbed in exploring the tiny compartments of the jewelry case. *I'm too young to have so much of my life tied up in memories.*

The doorbell rang, and she went out to greet Tony with a smile.