



LOST HEARTS, FOUND SOULS

By

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Chapter One

The sky was leaden, the day as cold and overcast as she felt inside her soul. Chilly fingers of a gusty wind tugged at her long coat as she drew the folds around her body. Pellets of hard rain beat the pavement around her, stinging her bare face.

I should go in, Samantha Whitman thought. Still, she stood immobile, unable to make her feet go, put her body into motion toward a dryer, warmer sanctuary. Instead, she lingered in the rain, a perverse self-torture she really was not enjoying, but seemed incapable to call a halt to. She had a little fold-up umbrella in her car. She hadn't bothered with it, though. She wanted to feel pathetic, put upon and utterly downtrodden. It suited her mood to a T. Going without it was a punishment. She would sacrifice herself to the rain, hoping that the water would purge her. Wash away her aches and loneliness and hate.

A baptism.

That's what it was.

She wanted to be punished, then cleansed, set free of the past.

She shivered, catching a glimpse of her reflection in the display window of the pawnshop where she'd been standing for the last ten minutes. Long hair plastered down. Smudges of exhaustion underscored her eyes. Face, a pale oval without a trace of make-up. Even her soft, full mouth looked bloodless. She looked, well, shitty. For some reason this pleased her. Nerves strung as tight as a piano wire, she looked miserable because she was miserable. Her whole life had fallen apart through this last year and she felt powerless to stop the depression. Like an earthquake victim, there seemed to be no way to dig herself out of the rubble.

She shivered again. She could feel the rain striking her, trickling down her neck, inside her clothes. Why, exactly, was she here today? She bunched her hands into fists and pressed them against her middle. In the back of her mind, she knew the answer she did not want to admit. She slowly slid a hand into her coat pocket and retrieved it.

Sitting in the palm of her hand was a gold ring. There was nothing fancy or impressive about it. It was a simple circle of fourteen karat, gold-faceted with three faux diamond chips. It was not worth one hundred dollars, but to her it had once been as precious as all the treasure in the world. The

ring was her wedding band. She'd had it for eleven years, had never taken it off. Until today. Now it was time for the ring to go. She was no longer a married woman.

The wind gusted around her, giving her a push. Damn, the storm was getting worse. The tips of her fingers were starting to tingle and turn blue from the chill. Samantha hurried to the door. The sign still said "OPEN" and even though it was late in the afternoon and nearing closing time, the shop was still doing a bit of brisk business. Several people had already come and gone, hardly giving a second glance to the strange woman standing there, being pummeled by the rain. Pulling open the heavy glass door overlain with thick security bars, she walked inside. It was like walking into a prison.

The Romaine and Sons Pawnshop had been on the corner of Second and Main for over fifty years. The business had prospered, each decade seeing the building that housed the shop become larger and more elaborate. The place was far from lovely, a short squat adobe-style building that tried hard to resemble a Mexican hacienda and failed. Perhaps this was because of the bars on the windows and doors, or perhaps it was because of the garish neon sign outside.

Entering the warmth of the shop was pure bliss. Remembering her untidy appearance, Sam scooped her brown hair off the back of her neck, letting the circulating heat ease the dampness. She'd put her hair up this morning, but the long mass, which had a tendency to curl when wet, had come down in Medusa-like tendrils. She quickly set it back into place, winding it into a bun and pinning it with combs. There, much better. She hadn't lost all her pride. Not quite yet. She fanned her coat around her like a pair of wings. The button down style of dress she wore hugged her slender figure. She was ten pounds thinner since she'd begun her liquid diet of wine for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. It just seemed easier to pour a glass of merlot or chardonnay than to cook for one person. Those single-serve gourmet meals tasted like warmed-over cardboard and she really wasn't hungry lately anyway. She'd never been a heavy person to begin with, small bones on a petite, five-foot-four frame. As it was, she now weighed less than her college weight. Not bad for going on thirty-one. Fortunately her tendency to drink to excess had not taken a toll on her looks. She was still a pretty woman, not stunning, but pretty.

Sam glanced distractedly at the rows of electronics lining the shelves; stereos, televisions, VCR's and DVD players, all neatly tagged and arranged. On the other side of the store was another set of display cases that held rifles and handguns, along with the corresponding ammunition. It was because of gun sales that the pawnshop had been in the news recently. A few weeks ago,

a man had walked in, purchased a rifle and bullets and killed himself right in front of other stunned customers. So much for the seven-day waiting period. Unable to buy a handgun, he'd settled on a rifle, which had no such restrictions.

She glanced around as if she expected to see remnants of blood--at the very least a chalk outline on the floor. Of course, there was no sign of the traumatic event. Nothing. Simply business as usual, people milling around shopping, or, more likely, waiting in line at the rear counter to sell their items for a little quick cash. All in all, the shop was neat, clean, well lit and arranged. The used merchandise was displayed to advantage and clerks waited behind counters to make a sale. A sign pointing to the back of the store indicated where to go to begin the haggling. There were already people waiting in line.

Sam drifted over, pretending to stop and examine the merchandise. She worried the inside of her cheek with her tongue. She was still unsure if she really wanted to sell her ring. Maybe she should keep something, to remind her

She slipped the ring back into her pocket. It would be safe if she changed her mind.

As she loitered, she glanced at the people lined up at the rear counter. A thin black man was presently attempting to sell a huge ghetto blaster to the bored looking clerk who'd probably seen so many in his career that he barely even glanced twice at the huge monstrosity. It was clear the black man needed money. On a bitterly cold day he wore no more than a thin dirty T-shirt, torn camouflage pants at least two sizes too large and tennis shoes. Thin as a rail, sweaty, jumpy and nervous, he displayed all the signs of an addict and the stereo was most likely stolen. Sam didn't know what the man's disease was. She really didn't care. She just wished he'd bathe. His stink was an overpowering one.

She averted her gaze and discretely covered her nose with a hand, pretending to study a stack of old vinyl albums from the seventies. Unlike the other people here, she didn't have a pressing need for money. Her ankle length caramel suede coat alone had cost over two hundred dollars. The matching boots had cost at least ninety.

Not really sure why she was even bothering with the pawn shop, Sam bit her lower lip, blinking away tears to clear her vision. The clerk had begun to haggle with a woman selling a necklace and she gave half an ear to the conversation. After a few minutes, a sale was made and the woman gratefully claimed her money.

Watching her go, Sam descended back into her own depression. She

considered turning around and walking out. Her ring probably wouldn't bring an offer of twenty dollars, tops. Yet, she didn't want to keep it, either. It was now meaningless, a trinket representing a past she no longer wanted to hold on to.

Chapter Two

“Can I help you?”

Sam turned around. The clerk working the counter had apparently noticed her.

Her breath caught in her throat. The moment her gaze fully settled on him, she experienced a small frisson of shock shoot all the way to her toes.

He was impossibly tall, broad shouldered, yet with a wiry leanness that suggested he could move as fast as a puma on the prowl. There was almost an animal maleness about him that seemed to deride the trappings of a simple shopkeeper. It seemed such a shame to keep a man like this penned up. He looked like he longed to roam the wild country on a horse, with his trusty rifle and hunting dog at his side. He certainly didn't look happy or comfortable behind that counter. In fact, he looked downright miserable.

She dipped back her head to find herself staring into the most beautiful set of eyes she'd ever seen. This man's irises weren't just blue, they were the color of the early morning dawn, just before the sun fully rose into the sky. Contrary to her first fleeting impression, his were warm eyes, kind eyes.

For the first time in months she felt a little spark of erotic interest jump back into her mind. Her body reacted with a sexuality that made her heart thump faster, sent a rush of blood to the tips of her nipples--already bead hard from the cold. A need deep inside her core rippled to life.

Oh, those incredible warm blue eyes. They were so inviting, like a tropical pool to swim in on a warm summer's day. She could almost disappear into the depths of those eyes. By his smile of welcome, it was clear he, too, found her attractive. His eyes danced, his fine lips curving into a smile that showed straight white teeth. He was close to movie-star hot. His features were sharp and well defined. His sandy hair was long and wild, looking like he brushed it with his fingers rather than a comb. His square face was clean-shaven.

What would he look like out of those clothes? The wicked thought swept through her mind unbidden and she felt her cheeks flush with heat.

He caught her blush. His smile grew wider and his unabashed stare ranged over her in a more than impersonal manner. The top half of her dress was damp and his gaze was inexorably drawn to her breasts. Small, but

temptingly plump breasts thrust pertly against the silky material. It was obvious she wore no bra. Her nipples jutted out, front and center, hard little peaks. Down went his eyes, lingering at the soft V between her thighs. He was mentally sizing her up, stripping her down, and it was clear he liked what he saw.

“My name’s Erik and I’ll be your willing slave today.” He smiled again. “Can I help you, lovely lady?”

His question startled and confused her. It seemed to directly hit the desires she was entertaining. Sam’s blush grew hotter and she could barely meet his eyes with her own. She struggled to resist the temptation of him, quell the arousal of instincts she wasn’t sure she was ready to indulge. But she could not curb the unexpected warmth filling her, starting in her belly and working its way down through her groin. She was still human, a woman of flesh, blood and bone, a woman who hadn’t had sex in a very long time.

She felt intensely vulnerable and imagined herself standing there naked, perhaps to sell her body to him instead of a ring. The idea excited her more than a little. Wetness flooded the crotch of her thong panties. Her mind whirled in panicky embarrassment. Was he aware of how attracted she was to him? A desperate need to keep her feelings guarded and impersonal forced her to maintain a calm demeanor. Breathless, she could barely conceal a tremble that was pure unadulterated desire. Was he single? She cut a glance to his left hand. Sure enough, he wore a gold band. He was very married. She frowned, wrinkles suddenly creasing her forehead. Disappointment crushed her interest like a ton of bricks.

Snapping out of her reverie and pulling her thoughts together, Sam abandoned the brief fantasy she’d entertained about swimming in those blue eyes of his. Ignoring his too-cute come-on, she slid her hand into her coat pocket, found her ring and plopped it down on the glass counter.

“I’d like to sell this.” There was a little quiver in her voice. Her legs felt like jelly, wobbling, shaky, barely able to support her weight. God, how she’d love to melt into his arms and have him make violent love to her.

Erik picked up the ring and examined it from all angles. He used a jeweler’s loop to examine the setting. He really need not have bothered. The three little diamond chips were really cubic zirconium. Almost worthless.

“I can give you fifteen dollars.”

Sam’s mouth fell open. “B ... but it’s worth at least fifty. I mean, that’s what we paid for it.” She pounded her index finger on the counter. “We bought it right here, eleven years ago. The old man who sold it to us wouldn’t budge on the price.” She looked around for the moth-eaten oldster who’d sold her and Dan the ring. He was nowhere in sight.

He laughed. It only served to make Sam angrier, hate him more. Didn't he see she was in agony? Why didn't anyone realize that she was hurting? Did she have to stand and shout it out? She did nothing of the sort.

"That must have been my dad," he explained. "He'd never budge on a buy or a sell."

"Where is he? I want to see the man who sold me the ring."

Erik shook his head, mouth turning into a frown. "Dad died six months ago. My brother and I are still sorting through the inventory." He pointed to the display case. A row of rings exactly like hers filled it. "I have at least a dozen of these now. I don't really need anymore. Fifteen is all I can go." He shrugged as if to say she was really putting him on the spot by coming into his store and offering an inferior cheap ring.

Anger spurred her. "Thirty-five," she countered. She really didn't want the ring. The memories attached to it were too painful. It was too easy to remember that she and Dan had once stood outside this very shop, looking at the rings on display. Then, the day had been warm and sunny. Perfect. They were planning their wedding, on a shoestring budget. Broke and in love, they were still convinced that two could live as cheaply as one and planned to get married anyway.

Sam still remembered the day Dan had driven her to the pawnshop in his burnt orange Chevy hatchback. As they'd looked at the selection of rings in their price range, he'd apologized.

"I wish I could afford something new, babe," he'd said. "When I'm making the big dollars, I'll get you the biggest diamond money can buy." He'd looked so boyish and charming that Sam had laughed and kissed him, saying it was fine, that she'd never want anything more. At the time, it was true. Dan had kept his promise, though. As the years passed and their affluence grew, he'd bought her plenty of nice jewelry to go with the car, the house, the vacation condo. She'd never given up her little wedding ring, though. It was a symbol of simpler, happier times. The rest was just stuff. Useless junk. She might sell it, too. At nearly thirty-one years old, her world seen through rose-colored glasses had been shattered to pieces.

"Thirty-five is too much," he said, firm in the face of her anger.

Sam thought about it. Fifteen would buy a nice bottle of wine. "I'll take it," she said. "The alternative would be to chuck it into the gutter." Her heart thudded painfully the moment the words left her mouth.

"Okay," he nodded agreeably. "I'll need your driver's license."

She bristled. "Why?"

Erik winked. "Because I'd like to ask you out on a date and I need to know where to pick you up tonight." His laugh annoyed her.

Sam frowned and said nothing. She narrowed her eyes and shot some daggers straight at him, letting him know that his smart-ass invitation was not welcome. She wasn't in the mood to be hit on by a married man, another faithless bastard who would probably stomp on her heart and walk back to his wife and cozy family. This man might be attractive, but she wasn't on the market. He wasn't either, but that didn't seem to faze him in the slightest.

He sobered fast. "I need your ID in case the ring is stolen. I have to hold this for thirty days in case you change your mind."

"I won't change my mind," Sam cut in quickly, coolly, but polite. She dug in her purse and extracted her wallet. Flicking out her driver's license, she waited while he typed some information into the computer. He fumbled with the keys and cursed under his breath, an indication that he wasn't exactly familiar with the system. His style of typing was hunt and peck, one letter at a time. She imagined again that he would be much more at home herding cows and baling hay. He was clearly not a man suited for electronics, and it showed. Dan, her ex-husband, worked with his brain. His tan was faux and his abs gym-sculpted to perfection. He wore thousand-dollar suits, not flannel work shirts and jeans.

"So, you got this here?" he said, trying to make conversation. "Why sell it now?"

She shrugged nonchalantly to resist the temptation he offered, to quell the arousal of sexual instincts she longed to indulge. Her pulse fluttered wildly. Dammit! He was so incredibly attractive. "I'm divorced," she bit out in a flare of resentment. "Why keep it?"

"Good point."

He surely was being goddamn slow in getting her paperwork done. Trying to be patient, she cast her eyes around his work area. There were a couple of photos tacked to the side of his computer monitor. From the angle, she could make out a few of the details. The first was of a nicely dressed red haired woman, a little girl of about four standing beside her shoulder, a tow headed baby in her lap. All three were focused on the camera, bright and all smiles. The second photo was of the children, a little older, posed together. Neither child seemed happy.

"Your wife?"

"Yeah," he grunted, distracted with his typing.

"You have a nice-looking family," she commented. Pain put another rip into her heart. A family was something she didn't have. *God is too cruel*, she thought. *It doesn't make sense or balance out.*

His lips thinned and his brow furrowed, an expression that said all was not well in his happy home. His eyelids dropped, veiling any further

clues that might have revealed his feelings about his marriage. The look quickly vanished and he gave a brief smile. "You have kids?"

She quickly shook her head. "No, never happened." She made her tone noncommittal to put an end to the direction the conversation was taking, a little too personal. She brushed damp strands of hair off her forehead. Her hand trembled, more than a little. Anyone looking at her pale face and red-rimmed eyes and shaky hands would think she was coming off a weeklong drunk. Well, surprise! She'd finally managed to sober up long enough to get dressed and get out of the house. The trip to the pawnshop had been purely impulse.

"Listen," he said suddenly, shyly. "I don't do this often, but would you have dinner with me tonight?"

Sam tried for a smile and found none. The cheating bastard. Here they were chatting about families and he had the nerve to make another pass!

I don't do this often....

Yeah, right. That was probably a well-used line. What the hell was he thinking? That because she was a divorced woman selling her wedding ring that she was lonely, an easy mark for some on the side sex? Christ.

"I'm sorry." Her voice was pure frost. "I do have other plans tonight."

He clearly didn't believe her, but was polite enough to take her brush off. "Well, I tried," he joked.

Yeah, you did, asshole, she silently agreed. She was suddenly in no mood for small talk or the stupid men who made it.

Instead of seeking life, she was pulling oh-so-slowly away from it, cutting all her ties slowly and methodically. The ring was one of the last to be severed.

A few minutes later, the clerk printed out a slip for her to sign. She scrawled her name and returned it. He handed her a ten and a five. Sam slipped the money into her billfold.

"Thanks." She let the words hang.

He put the ring in a small envelope and wrote a few things on its face, then stapled a copy of the slip she'd signed to it. "Thanks for doing business with Romaine and Sons," he said. "Come back soon, please."

Sam gave him a thin smile. Inside, her guts spasmed. Her stomach felt like she was digesting a pound of ground glass.

"I doubt I will be back again," she said curtly.

Turning on her heel, she silently bid goodbye to that hunk of beefcake and his blue eyes.

Chapter Three

Wow, she's something else, Erik Romaine thought.

Watching her walk away caused a stirring in his groin. He silently groaned, letting his eager gaze roam over her slender figure until she vanished from his view. Even under her long suede coat he could imagine the sway of her hips. He wished she hadn't been wearing it. He would have loved to have seen her walk away in that form fitting dress. He had no doubt that that dress would have clung to the curves of her fanny, looking much like two kittens tussling under silk sheets. That body of hers was all fire--that frosty manner all ice. Together, well, together it was a damn fascinating combination. He felt like he had just smacked head first into a brick wall. The impact hurt, but whoa! He'd willingly do it again to get her phone number.

When she stepped back into the rain, she paused, turning up her face, letting the rain strike her full on. Through the thick panes of glass, one of Spring's early storms was howling. That image impressed him. She reminded him of a feral cat-wild, scared of getting involved. Her manner was not fearful, just full of suspicion.

Grab that tiger by the tail, boy, and she'll rip you to shreds ...

Samantha Whitman looked like a ball breaker and he had no doubts that she'd probably just done that to her ex. Why else would she be in there selling her wedding ring? It was clear that when she was done with a man, she was finished. Period. She'd also made it clear that she did not suffer fools gladly.

Oh, but he would love to get his hands on that woman, explore every part of her luscious body. Even though she'd looked like a drowned hen, she was still the prettiest woman he'd set eyes on in a long time. Hers was a natural beauty. Face bare of cosmetics, her creamy pale complexion was free of blemishes except for a spattering of freckles across her nose. He wondered if there were other freckles hidden under her clothes. If so, he'd love to give each one a taste ... with her deep hazel eyes and full lips made for kissing, she was a lot of woman wrapped up in a tiny package. The top of her head barely came to his chin, but he had no doubt that little spitfire could tame the largest man with her luscious body.

Whoa! He shook his head. Why was he fantasizing about a woman

who'd just shot him out of the saddle? He must have totally misread the signals. He'd thought they'd made a connection. The spark had most certainly been there. He felt that familiar twist in his groin again. He suddenly didn't want to be stuck at work. He shot a glance at the wall clock. Five-thirty. Almost time to close up. Good. He was tired of dealing with the public. Fortunately, the store was empty except for employees. He had a few minutes to himself after a busy day.

Leaning forward on the counter, he pinched the bridge of his nose with two fingers and closed his eyes. Did Samantha Whitman know how sexy she looked in that tight dress? Those breasts with the tips of her nipples rubbing against the silky material were guaranteed to drive a man to distraction. A quick fantasy played across his mind's screen, one where he ripped that dress open and circled his tongue around those hard little peaks until she whimpered for more. He wanted to run his fingers through her hair, smell the scent of her perfume on her skin, spread her thighs and taste the juices of her womanhood. He could imagine vividly how it would feel to sheath his cock inside her moist depth. The idea sent a shiver up his spine and pleasant warmth coursed through his body. *Jesus, Erik! You need a woman. Bad.* This going without sex was too damned much. Celibacy was not agreeing with him.

He frowned.

Dad needs a break. Some adult conversation, a dinner that's not macaroni and cheese or beanie weenies consumed in front of the boob tube.

He sighed and drew himself up. He needed to make some decisions that he'd been putting off as long as possible. He could no longer avoid the issues and hope they'd settle themselves. He's been too indecisive for too damned long. Dealing with the death of his father had only allowed him to put off facing the fact that his marriage had tumbled like a house of cards.

His brother Brian sauntered over, leaning against the counter. One of his eyebrows went up in a silent question.

"What?" Erick grated, a bit annoyed to have his fantasy spoiled by the intrusion of real life.

"Haven't seen that look in a long time, bro."

Erick shot a narrow glare at his younger sibling. "What look?"

Brian laughed. "Lust. I haven't seen you look at a woman like that since Brenda walked out on you. I was beginning to get worried."

Erik made an exasperated snorting sound, at a loss for words. Damn, had it been that clearly written on his face? That Brian was right on the mark, though, was something he didn't want to admit.

"Women," he said. "Can't live with them, can't kill them." He reached

for his coffee cup, took a sip of its content and shuddered. It was cold. He thought about getting a fresh cup but decided not to. He was drinking way too many these days, wiring himself on sugar and caffeine to try and keep up with his busy schedule. He was usually out of bed by six in the morning and rarely back before midnight. The lack of sleep was beginning to wear him down.

“Anyway, that one shot me down like a dog. Guess my pick-up skills are rusty.”

Brian snickered again and shook his head. His own blue eyes teased. “Rusty?” he cracked. “What skills, man?”

Another glare. His little brother was definitely starting to get on his nerves. It had been a long time since he’d held the little bastard down and given him a few head noogies. Maybe it was time to start reasserting his brotherly command? What did Brian have to worry about anyway? He was as free as a bird, interested only his car and guitar. Since their dad’s death, the only thing they had agreed on was that his soon-to-be ex-wife was a bitch and that neither of them wanted to be pawnbrokers. As soon as the estate could be settled, the business would be sold and they would split the money and go their own ways. There really wasn’t much love lost between them.

“What?”

“Shot you down, man,” Brian repeated. “She shoulda’ buried you, too. Do you know how very married you look?” He pointed to the photos of Kylee and Kayla. “I mean you got pix of your kids tacked up.” He wagged his left hand. “And you still got a ring on your finger. You know what that says to her, asshole?”

Erik could barely keep from gritting his teeth in annoyance. He hated to admit it, but Brian was right--and he rarely was.

Brian continued to enlighten him. “It screams out that you’re married. Duh.” He slapped his forehead in mock confusion. “Why you wear it boggles me, man. Brenda dumped you. She’s gone. The papers are filed. Take it off, sign the papers and get on with your life. It’s been a year. She’s not coming back.”

The words hit Erik squarely in the heart. He was still reeling over the fact that Brenda had packed her bags and walked out on her family. It shouldn’t have surprised him in the least. She’d been pulling away for a long time, spending less and less time at home as she pursued her MBA and worked full time. It embarrassed her to be married to a man who made his living with his hands and not his head. She was a very career-oriented woman. She wanted to bring home the bacon, but not cook it. As for being a

mom ... God, she hated it. Being stuck at home with two little girls was definitely not her idea of life.

“Well,” he flared, failing to cover his hurt. “You try explaining to a five-year-old and a seven-year-old that mommy left and she isn’t coming back.”

Brian held up his hands as if to ward off physical blows. “Whoa! I *know* all the history, Bro. My point is that you’re going to have to quit hiding your head in the sand and face some facts. Brenda wants out. Take off the ring and get on with life. The girls will adjust. We adjusted.”

Erik rubbed his hands over his face, feeling suddenly very weary. God, he was so tired of the whole mess. He wasn’t looking forward to raising two girls alone, but what choice did he have? Brenda had made it clear that she did not want primary custody, only visitation rights. Since she’d left, she’d returned only twice to see the girls: Once for Kylee’s birthday and for a few hours on Christmas Eve. She’d loaded the girls down with presents, as if to assuage her guilty conscience. She could afford it, too. She was on the fast track as an ad consultant and making way more money than he did. She’d offered child support. Though he didn’t want it, he was considering taking the money and banking it for the girl’s future. They would both be taken care of financially.

Emotionally ... well, he was trying his hardest to keep life on an even keel. Kylee was in the second grade and Kayla was in kindergarten. Between their schedules and his, he barely had time to take a shower, much less think about dating. Plus, he hadn’t really told the girls that he and Brenda were divorcing. They’d agreed on a separation. She wanted time to think, she’d said. Apparently she’d done enough thinking. The papers had arrived from her attorney a month ago. She’d given no warning about her decision. A follow-up letter explained in curt words that she’d met someone else. She didn’t love him anymore. Apparently, she didn’t love her kids, either.

It’s going to be hard to break the news to the girls. Better that they know the truth rather than continue the lies. It’d be a relief to drop the facade he’d scrambled to keep in place. And, if he admitted it, the girls had already put some of the pieces together. They were smart and knew from their schoolmates that other mommies lived at home. Usually it was the dad who skipped off. They knew about daddies leaving. More than one of their playmates was being raised by a single mother.

And the beat goes on. Too bad he’d lost step.

He released the painful breath he’d been holding. “You’re right, Bri,” he said. “We adjusted and they will, too.” He shifted his gaze to his left hand. The plain gold band winked back. It was no longer a circle

representing the love he'd felt for the woman he'd married seven years ago. It was a cold piece of metal, meaningless. *Face it. You only married Brenda to keep her from aborting Kylee.* There wasn't any real love between them. He was just doing right by the child he'd helped create.

He swallowed the knot that was threatening to form in his throat. Through seven years he'd worn his ring, been faithful to his vows. He could never have imagined cheating on Brenda. He wasn't that kind of man. Not that he didn't have a lot of chances. Every day he saw a variety of tempting women--women who gave him the come-on and made it clear that he was welcome in their beds. Miscellaneous sex to ease that itch in his groin just wasn't his style. He couldn't countenance satisfying himself with a woman for the sake of sex. He wanted some feelings present in the act. He wanted that *spark*.

He'd felt that spark with Samantha Whitman. And he wanted to get to know her better. But he couldn't do that as a married man. He slid his ring off his finger. It felt as if a thousand pound stone had just lifted off his soul.

Brian applauded. "Good deal. Cut those strings."

Erik's heart was beating a mile a minute. He cleared his throat before he spoke. "Feels strange." He jiggled the ring in the center of his palm. "One step at a time."

Brian gave a wan smile. He knew all about steps. Erik wasn't the only Romaine brother starting over. Brian was on his eightieth day of sobriety and working his way through AA's twelve steps.

"That's it," he breathed. "Now what?"

"So get in touch with the chick." Grin a mile wide, Brian made a fanning gesture with his hand. "You're free. Waste no time, buddy."

Erik pocketed his ring, unsure of what to do with it. "She thinks I'm married."

"Call the lady up," Brian urged, flicking his surfer-dude bangs out of his eyes. Even though neatly dressed, he always looked like a wrinkled wreck, much to their mother's despair. "Do some fast talking."

"I can't do that," Erik snorted in protest. He glanced down at the envelope holding her ring. The slip with her contact info was stapled there. And her driver's license. He groaned. He'd forgotten to return it.

A shit-eating grin crossed Brian's face. "Oh, so perfect, Bro. You have no reason not to call her."

"Guess so," he said dryly. Still he was hesitant. This was a big step. Was he going too fast?

"Where's she live?"

He glanced at the address. "2117 Jonquil."

Brian's grin grew wider. "Hey, isn't that, like, two blocks from your house?"

"I go right by her street, yes."

Brian whooped and slapped the counter. "No excuses, Bro. Perfect reason to drop by. 'Oh, miss, you left this.' Maybe she'll invite you in."

Erik blushed to the roots of his hair. Oh, for God's sake! He was thirty-four, not thirteen. What would be wrong with dropping by Samantha Whitman's house to return her license? He drove right by her street on *his* way home. It would be a nice gesture.

It would also give him a chance to see her. Maybe explain a few things. Would she be interested? He didn't know.

"Come on, Erik," Brian urged. "Go see her." He checked the wall clock. "It's near six. I'll close the store so you can go early."

Brow wrinkling, a skeptical look crossed Erik's face. Brian hated working in the store more than he did. His little brother usually made all kinds of excuses to go home early. "You, close? That's a laugh."

"Hey, I know how." He crossed his heart. "And I promise not to put my hands in the cash register and filch a couple twenties to drink on. I've cleaned up. You can trust me."

Erik winced. "That isn't what I was worried about, Bri."

"What, then?"

"Starting over." Frustration halted his words. He pressed his lips briefly together, then went on, his voice tight. "I'm a man with two little girls to raise. Most women my age already have a family or want one of their own. My baggage may be too much."

"Instead of telling me that," Brian said sagely. "Try asking her." He shrugged his shoulders. "She says 'no', you go your merry way, no less. And if she says 'yes,' well, go from there. It's one day at a time, Bro. One day. That's all you can do. Just remember, if you waste that day, it's gone forever, time you can't get back. Don't waste it like I have."

Erik grinned. "When did my little brother get so wise?"

Brian shrugged. "Maybe when I woke up in jail," he answered with a half sad smile. He spoke the words matter-of-factly, without a trace of self-pity or bitterness. In the last few months, he'd grown up. A lot. He reached across the counter and gave Erik's arm a playful jab. "Opened my eyes, man. Now open yours."

"Okay," Erik made his decision. "I'll go see her."

"When?"

He tapped the hard plastic square on the counter. "I don't know."

"Why not now?" Brian hinted.

Erik slid Samantha Whitman's license into the breast pocket of his shirt. "Don't push, man. I gotta think, okay?" Thunder cracked, reminding him of the rain outside. It was going to be an ugly night.

"Right now, I think I'll just go home," he said, grabbing and sliding into his jacket. "Let mom know I'm on my way. I'll grab a pizza and movie for the girls. That'll be dinner."

Brian made a raspberry sound. "Wuss."

"Give me a break."

Brian gave him two thumbs down anyway. "You're still a wuss, Bro. Wait too long and you'll be an old man."

Erik didn't return the gesture. Lust at first sight was a common thing. Love at first sight was a rare phenomenon, though. Like sunrises in the morning, it occurred daily but was watched by few.

How to tell the difference?

He wasn't yet sure, but he wanted to find out.

Chapter Four

Exiting the pawnshop, Sam tucked her coat around her body and dashed to her car. She was mightily relieved that she's so neatly disposed of her ring. Like that small circle of gold completed the union between a man and a woman, she'd completed yet another, returning the ring to its place of origin.

Climbing into the driver's seat, she drove to the grocery store. Stopping to chat with no one, she carefully selected several bottles of her favorite wine, then went over to dairy to pick up a quart of skim milk and a small container of cottage cheese. A few cans of pineapple completed her shopping. That done, she headed to the pharmacy to pick up her prescriptions. Her doctor was a wonderfully sympathetic man, commiserating and consoling her over the breakdown of her marriage. Of course, he understood her inability to rest well given the traumatic events that had unfolded in her life.

Prescription and groceries loaded into the car, Sam headed home. The rain had settled down into a light mist that made the cold air wet and sticky. As the gloomy day began to descend into an even gloomier evening, clouds sank low to the ground, creating a purplish luminescent fog. It blanketed the land, giving the impression that the town and its people were wrapped in a layer of gauze--a beautiful, if eerie, sight that perfectly suited her mood.

Usually, Sam took the long route home. Today she decided to take the shorter one. As she drove down the boulevard, her lower lip began to tremble, her throat clog and swell. Tears she had earlier refused to let fall now trekked down her cheeks in a torrent. It had been almost two years since she'd driven past *'that place.'*

Memorial Gardens Cemetery.

On impulse, she switched lanes. Standing guard on this abode of the dead were two twin stone pillars, the gate still open. She drove in. The grounds of the cemetery were neatly kept, grass and hedges trimmed, black wrought iron fence kept free of trash. A huge marble carving of a book with the Lord's Prayer inscribed into its marble pages sat just past the gate, neatly positioned between two towering weeping willow trees. There were iron benches beneath the trees, inviting the bereaved to sit beneath their shelter and seek comfort from the savior's words.

She had never found any comfort there.

Driving past the great book without a second glance, she followed a narrow gravel road that lead toward the rear of the cemetery. She did not like this place. Instead of huge ornate headstones, all the occupants were allowed for grave markers was a small flat plaque, easier to mow over, they said. How sad a person's whole life should be reduced to a 12x12 brass plaque.

Reaching her destination, Sam shut off the engine, leaving the lights on, twin beams that cut through the silent fog. She was the lone living occupant. It felt strange to be back in this place. She had sworn that she would never come back. But there was someone here she'd never been able to properly say goodbye to.

She swiped tears off her swollen face. Drawing in a breath, she opened the door. Her trembling legs would barely hold her weight. She had to force herself to pick up her feet and walk. The last time she'd been here, she was so numb with grief that Dan had practically had to carry her. She remembered almost nothing of the day. It was a blur. Nothing but an ugly blur.

It took thirty-two steps to reach the grave. Thirty-two steps to the place where her soul died two years ago. There it was, ringed by damp grass, its face beaded with raindrops. The plaque of a life unlived. An awful weak feeling attacked her legs as she studied the gravesite. She closed her eyes and bent her head. She was trembling, trembling with a violence that shook her to the core.

Arabella Whitman, it read. Born March 1, 2002. Heaven's littlest angel.

There was no death date. None was needed. It was also today's date, exactly two years later.

Her coat hung open. Sam lowered her hands, running her palms over her flat belly. Her stomach showed no sign of the child she'd carried. Legs no longer able to support her, she collapsed. The grass under her knees was cold and wet, the same grass covering her child's grave. She put out a trembling hand, touching the plaque. How was it the grass was so perfect, the maw in the ground grown over as if the hole there had never existed, as if Arabella had never existed? She felt the chill seeping into her bones but was way past acknowledgment.

It's so cold and dark here. You've been here all alone for so very long. How could I have left you here? I never should have left you.

The anguish of that terrible time flooded out of memory like a snake, twisting itself around in her skull, biting deeply into her brain tissue with sharp, poisonous fangs. The memory most stark in her mind was that she had

not been able to cry at the funeral. She had been like marble; pale, stiff, emotionless. She had wanted to cry. She had needed to cry, but the ability to make her eyes shed water had eluded her.

Later, the tears had arrived. And since that day they had not stopped. Her routine was the same. Get up in the morning. Cry. Clean house. Cry. Go to the store. Cry. Get into bed. Cry some more. The wound just would not heal and time was failing to ease the pain.

Arabella's death had not only killed her soul, it had signaled the end of her marriage.

Unlike other couples married in haste, she and Dan had had the luxury of establishing themselves in life. Their first few years of marriage were spent working. Dan finished law school and passed the bar exam on his first try. As a young public defender, he didn't make a lot, but that step up meant that they could leave the efficiency apartment behind and move into a house--a house with a back yard where kids could play. Her job was to stay home, keep house and have the babies.

No babies arrived.

Oh, the pregnancies happened--the EPT test stick revealing the anticipated pink lines. But a month, maybe two, into the pregnancy and Sam would miscarry. Trips to doctors and fertility specialists gave no answers. She was healthy. Dan was healthy. They should be able to spawn healthy offspring. There was no medical reason why her womb kept expelling the fetuses.

Hopeful, they had kept trying. More years passed. Dan moved up in his job, kept longer hours at the office when he became assistant district attorney. Sex that had once been a pleasure became a chore as they charted Sam's cycles and tried to determine her fertile periods.

Eight years into the marriage, it happened. Arabella was conceived. Very conscious about the precious gem she carried, Sam immediately took to her bed, following the regime her doctors had mapped out for her. She ate right, took her vitamins, exercised lightly--and looked forward to delivering a healthy baby girl. A nursery was decorated, a name chosen. At last, at long last, she and Dan were going to be parents. Everything seemed fine. Perfect. Sam was looking forward to her delivery date with bated breath. She had visions of soft smiles, happy coos, counting fingers and toes.

Too perfect.

And then it happened. She went into labor. The pain was terrible, the contractions hard and fast. Seventeen hellish hours later, Arabella was ushered into this world more than two months prematurely, weighing all of two pounds and four ounces. Doctors were hopeful because she was a

healthy baby.

Arabella did not survive the night.

That's when the blur began. The hysterics. The shots to make her sleep. Later, the funeral ... a tiny white coffin lowered into the ground before bereaved parents.

The distance. The nights spent sobbing in bed alone. Dan could not or would not face her, preferring to spend his hours at the office, immersed in work. The hateful words he spoke when the silence between them was broken were words she'd never forget.

He blamed me, she thought through a veil of tears she could no longer distinguish from the rain. *He said my body killed his child*.

Eyes vacant with hopelessness slowly glazed over with fresh tears. "I didn't mean to kill you," she sobbed, the words breaking through numb lips. The quiver of betrayal in her broken voice went unheard by living ears. Her head sagged on her shoulders. She felt so tired, so awfully horribly tired. When something hurt a heart this much it was almost unbearable. She'd tried not to let the past hang on to her, but it was impossible--the loss of her baby was just something she could not get over.

Catching her lower lip between her teeth, she tried to dam up the fresh sobs rising from her chest. Hopeless remorse won over and she began to cry again, the crying of a soul lost and so alone. She wished Dan were there, to fold her in his embrace, comfort her. But he was gone. A year after the baby's death, Dan moved out. And into the arms of his much younger secretary. Off to enjoy a new life.

Fighting to catch her breath, she knotted her hands into fists. She was shaking, whether from the chill or her own angst she didn't know. Sighing, she pasted trembling hands to her face, wishing the awful tearing pain in her chest would cease. It didn't.

How dare the bastard walk out and leave us, she fumed.

Silence. It pulsed in her ears, throbbed in her temples. She felt sucked dry, emptied out, weak. She had not been raised in any organized religion. She did not really know or understand the concept of prayer, of relying on a higher spiritual guide. Both her parents had been borderline Christians, meaning that they identified themselves as God-fearing people, but had never cracked a bible or spent Sunday in church. *Do unto others* and *thou shall not kill* were not really commandments, but common sense. They worked hard, lived the American life of prosperous debt and retired to Florida to live out their last years. Was there even a heaven? Did it even matter? Why did Dan have the ability to walk away and start his life over? Why couldn't she? Weak of mind? Weak of will? Why must she keep

flogging herself with the guilt?

A burning sensation washed over her body. She'd been crouched on the wet grass for too long and her body was beginning to rebel.

Soaked to the skin, her limbs cramped, she wasn't sure how much time had elapsed since she had arrived. She slowly dragged herself to her feet. Her face was pale and lifeless, all positive energy drained from her body. She blinked, trying to clear her vision, swallowed hard to kill the lump in her throat. The realization of how alone she was struck her full force. She heard the sounds of evening traffic in the distance, but it did not register on her benumbed senses. Nerves unbearably strained to the breaking point, apprehension sent pinpricks up her spine. Her mind whirled sickly. For a moment she feared she would be ill. She caught a breath of scorching cold air. That helped clear her head.

Why did it always come back to this one tiny person? Arabella was gone. Nothing she did or said could reverse that. Why in God's name couldn't she and Dan have comforted each other instead of turning on each other viciously enough to draw blood? The sad fact was that they were tired and the lingering love they'd had for each other died with their child. Years of disappointment had taken its toll. They weren't getting any younger and his parents were tired of waiting for grandchildren.

All the pertinent emotions were there, hammering at her heart and mind with an unforgiving ferocity. Bitterness, regrets, love lost. All had slipped through her fingers like sand. She grasped at the last granules, but it wasn't enough. She knew she was drowning, but she didn't know how to ask for help without appearing to be weak and foolish. She was trapped in a pit of despair, a pit she kept digging deeper. The edges were threatening to crumble and collapse on top of her, burying her.

She gave herself a hard mental shake. *I have to find the strength to let go, say goodbye.*

She drew a deep breath. Turning around, she forced herself to walk away from the grave. She did not look back. She couldn't. Keep living in the past and, without a doubt, it would destroy her.

Chapter Five

Pizza in hand, Erik opened the front door. As usual, the living room looked like the wreck of the Titanic. Games were scattered helter-skelter and the television blared, set, it seemed, permanently on the Cartoon Network. He shook his head. It seemed ages since he'd been able to tune into the news or an adult program.

The delighted squeals of two little girls greeted him when he walked into the kitchen and sat the food on the counter. Kylee and Kayla were sitting at the table finger-painting. Both girls had managed to smear more of the paint on themselves than they did the paper during the process of creating great art. His mother stood at the sink, washing dishes.

"Daddy!" Both girls chorused in unison. Kayla held up her latest work.

"See what I made." She giggled shyly.

"That's pretty, honey," Erik said, leaning over to kiss the top of his youngest daughter's head and tousle her blonde hair. He was clueless as to what her drawing might be, but would admire it as though it were the world's finest art. The fridge was already covered with Kayla's masterpieces, many only hours old. Doubtless another would be added as soon as the paint dried.

"How was work?" his mother asked, wiping her hands on a dishtowel. At fifty-seven, she was still slender, pert and very active. She had to be. Helping Erik keep up with two little girls wasn't an easy chore. The last year was beginning to tell on her. There were dark circles under her eyes and her face was a bit paler, drawn.

"Busy," he grumbled, sliding out of his jacket. "No wonder Dad was never home."

"Thanks for bringing dinner in." Sending the girls off to wash, she began to clear away their painting supplies and set out plates. She poured milk for the girls and got a beer for Erik before she dished out the pizza and sat down. Both girls moaned over the loss of their fun, but were equally delighted with the pizza.

"Thanks Dad," Kylee chimed, remembering her manners. She took a healthy bite out of a slice of pepperoni pizza. It was her favorite food. She'd live off it if allowed to do so.

Erik felt his heart tear just a little. Of the two girls, Kylee looked most like Brenda. He knew the girls missed their mother. Adjusting to a new life without her was difficult for all of them.

Ignoring the food, he popped the top on his beer and took a long draw. He liked a couple after work, but only two. Both his father and brother had battled the bottle. He'd struggled with it himself in his twenties, but realized it was a losing battle. His perspective had changed entirely now that he had two children to raise.

They're good kids, he thought.

It still amazed him that Brenda had been able to walk out and not look back. Her mothering instincts left something to be desired. Not that she was a bad mother. When in her care, the kids were always clean, the house neat. But her heart wasn't in it. Being a homemaker was like putting a ball and chain around her spirit. Brenda was a people person. She liked being out in the public, pursuing the contracts, closing the deals. Conversation at the level of a five year old bored her to tears and she wasn't interested in swapping mommy stories with the other women in the neighborhood or who took their kids to the park to play. No, Brenda was ambitious and ambition didn't mingle well with husband and kids. She'd made it clear when they married she would finish her education and go back to work. And she had done just that.

He took another sip of his beer, savoring the brew.

After Brenda moved out, he'd been dazed, like the shell-shocked victim of a bombing raid. He functioned, but just barely. At his mother's suggestion, he moved in with her until he could figure out what he needed to do.

Moving home was not an easy choice. Here he was, at thirty-four, with two kids and no wife. It felt like a defeat to have to leave a job he loved in construction to return to a state he hated, in a town he despised even more. But it was better to have the girls with their grandmother rather than leave them with a nanny all the time.

His parents had divorced years ago, bitterly. They rarely spoke. And even though he was on decent terms with his dad, it was hard to walk the line between two parents who no longer loved each other but shared two sons. Employment was no problem. He'd go to work at Romaine & Sons. At the time, his father was failing from the liver cancer that would take his life six months later. While he and Brian had worked in the store as teenagers, neither boy had wanted to remain pawnbrokers. This had hurt their father immensely. Salvatore Romaine, whose own father had founded the shop, wanted to continue the family tradition. It was not to be. They were selling

out--lock, stock and barrel.

The money from the sale would give him a tidy sum to start life over. Not many got that chance at his age. As much as he loved and appreciated his mother's help, her house was too small for the four of them, plus the menagerie of pets they'd acquired. There were only two bedrooms. She shared her room with the girls, who slept on bunk beds. He had the other. She had been generous about their piling in, but had had to curtail her own activities. Her gardens were neglected and she rarely got to attend church or play bridge with her friends. He realized that he and the girls needed a place of their own. What's more, he needed a life, a break in his routine that did not include go to work, come home, sleep and repeat the process the next day.

"You're not eating, honey."

It took Erik a moment to realize his mother was talking to him. He shook his head and pushed away his plate. "Just not hungry, Mom."

"Anything wrong?"

He made a "no" gesture with his head, meaning that he didn't want to talk in front of the kids. She caught the message. Dinner was finished with general chitchat about his day. He listened to the girl's chatter, asking questions about school and their friends. He wasn't really paying attention, but as long as they thought he was that was okay. He couldn't very well admit that what was on dad's mind was a very sexy lady he'd met at work.

A movie was next, some Disney flick he'd already seen as a kid. To the girls it was new and they watched, enraptured. When their rapt attention was on the little wooden boy, he eased out onto the back verandah for a quick smoke. His mother did not allow cigarettes in her house. Sitting down on the porch swing, he lit up a Camel and watched the rain. Taking a long drag off his cigarette, he watched the smoke curl up. He hated to admit it, but he didn't want to be home with his mother and two chattering children. He wanted to be with Samantha Whitman.

He slid her license out of his pocket, almost feeling like a twelve year old taking a peek at Playboy for the first time. There was some special quality alive in her eyes. Sadness, yes, sadness was there, but there was also strength, a defiant glint. Stronger, though was *need*, burning hotter than the sun. In his mind he experienced a whole different evening, one where she'd accepted his invitation. He would say clever things. She would laugh, flash a smile while her eyes sparkled.

And then the drive home, walking her to her front door. Perhaps a kiss good night. He inwardly moaned when he imagined that body of hers leaning into his, her head tilted back, full lips ready for a kiss.

He could feel his penis twitching, a bit of life returning to the part of his body he'd began to believe was nonexistent. God, how he wanted to pull her close, taste every inch of her. He could imagine reaching down to grip her hips, pull her body against his, squeezing her firm ass cheeks as he ground his cock against her softness. She would moan, her hands flying up, pulling at his shoulders as he eased up her skirt

Get your mind out of the gutter, he warned himself. It was a warning that went ignored. He couldn't help it. He was aching to have sex.

In his mind he was reaching for those luscious little breasts, cupping them, teasing her nipples. He could almost feel their weight in his hands, firm and inviting. He could see himself taking her right there on her porch. He'd driven by her house on his way home from work. She wasn't home then and he didn't know if he was disappointed or relieved. It was one of those wrap around decks with a waist high rail, not easily seen from the street at night. Still, he could picture himself pushing her against the railing, savoring the anticipation as he uncovered her panties. What color would they be?

He took a drag off his cigarette, the tip glowing hot red. Hmmm. Was Samantha just as hot, hiding her passion under the gray ashes of an abused heart? Surely embers burned beneath that cool exterior of hers. He retreated back to his fantasy.

Perhaps there would be no panties at all, just a hot eager pussy. He was dying to slide his fingers gently over her clit, stroke her until her body's needs overcame her senses. He could imagine her leaning back on her hands, tilting her head back and closing her eyes as her orgasm built. He'd thrust two fingers deep inside her vagina, giving her a slow hot finger fuck. She'd moan and spread her legs further apart as his fingers delved deeper inside her cunt, begging him for release. He closed his eyes and his cock grew hard in his form fitting jeans. The anticipation of her vagina's muscles tightening around his digits as she climaxed was almost unbearable.

The sound of the sliding glass doors shattered his flight of imagination, all bets off as the images crashed and burned back into the reality that was his life. The movie was over and it was time to get the girls ready for bed. A quick bath, and each child was sent to bed with a kiss. Back to being a dad, to going to bed all by himself. God, he hated sleeping alone. He liked having a soft warm body next to his under the covers, to hear the soft, gentle breath of a woman asleep--and to hear the louder lustier moans of a woman in the throes of passion when he made love to her.

Back in the living room, Erik treated himself to a second beer. His mother sat across from him in her rocking chair, a cup of chamomile tea in hand. There was a pensive expression on her face.

“What happened today, Erik?”

He shrugged. “What makes you think anything happened?”

“I know my son,” she said simply. “You’ve been distracted all evening. It’s clear to my eyes you have something on your mind.”

He sucked down more beer. “I’m going to give Brenda her divorce.” The wrinkles in his mother’s forehead briefly smoothed. “Good. It’s about time.”

Erik frowned. “I thought you were against it.”

“I’m saddened any time a marriage ends,” she said. “Especially when little children are concerned. But I’m also realistic enough to know when people are miserable. You’re miserable, Erik. I know you tried and I know you feel you failed. You didn’t fail, honey, and Brenda didn’t fail--”

“I’m not so sure about that.”

“You can’t blame Brenda all the way, son. You knew she wasn’t the marrying kind of woman.”

His grip tightened on the can. “I wanted to do right by my kid, mom!” he protested. “She was going ...” His voice trailed off.

“I know,” she soothed. “And as the father, you had the right to have a say. But you knew she wasn’t happy and bringing in yet another baby to try and shore up your marriage was wrong.”

“Okay,” he admitted. “We both made mistakes. Big ones. Now, all I can do is try and to fix things.” He sat the can down and leaned forward, rubbing his hands over his face. “We need a place of our own,” he continued. “You need your own life back, too.”

His mother sipped from her cup and rocked in her chair. “I wouldn’t disagree, Erik. I could still watch the girls after school.” She sized him up. “Does this have anything to do with the woman you met today?”

He lowered his hands. “Brian didn’t waste a minute spreading the gossip, did he?”

She smiled. “I think it’s nice you’ve found someone.”

He laughed. “*Saw* someone, you mean? I saw her all of, oh, ten minutes, tops. Asked her out, too, and she gave me the brush off.”

“But she’s on your mind?”

“Yeah, she is.” He took Sam’s license out of his pocket. He would have to return it someday. Couldn’t carry it around like a souvenir. “She left this. Since I saw her, I swear I can’t get her out of my mind. It’s like a needle stuck on a record, the same note over and over. I want her.” He shook his head. “Is that dumb or what?”

“I think it’s sweet.”

He sighed. His mother would say that.

“Brian says she is very pretty.”

He managed a tired smile. “She is, Mom.”

“Are you going to see her again?”

He laughed. “She said *no*. I can take a hint.”

“But you want to see her again?”

He shrugged. “Sure.”

“Brian says she lives just a couple of blocks away--”

“I see that little rat spared you no details,” he said unhappily. He would be having a talk with his little brother tomorrow about opening his big trap.

“He thinks you should drop by--return her license. Make a nice gesture, you think?”

“Give me a chance to see her again?”

“Why not? What would it hurt?”

He made a grimace, mocking pain as he grabbed his chest. “My heart. I don’t need it broken again. I’m just getting it glued together from Brenda’s little dance on it.”

“You’ve got a strong heart, Erik. And a big one. You’re a good man. Give her a chance to see that.”

“You mean, go and explain that I’m not so very married?”

“Exactly.”

He tapped the hard plastic against the edge of the coffee table in indecision. He wasn’t an impulsive man. On the contrary, he was a man who thought things through, considering every angle and what the consequences would be. He’d known when he married Brenda that tying her down with a family was like trying to rope a wild mustang. The animal would snort and buck and try repeatedly to free itself. He’d hoped time and patience would gentle her, but that had done exactly the opposite. She’d only strained harder to break free.

What would he be getting into if he went after Samantha? She didn’t know him from Adam. They’d had a few minutes worth of contact and not very much conversation. But that zing, that special spark that happened when two compatible people came together, well, it had happened to him. It wasn’t that he hadn’t been in love before. He had. And it was as wonderful as the heartbreak of parting was bittersweet. If he saw sense, let this chance pass, would he ever see her again? So, there it was, staring him in the face. Two paths; one clearly marked and safe to travel, the other overgrown and impossible to see down. He could make the safe choice. Sit down, watch the evening news. Go to bed. Alone. Or he could take the path less traveled. Take a chance ...

“It’s still early,” his mother prodded.

Erik made a quick decision. “Ok, I’ll go see her.” He stood up. “Don’t wait up.”

She smiled and winked. “I won’t.” Her own blue eyes twinkled merrily with a hint of playfulness. “I wasn’t always an old lady, you know. I knew the feelings of a young woman’s heart.”

“You mean that sexual urge?”

She laughed. “You said it, not me.” Then she grew serious. “You need someone, Erik. A woman who’ll love you and want what you want.”

“She doesn’t seem to exist,” he sighed.

“She does. Open your eyes and look. Lots of single women would appreciate a man who puts family first.”

“You think so?”

“I know so.”

Chapter Six

Sam turned into the driveway, killed the engine and lights, gathered her packages and prepared to go inside. Many of the more affluent citizens lived in the Pleasant Hills development. Located outside the town and amid the sprawling acres of farmland, Pleasant Hills was the place to live. She and Dan had purchased the simple, no frills brick house four years ago. While smaller and less ostentatious than some of the other homes in the area, they had thought the house to be perfect. It had plenty of space, an established yard and garden and room for expansion. At the time, it was perfect.

Perfect was an illusion.

The house presently had a FOR SALE sign in the front yard. She had won the house in the divorce settlement, but the hefty monthly payments were eating into her not so generous alimony. Unless she wanted to work, and she did not, the house would have to go. She needed a one-person efficiency apartment.

The rain kicked up into a hard drizzle, ushering her inside. Already soaked to the skin and feeling not a little feverish, Sam hurried to lug her purchases into the kitchen. The house was silent, dark and empty. She thought she heard voices talking softly. No. Nothing. She turned on the lights, the television and the radio. She hated the silence. Like a tomb, it crept her out. She stopped to listen, cocking her head. No, this house wasn't really empty. Ghosts lingered in the corners, the shadowy remnants of a marriage in tatters, an empty nursery that would never entertain a child's laughter and a sad, lonely woman who was coming to the end of her rope.

God, she thought. There's always another wound to discover. I'm tired of it, so tired....

Stripping off her coat, she put the wine and perishables in the fridge. Her new prescription lay on the counter. She shot a quick glance toward the answering machine. It was no surprise that there were no messages waiting. Her parents wouldn't call. They lived clear across the country in Florida, retirees on a fixed budget. She spoke to them only on holidays. Dan? No, he wouldn't call. Their divorce was long settled. He had been generous, fair. She couldn't fault him there. He was always a gentleman to the end when it came to business dealings. Near the end, that was what she had become to him. Nothing more than an impersonal case that he wanted settled as soon as

possible, as quietly as possible. After all, he was bucking for the position of District Attorney and any hint of scandal would taint his steps up the career ladder. Like the genteel educated people they were, they had managed to keep their problems behind closed doors and out of the public eye. Sam had wrapped herself up in such a mantle of grief that she had agreed to a quiet separation and quick divorce. At that point in their marriage, she was too worn down to care anymore. Why would she want a man who hurtfully flung out that her womb was a “hostile environment” and slept in the guestroom for six months before he finally got the nerve to pack his clothes and leave?

The friends they had shared as a couple had somehow all drifted to his side. Most were married with kids. A single person was a third wheel, useless. What could her girlfriends possibly have in common with her now? They were focused on family, problems of their own. The few girlfriends who had remained faithful were pushed away. How could they possibly comprehend her grief? No, it went too deep, to the bone. Like a cancer, it was something that couldn't be shared, talked out. She had made the choice to push them away. It was easier to be alone anyway, to drown herself in her personal puddle of pity along with each glass of wine she quaffed.

Feeling the chill all the way to her bones, she decided a long hot shower would be just the ticket. In her bedroom, she kicked off her boots and shimmied out of her dress, panties and hose. In the dresser mirror she caught a glimpse of her naked body. In a few weeks she would turn thirty-one. God, she felt so much older. For her age, though, she was still in fairly decent shape. Her breasts were small, but pert--there would be no sagging to her knees when she was ninety. Her waist was small, trim. Even pregnant, she'd hardly gained any weight. The only sign that gave away any evidence that she'd carried a child was in the stretch marks across her thighs and belly. Her stomach had only the slightest of pouches, just enough to enhance the curve above her Venus mound and give her a more womanly fullness.

She closed her eyes. Dan had once called her body delicious. It was easy to remember how it was when they were first married, before tension and loss drove a wedge in their relationship. He'd eagerly strip her naked, hungry to touch and taste every inch of her skin. Body poised over hers, his cock eager and straining, he'd tease her, kissing her until she was breathless, aching with need of her man.

When he was inside her, she could feel his penis stretching her, filling her as she closed around his generous length. Back then they were not worried about her getting pregnant. That would happen with time and let nature take its course. They were content just to practice making a child.

Nature hadn't taken over, though, and five years later they were still childless, sex was a chore with neither of them really in the mood any more. Sam had suffered nine miscarriages. Hope of a baby faded with each passing year.

Shaking herself out of her morbid memories, Sam padded barefoot toward the bathroom. Twenty minutes later, the chill was gone, replaced by a calming warmth.

Throwing on a silky robe, she combed out her long hair and arranged her curls into a messy chignon, then rubbed moisturizer into her face. Tearing open the little white baggie holding her prescription, she popped the safety tab off the Valium and downed two of the pills. The pills were her sanctuary. Her days were becoming hazy, blurring one into the other with few changes. Mixed with wine, the valium took the edge off her taut nerves. The house could burn down and she couldn't give a flying fuck. She didn't have to lay awake night after night staring holes into the ceiling. Those little capsules along with a few glasses of wine were guaranteed to send her into a sodden slumber.

Leaving her bedroom, Sam crossed the hall and lingered at the doorway of Arabella's nursery. With an unsteady hand, she reached in and flicked the wall switch. Light pooled in dark corners, but she did not go inside. She couldn't yet bring herself to cross the threshold.

The nursery was still decorated in pale yellow and white. A layer of dust coated everything-most of the items were new and never used. Dan had wanted her to take and sell everything, clear out the room. She'd refused and the resulting fight was to be the death knell in their relationship. He'd left the next morning, suitcase in hand. She later learned that he'd found comfort in his secretary's arms, a place he'd been quite comfortable in for many months. She thought about the newspaper she'd placed on the kitchen table this morning. The paper was open, folded neatly in half to the "New Births" announcements. There, front and center, was a photo of Dan's new wife, Crystal, holding her newborn baby, a child named Marcus.

Dan wasn't living in the past. He'd gone on, building a new future. Mourning for what might have been was destroying her. Deep down inside, she knew that. Perhaps selling the ring could be her first step toward independence. Taking down the nursery ... well, she'd face that idea tomorrow. She flicked off the light. The darkness was comforting.

Needing to relax, she claimed a chilled bottle of wine from the fridge. With a single glass in hand, she drifted into the living room. She began to arrange a haven for herself, turning off the television and lighting several candles. The musky scent of sandalwood filled the air as the flames began to

lick their way down the wicks. She put on her favorite CD, a compilation of gentle Beethoven sonatas. Music poured forth in the melodic notes that spoke of regret, loss and sadness.

Sinking onto the couch, Sam poured herself a glass of wine. She drank it down in a single gulp, poured a second and drank it, too. She had not had a meal since yesterday and the wine went straight to her head. She was hungry, but couldn't eat. Maybe later. She just couldn't face another sandwich or single serve microwave meal.

Closing her eyes, she plumped up a throw pillow and stretched out on the couch. It was nice just to let her thoughts float along with the melodic masterpiece. Beethoven's "Moonlight" sonata resonated with pain and loss. She had no doubt that the composer had known many losses in his life. No one wrote music like that without experiencing great anguish. Her mind glided back to the pawnshop and little smile wafted across her face. Erik Romaine.

Now there was a hot looking man. She could still see him across her mind's screen, undressing her with his eyes. Just thinking of that hard body of his made her clit pulse pleurably. Perhaps she should have taken advantage of his invitation. He hadn't asked her for sex, only dinner. It might have been nice to get out, spend a few hours just talking. Make a new friend. He didn't know her history. She could have kept it light ... fun. Something she didn't have much of lately.

A little smile played around the corners of her mouth. She realized that for the first time in a long time she was thinking like a living breathing woman again, not a mechanical automaton merely going through the motions of living. Perhaps there was a first step to be taken toward recovering her life. Perhaps there were many more steps yet to be taken.

Sex ... that was something she hadn't thought of in a long time. Through too many years she had considered it as a purely procreation matter in her pursuit to get pregnant. The pleasure had been replaced by desperation, enjoyment replaced by mechanics. What would it be like to lay back and let herself go, with nothing more on her mind than giving herself over to the sensations? What would it be like to have sex with a man other than her husband? She wasn't a virgin when she married Dan--her hymen had been sacrificed when she was sixteen. But she had remained faithful to her marriage vows. It had been a long time since a man, any man, had touched her.

Eyes half closed, lulled by the wine, the heady scent of the candles and her own emotional exhaustion, Sam let her hand drift down to her left breast. The silky material of her robe covered its fullness. She cupped it,

feeling its weight. A little tingle sent shivers up her spine. She began to circle her nipple with the tips of her fingers, enjoying the feel of the soft material against the silkiness of her aureole.

“Mmmmm....” A low sigh escaped her throat. It was easy to imagine that her fingers were Erik Romaine’s tongue circling the hard tip. Her other hand slipped down, brushing the tight curls covering her Venus mound. She shifted her body and opened her legs, giving easier access to her exploring hand. Using only the tips of her fingers and the gentlest pressure, she began to tease her clit with soft little flicks. Her arousal was almost instant.

Growing bolder, she stroked with more pressure, feeling the wetness seep up. She was wet, warm and oh-so-ready to be penetrated. Mind descending into a pleasant fog, she let her fantasy continue, pretending her fingers were Erik’s cock when she slid two into her depth. The yearning in her heart thudded on, her yearning for a man she’d only encountered for a few brief minutes burning hotter than a thousand suns...

Chapter Seven

Erik pulled into the Whitman driveway. Letting his car idle, he peered through the windshield wipers for signs of activity. Though Samantha's car was parked just in front of his (a good sign that she was now home), most of the windows in the house were dark (a bad sign she wasn't).

He sighed. Despite his mother's and Brian's encouragement and his own realizations that his marriage was truly over, he was still hesitant about making any sort of declarations to a new woman. True, it had been over a year.

But was he ready to start rebuilding a life for himself and his daughters, a life that would--someday--involve a new woman? He wasn't quite sure.

And what about Samantha Whitman? She was divorced, too. What if she wasn't ready to be looking for a new man in her life--and her bed?

Maybe he should get her phone number instead of showing up unannounced at her house. He could call her on his cell, let her know he was dropping by. What should he say? He couldn't think of a single thing. He didn't want to come off sounding like a jackass. No matter how many times he rehearsed the conversation in his head, nothing he might say sounded right. So what was he going to do? Sit and stare at her house like a lovesick cow? For God's sake. Was he a man or a mouse?

He who hesitates is lost, he reminded himself. And if I don't take a chance, I'll never know the answers to the questions.

"Damn it." He tightened his grip on the steering wheel. Why did the thought of asking Samantha Whitman out again reduce him to a nervous wreck? He felt like a teenager who cadged his dad's car for a date. Closing his eyes, he could easily picture Samantha; full lips moist, breasts heaving against that tight dress she'd worn today. His heart beat faster, pulse speeding up, a light sweat breaking out on his brow. It was suddenly hot in the car, too hot. He flipped off the heater. The way he was thinking, he didn't need it. He leaned forward, rested his forehead on the steering wheel, staring down into the floorboard. Her little body was made for loving a man. And the idea of another man holding her made his knuckles go white.

He suddenly sat up. "This is stupid. She's not even home."

A plan formed. He'd drop her license in the mailbox by the front door

and simply go home. It was Friday. He should go home where he belonged, grab a book, get in bed and read. Entanglements would come when the ink was dry on the divorce papers. Why try and rush things? This idea was too new, too scary to face just this moment.

That, however, was the last thing he wanted to do. He wanted to feel Samantha in his arms, her breasts pressed against his chest as he claimed her mouth and kissed her insane.

He let out a breath, half a frustrated groan. All his thoughts kept circling around to sex. It had been too long.

Killing the engine, he got out of the car and dashed up the driveway. The covered porch offered a dry sanctuary. Shaking off the water like a wet dog, he slid her license into the mailbox. She would find it with the morning mail. He was about to leave when he noticed the cheery glow emanating through the living room windows. From the driveway the soft light wouldn't be easily noticed--partially concealed by the low overhung style of the porch.

Feeling a bit like a Peeping Tom, he glanced through the window. She hadn't drawn the drapes and the sheers were transparent enough to see completely through. From his vantage point he could see the living room was set for an intimate evening. Candles had been lit, wine sat out on the coffee table. His widened when his gaze settled on the couch.

Samantha sat, sipping her wine. She was dressed in an almost transparent robe that left nothing to the imagination.

Damn! She was so beautiful. Long hair piled up, the soft candlelight giving her peachy skin an unreal, elusive quality. A lump formed in his throat, almost cutting off his oxygen. She was alone. Dressed provocatively. Was she waiting for her lover?

As if in answer to his silent questions, she put aside her glass and stretched out across the cushions. Her hazel eyes sparkled with a secret dreamy expression. Her hand settled on her left breast, stroking around the nipple. Her lips parted, tongue flicking out to trace her lips. She closed her eyes. Her free hand went lower, down the flat plane of her belly. Her thigh parted and her hand slid down between her legs.

Watching her masturbate, Erik felt his own inner mercury rise into the red. His breathing grew shallow as if to mimic hers. The ache in his loins grew fierce and his cock strained to break free of his tight jeans. God, the pressure, the needing, the wonderful anticipation. He wanted to unzip his jeans and wrap his hand around his throbbing erection, pump his cock in time to the dance her fingers were performing on her clit. He bit his tongue, gritting his teeth to resist the carnal urge. If a cop drove by, he'd surely be

arrested for public indecency, He should leave, but the sight of this woman he desired pleasuring herself was too hard to resist.

Though he could not see between her spread legs, he knew exactly what she was doing--rubbing her clit hard and then dipping her fingers into her creamy depth. Her free hand lingered at her breast, rubbing and pinching her nipple as the tempo of her faux-fuck increased. Lost in a fantasy of her own making, her skin was flushed, her breath coming in shallow gasps. She drove her fingers harder into her depth, teased her nipple with more ferocity. Another hard thrust of her fingers and she burst into flame like a star gone nova. A cry escaped from deep in her throat and her body trembled joyously with the relief of climax. He could imagine the muscles of her vagina rippling around her entrenched fingers. He wanted it to be his cock those muscles massaged.

Unable to help himself, Erik pressed his hand against the front of his jeans. His cock was throbbing painfully, alive with its own mind, its own needs. He'd totally lost control. His thoughts were centered around one idea: to make love to Samantha Whitman.

Tonight.

Lost in the haze of sheer lust, he bounded back to her front door and ferociously jabbed the doorbell with a thrusting finger. The wait for her to respond was sheer hell, the seconds seeming to drag like hours. Now he knew why William Hurt had been driven to hurl the chair through the window to get to Kathleen Turner in *Body Heat*. He was tempted to do the same damn thing, but he doubted Samantha would appreciate the fright.

He jabbed the doorbell again. If she didn't open it soon, he just might kick the fucking thing in.

Chapter Eight

The buzz of the doorbell sliced through the tranquil notes of Beethoven's sonata.

Sam opened her eyes, drawn out of the lovely cotton-candy softness she was close to drifting off into. Goodness, but the wine and lulling music had made her so sleepy. She was so wonderfully warm and relaxed that she didn't want to get up. Except for the music and soft patter of rain on the roof the house was silent. Had she imagined the sound?

She closed her eyes, feeling the feather soft brush of eyelashes on her cheeks. The doorbell rang two more times in quick succession.

"Damn," she muttered, tongue thick from the wine she'd consumed. Who could that be? Few people bothered to come by anymore. She considered ignoring the bell.

The insistent sound cut through the living room a fourth and fifth time. Whoever was outside was determined not to be ignored.

Sam sighed and sat up, rubbing her eyes. The pins in her hair had worked loose and a mass of brown curls tumbled down past her shoulders. She brushed it out of her face with an absent gesture. A few wisps insisted on lingering. The edge of the coffee table caught her leg as she tumbled past it. Grumbling, she fumbled in the semi-darkness with the dead bolt. Her fingers wouldn't quite obey.

Twisting the knob, she pulled the door open. The outline of a tall man filled her threshold.

Erik Romaine ran nervous fingers through his hair, further mussing his mane into a wild untamed style. His gaze danced over her body, taking in the sheer robe that clung like a second skin. The soft material rubbed against her nipples, hardening the little tips enticingly. Nearly transparent, Sam was aware that it was clear she was naked underneath. He knew it, too. A muscle tightened along his jaw line. He opened his mouth to say something, then closed it again. His gaze rose to her face. Their eyes locked. The air between them crackled with strange electricity.

Attraction. Need. Desire. All was communicated without a single word.

Seeing him at once dispelled Sam's despair and loneliness. The intense ache down in her heart was just as instantly forgotten. It was as if the

whole world outside had ceased to exist. She felt the fine hairs at the back of her neck prickle. She recognized him instantly, knew why he had come to her door. All sense flew out of her head and her sole thought was of how badly she wanted him. Now. His was a warm, living force, a magnet she could not resist. She wanted to be held, taken by this man--his to use any way he wished.

The emotions of loss that had been churning through her were suddenly quelled. This man had sought her out. She didn't know how or why he had come at this particular moment. She didn't care. Somehow, her prayer had been answered. She wouldn't be alone tonight. Shifting her body, she let her robe fall open reveal her otherwise nudity. Her message was subtle, but clear. He could take her as he wanted. Use her as he pleased.

Every inch of her body tingled with anticipation when he closed the dark distance between them, looming closer, filling her vision until all she saw was the desire in his eyes, a thing that could not be that could not be transmitted any other way but through touch.

His expression was hesitant, asking silently if he dared.

Her eyes mirrored his, answering *yes*.

Without a word, he bent and swept her up. Dizzied by her sudden ascent, Sam circled his neck with her arms. His hair and clothes were wet. He smelled like the cold spring rain, fresh and pure, cleansed by nature. His skin was chilled by the wind but that did not deter her. She wanted to be in his embrace, share her warmth with him. His head bent and his mouth captured hers in a kiss that stole her breath away.

Kicking the door closed with a foot, Erik carried her into the living room. He tumbled her down on the couch, his body half on top of hers.

"You came," she whispered, more to herself than for his benefit.

"I had to." His own voice was husky. His mouth covered hers again.

She regretfully broke it. "I--I'm not sure this is ... right...."

Erik brushed aside her robe, uncovering a breast, cupping it. His thumb traced the hard pink tip. "It's right because your body knows," he breathed. "And your body wants." He caught her chin, tipping back her head. "I want you, Samantha. All of you." Slipping past her lips, his tongue began a wonderful waltz with hers. It was a long, slow kiss, a kiss that said he intended to take his time with her. He would not be finished until he'd caressed, licked and sucked every inch of her.

Then, as if remembering himself, he pulled away with a groan, pulling a deep breath to steady himself. He lifted his left hand, showing her the finger that was now bare. "It's over," he said bluntly, with no trace of remorse. "I held on, thinking that Brenda would come back, waiting every

day for the call that she'd changed her mind."

Head still spinning in rapture, Sam tried to corral her hormones and listen to what he was trying to tell her. "Your wife left you?" she asked, still a bit dazed by the fact that the man she'd been fantasizing about was actually in her living room. She gave herself a little mental pinch to make sure she was not dreaming.

He nodded. "Over a year ago. I got the papers she filed last month." He ran his hands over his face, then rubbed his eyes. It was clear that a lot of emotions were piling up on him at once. "I haven't been able to look at them, though. I put them away, thinking out of sight, out of mind. I didn't want a damned divorce....."

The air in her chest locked painfully.

"Until today," he finished.

"Today?" she echoed, confused.

He reached out, catching her foot. Placing it in his lap, he stroked the soft spots behind her ankle with a feather light caress. The bulge in his jeans was unmistakable. The sensation sent a flood of warmth through her body all over again.

"Because I saw you," he explained. "Looking every bit like a drowned kitten, hissing and spitting mad. I've never believed in love at first sight, but it happened to me today. I fell in love with you right then and there."

Her mouth was suddenly parched. Struggling to sit up, she reached for her glass. Taking a sip of wine, she couldn't think of a single thing to say.

"I know, I know," he said, sounding a bit sheepish. "You must be thinking I'm an idiot. But I've made up my mind. I'm signing the papers tomorrow, no ifs, ands or buts about it." His hand moved higher, massaging the back of her calf.

"I came here tonight, hoping you'd give me a chance to explain, Samantha. I'm not a cheat. I haven't been with another woman since Brenda left me." He hesitated and then blurted, "I haven't wanted to be--until today."

Samantha was extremely conscious of the way he was caressing her leg. Those were the scariest words she'd ever heard a man speak, but they slipped past his lips with ease. It didn't help that he was caressing her in a wonderful way. It was the sexiest touch she had ever experienced.

A little shiver ran through her. Whether from the sudden turn of events or the nearness of Erik Romaine, she wasn't sure. The power to please or hurt, to accept or reject implied a lever of trust that twisted her heart.

"It's fast, I know. I just wanted you so badly that I couldn't help

myself. If you want me to leave--" He let his words trail to silence. The decision was hers to make.

Sam shifted her body. His hand immediately dropped away, taking the warmth of his touch. "It's easy to slide that ring off," she said, "and claim your marriage is over."

Erik met her gaze and held it fast. "That's true." He drew a deep breath, obviously fighting to cool his boiling passions. "But I'm not out looking for a one night stand. If I were, I'd be in a bar and any woman would do." His voice was serious. His words hit her in the gut.

Sam shook her head. It would be easy to bare her body to this man. But her soul? She couldn't give him that kind of power over her.

"That's the trouble." She sucked in a quivering breath. "I don't want to be any woman."

Erik reached out. He twirled a strand of her hair around his finger, tugging lightly. "I want you, Samantha Whitman. All of you. Nothing less will satisfy me tonight. Tell me now what you want me to do. Stay or walk out." A slow grin crossed his face. "But I'm warning you now. Throw me out and I'll be right back here tomorrow on your doorstep. I'm serious."

Sam lifted her eyes, staring into his handsome face. She expected to see the manipulation of a schemer in his eyes. Instead she saw only certainty. And unabashed desire. He was giving her the choice.

At this moment she felt so alone. She was attracted to Erik, but she didn't want this to be just a night of casual sex with regrets in the morning. Everything in her life had changed in an instant. Should she let him take the lead, follow the path he was blazing. Or should she draw back, play it safe and sensible?

When she didn't reply, Eric captured her hand and drew her against him. "Besides, I could easily pack you up in my car and take you home with me. There, you'd find my mother--with whom I live, I might add--sitting with my kids. My mother would be more than glad to give you an earful about the sorry state of my life and marriage."

His plain words, sweet in their effortlessness, were oddly sensual.

Sam didn't pull out of his arms. It felt good being there. Her body, already on edge from his nearness, stirred with renewed eroticism.

She tilted back her head, looking into his solemn, open face. "And you think it can be that easy, that I should trust and believe a complete stranger?"

A grin tugged at his lips, making her want to lay claim to his mouth.

"Give me tonight," he whispered, "and I won't be a complete stranger anymore."

Chapter Nine

Before she could answer, Erik brushed a kiss over her lips. He meant to reassure, but the fire between them flared fast and without warning. All her suppressed feelings came rushing to the surface. She wasn't sure who reached for whom first. It didn't matter, because his arms were around her and his lips came down again on hers.

Sam ran her fingers through his hair, holding his head, silently pleading with him never to stop, never leave her. Was she being a fool, letting this smooth talking man in? With seduction on his mind, the words falling from his lips could be well-practiced lies. She wasn't a fool, hadn't been born yesterday. Yet something in the touching simplicity of his words struck a note in her heart.

In that moment she took a leap of pure faith and opened her mind, and heart, to the future. Even if it was only for tonight, well, at least she'd have that.

She whimpered, torn by the need of a warm body next to hers. He moved his hand and cupped her intimately, knowing and anticipating her every desire. He didn't move his hand and his fingers rubbed in lazy circles over her softness, until her breath came in shallow gasps and the dampness between her legs increased.

He stared at her under a heavy lidded gaze. "What is it, Samantha?" he whispered. "Tell me what you want?"

Sam wanted the ache in her soul to ease. And she never wanted this night to end.

She wanted Erik Romaine.

Pulling away from him, Sam stood up and let her robe slide from her shoulders. It pooled around her feet in a soft hush.

"Stay."

She held out her hand. For now there was the night and nothing about truth or lies mattered. The consequences would come with the morning. She couldn't face them now. If she did, she'd be left alone. And alone was something she couldn't handle tonight.

His piercing gaze swept her naked body. After a nerve tearing silence, he took her hand and softly asked, "Are you sure?"

"Yes." She hardly recognized the deep husky tone of her own voice.

He pulled her into his lap. "Me, too. More than ever, me, too."

Fingers tangling in her thick curls, he drew her face close to his. Instead of immediately attacking her mouth, he flicked at her full lips with his tongue, teasing her. It was an utterly sexy move. When he finally did kiss her, she sank into the pleasure of his expertise. She pressed her body close to his, and then broke away with a chuckle. "You're all wet."

He tumbled her back onto the cushions. "I can take care of that." He stood up and slipped off his jacket. The top half of his shirt had been soaked, too, and her gaze was drawn to the way the material clung to his broad shoulders, delineating the disturbing maleness of his body.

Sam let her hungry gaze roam freely over his hard physique as he stripped off his shirt. There wasn't a spare ounce on his lean frame. He had clearly worked hard all his life and it showed in his sinewy muscles, broad shoulders and chest. She followed the line of his abdomen down to the top of the jeans that hugged his slender waist. His cock was clearly outlined by the tight material, straining for freedom. She reached out, eager to free his erection, but he caught her wrists.

"Tell me what you were thinking when you were touching yourself," he grated.

Sam's eyes widened. She cut her gaze to the living room's bay windows. Anyone standing outside on the porch would have a theater perfect view inside. Had he been watching as she turned herself on? Strangely, the idea of him watching her masturbate excited her beyond words. It was so wicked, so daring. She's never done anything like this before. It spurred her on. She wanted to let go, leave inhibition behind and go wild.

"I was thinking of you," she admitted breathily and immediately blushed, feeling heat creep into her cheeks.

"What was I doing to you, Samantha?" He pushed her down onto her back. Moving aside the coffee table, he went to his knees beside the couch. Candlelight flickered, reflecting the fine sheen of perspiration on his tanned skin. He had obviously spent a lot of time outside without his shirt, working with his hands. And those hands of his; strong and broad, nails clipped short, palms calloused from wielding a hammer and saw. She had no doubt that he wouldn't handle her the way he did his tools, with great skill and finesse.

"You were kissing me," she breathed, realizing that he intended to recreate every move he'd seen her make. Only it wouldn't be her hands doing the touching. It would be his. She couldn't wait to get started.

Smiling, he leaned forward, brushing her hair off her face. His hand brushed her cheek, sending pleasant shivers through her core. Who would have guessed that a simple touch would have such a devastating effect on

her?

“Kissing you?” he asked. “Like this?” When his mouth came down on hers, it was with a slow deliberation. She felt the soft brush of his tongue passing her lips to explore her mouth.

“Yes,” she groaned. “Exactly.”

“And did I do something like this?” He bent his head and nibbled at the soft flesh under her jaw, just below her ear. She moaned softly, wordlessly encouraging him to continue his enticing torment.

He took full control now, beginning a sensual seduction.

“Maybe I did something like this, hmmm ...” He caressed her breast, teasing the nipple until the tip was hard and round. Samantha stiffened as the delight of his touch knifed straight to her nether regions. She could barely suppress her delight when he attacked her other breast. His head dipped, tongue flicking out to taste the tender pink bud. The gentle pressure made her whole body jerk. She gasped and tangled her fingers in his thick hair, pressing him closer. With a merciless drag of his tongue over the tip, he continued his exquisite torment.

Erik laughed low in his throat and began to suckle harder, taking each nipple in its turn and giving them slow long licks, as though tasting the sweetest of candies. When he nipped one gently with his teeth as he twisted the other with his fingers, Sam nearly hit the roof with delight. She moaned again to show her pleasure. She was growing wetter between her legs. The ache of her clit was fiercer than ever. God, she wanted to reach down and touch herself. She gave a secret smile. Have patience and the ache would be eased. She relaxed and let herself fall into the sweet oasis of ecstasy he was leading her into.

He kissed his way over her abdomen, finding the nest of soft curls covering her Venus mound. He kissed her there, and then moved lower, his hand parting her thighs. She opened for him willingly.

“Please,” she breathed. If he didn’t touch her secret places soon, she would shatter into a thousand pieces. She could hardly wait any longer.

“I want to taste all of you, Samantha,” he murmured, voice low and hoarse. He turned briefly, claiming her half full wine glass. He tipped the glass and let a bit of the burgundy liquid trickle into her belly button. With a devilish grin, he licked it away.

“Mmmm ... I love the taste of you mixed with wine.” She could feel the heat of his blue eyes when he dripped more wine onto her skin, then lapped it up. “I could get used to a diet like this.”

She tried to press closer to him, dying for him to take his nibbles lower. “Erik ... please ...” The words were a hiss from her lips, dry now

from the eager rasp of her breath. She gave a primitive cry when he parted the silky folds between her legs and splashed red wine over her clit. His tongue immediately followed. In a strange way, it was like a ceremony, anointing with wine before the feast. As he took his fill of her womanly juices, she thrust at him, aching for more.

Her body seemed to escape her control, moving with a wildness of its own when he began to suckle the little nubbin, his tongue beginning a circular dance that set her hips into motion. She began to thrash. The sensations were so fantastically intense that she wanted to laugh and cry at the same time. Her climax was building, threatening to erupt. She drew in a sharp breath, wanting those wonderful vibrations of arousal to last forever. His touch was seductively gentle, erotically knowing, yet exquisitely unhurried. He was savoring the taste of her sex, reveling in her every orgasmic quiver.

"Oh, God," she gasped. "That's so wonderful." Her moans and deep sighs mingled with the soft music and patter of rain to create a new composition, which were of a woman fulfilled.

"Slow down, honey. We have all night."

Her reply was a long, lusty cry when he entered her with his fingers, claiming her pussy with a sudden hard thrust. Her back arched as molten lava poured through her veins. Her climax was fierce, setting her whole body to trembling. It seemed to go on endlessly, lifting her to a plateau she's never reached with any other man. Tracing one nipple with the juices of her climax, he licked away her cream. Taking a deep drink of her wine, emptying the glass, he shared a sweet dark kiss with her.

She came back to earth reluctantly, gasping for air, her heart pounding fiercely in her chest. She felt like unmolded clay, reveled in the sensations a man could bring to a woman's body with a mere touch. She felt overwhelmed by a strange sweet inertia. She wanted to taste his body, enjoy his fruits as he had enjoyed hers.

"Let me touch you," she pleaded.

He gave her a lazy smile and shifted his body. His eyes glittered with his own fierce desires. Through half lidded eyes, Sam watched him unbutton the top of his jeans, heard the rasp of his zipper coming down. Her pulse began to race at the sight of his erection. His cock pulsed with a life of its own, the massive purple head straining as if to escape his hand and assume its own course. She smiled up at him and playfully licked her lips in anticipation. Her eyes said it all. *Bring it on....*

Palm pressing against her cheek, Erik slowly turned her head. He guided the tip of his shaft to her full lips. "I thought about this all damn

day,” he said in a low rumbling groan.

Sam parted her lips willingly, whimpering a little in delight as he pressed his erection deeper into her mouth. When she did not protest, he thrust his hips forward, careful not to gag her with his size. An involuntary groan escaped him as she circled the tip with her tongue, then began a series of small flicks and caresses under the ridged head. He responded to her pleasing torture, gyrating his hips back and forth. She responded to the desperate moans falling from his lips, taking his cock as deep as she could. Stroking, she began to softly explore his shaft, reveling in the strange new intimacy she’d entered into with this man. His skin felt so familiar, so alive under her hands and lips. She licked and teased the whole of his length again and again, gently squeezing his balls until he cried out with sweet torment. Where before she had been a prisoner of her desires, he was now a prisoner of his. She heard him moan lustily as she scraped his shaft with her teeth. His mind had passed the point of return.

As she suckled, his long arm stretched out and his fingers again moved downward to plunder her most private place. In perfect sync, they moved as one, each enjoying the sensations of glorious surrender to mutual passions. Her own body arched again as he drove his fingers deep into her hungry depth.

Just when Sam thought she would feel the pulse of hot semen in her mouth, Erik drew back. Breath hitching in his throat, he regretfully pulled away.

“I can’t hold back.” His voice was raspy as a rusty hinge. “And I didn’t bring a condom, damn it.”

Feeling him withdraw, Sam opened her eyes. “It’s okay,” she said and meant it. All reason was lost now. She could not believe she was allowing a man she barely knew to make love to her, let alone enjoying it. She wanted him completely naked, wholly accessible to her curious fingers and warm mouth.

He chuckled and pulled her up into a sitting position to face him. Then he stood up, discarding his shoes before bending to slide his jeans down his strongly muscled legs. The sight of him moved her to admiration. *Seeing* him wholly naked was different from *feeling* him. He had a physique that would put any male model to shame. He was all male, beautifully proportioned and, she blushed, amply endowed. Very much so. His tanned skin radiated heat, a powerful energy that she, too, longed to possess.

“Is it really me you want?” she asked softly, as if disbelieving he was actually standing before her.

His eyes glowed, so intense that they seemed to tunnel straight into

her very being.

“It’s only you I want,” he said in a low voice. “How can you think any other woman could do this to me?”

Then take me, she implored in a silent plea. Claim me as yours and never let me go.

As if reading her mind, he stroked his cock with a steady hand. The beast strained to escape, but he controlled it masterfully. His move was so sexual, so erotic when he went to his knees in submission between her legs that, rightly or wrongly, it made Samantha feel that she was no mere fast fuck to him, to be forgotten in the morning. No, she was special for him. What he was doing, he’d done with no other woman. She could not define exactly how she knew that. She just did.

Erik’s hands slid around her hips to pull her forward to the edge of the cushion. He bent to tease her nipple with a flick of his wicked tongue. He put his hands under her smooth butt and squeezed her firm cheeks. Sam gasped and put her hands on his shoulders, instinctively letting her head drop back and arching her back. A wave of anticipation swept over her and her body convulsed, desiring more contact. She trembled and could only utter a sharp, “Oh, God!” when he attacked her other breast.

“Oh, Erik,” she gasped, making a strangling sound that was half desire, half insanity. “Please ...”

Feeling her need as well as descending into his own, Erik positioned his cock against the soft folds of her vagina. He was trembling from the effort to hold himself back.

“I want you,” she whispered, relishing the feel of his taut member.

It was all he needed to hear.

He plunged deep then, sliding into the velvety soft depths of her pussy. The sudden sensation of fullness made her cry out softly. She wrapped her legs around his waist, hugging him hard, needing to take him as deep as he could possibly go. It felt so amazing to have a man inside her, filling her depth. He caught a handful of her thick hair and forced her neck back so he could plunder its softness with kisses and nips.

Sam could only grip him with both hands as wave after wave of liquid heat shimmered through her veins. All gentleness was lost between them as she met thrust after thrust of his hips with a parry of her own. As his pace increased, so did hers. The air around them was redolent with the scent of sandal and the sweat of two bodies caught in a fierce unrelenting sexual frenzy. A violent climax ripped through her body and she cried out, nails digging deeply into his flesh, tearing trenches into his back. Then, even as her own body was wracked with brutal tremors, she urged him on like a wild

stallion, driven by ruthless instinct.

Erik plunged deep a final time. His body stiffened and a low moan spilled from his lips. His body jerked a final time and he lost all control, discharging his hot semen into her waiting womb. She held him captive for a few cherished moments after his climax. When he broke away, his eyes were even a deeper blue than she remembered, glittering in the light of the candles like the twin pools of a night ocean.

She pulled him up on the couch to stretch out beside her. He came willingly into her arms. He lay beside her, making a pillow for her head with his arm. His body still shook from the force of his release.

Samantha snuggled against him. "Mmmm, I wish this could last forever."

His throat moved as he swallowed. "I don't know." He slid a hand along the soft curve of her belly. "But I'll damn sure try."

Sam could feel his powerful shaft begin to rise against her leg. He was as insatiable as she was! With a sound of playful excitement, she shifted a leg over his hip, bringing a hand down between their bodies to guide him toward her aching slit.

"Promise?" she grated breathlessly. When his cock slipped inside her, she tensed violently, feeling her pussy's muscles clutch and try to draw his reawakened shaft deeper.

He grinned and moved his hips slowly deeper between hers. "It's more than a promise, honey."

Sam was in a fever. She wanted so badly to move on top of Erik, but he grasped her hips, determined to have control. As he moved between her legs, his tongue teased the hardened peaks of her nipples. The sensation of pleasure was resounding. In wild desperation, she cried out. He silenced her cries with his mouth, kissing her, claiming her with his tongue even as he claimed her with his cock. His skillful moves drew more excited cries and moans from her. Every limb turned to liquid, every thought disappeared, leaving only the intense desire to have him take her again and again. Her hungry body was responding again with a fierceness that stunned her. Her mind blurred and she lost all sense of time and reality. Nothing--certainly not the past--mattered, but this man and his claiming of her body. She lay in helpless thrall as he did what he pleased all over again, shaping her breasts to his mouth suckling until a fierce piercing pleasure nearly made her weep. With him inside her, the sweet building peaks of pleasure were higher, sharper, more intense, leaving her breathless and grasping for the highest pinnacle yet, that of giving to each other, possessing each other--at last sharing and truly belonging.

True to his word, Erik played her body like an instrument until the first rays of sunlight peeked over the edge of the earth. Exhausted, Sam eventually fell into a deep sleep, curled in her new lover's strong arms like a contented kitten.

The storms of the night had passed, the dawn bringing fresh hope to two careworn hearts....

The End