



Finding Love *Again*

Marilyn Lee

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By

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Chapter One

I was determined not to like Don Westen. He wasn't going to be my type of man at all. I liked my men big, muscular, and very physical. That was why I'd fallen for Mark Mills the moment I met him when I was nineteen. I had loved him until the day he died. From Ta-tea and John Walsh's description, I was sure Don Westen was none of those things. I mean, he managed a bookstore for a living and liked to cook in his spare time. Neither activity sounded very exciting or was particularly masculine. But Ta-tea was my best friend. She and her husband, John, had been there for me when Mark died. So, even though I was weary of Ta-tea's attempts to fix me up, when she said that she'd consider my going out with John's friend from high school a favor, I couldn't say no.

Still, I'd warned Ta-tea not to get her hopes up. "I'll go out with him once, for you and John, but don't look for any repeat performances," I said darkly. Both of the men Ta-tea had introduced me to in the last six months had been nice enough, but neither had measured up to my Mark. And both had been Caucasian. After dating and finally marrying a white man, she'd convinced herself that was the only way to go.

That was a conviction I didn't share. While I had nothing against anyone who fell in love across the color line, the only thing I wanted to be white was the horse my next ebony knight rode in on to sweep me off my feet.

So I didn't have high hopes for my date with Mr. Bookstore Manager Who Liked To Cook.

Ta-tea had just given me what I called her trust-me-you'll-love-this-guy smile. "We'll see, Sam."

Yes, we would, I thought.

To make it easy to end an evening I was sure I wouldn't enjoy, I'd insisted on driving my own car to the riverfront restaurant where we'd agreed to have dinner. That way I could make an easy getaway ASAP.

Fifteen years of marriage to Mark, and helping him in his handyman repair business, had made me very practical. After our courtship was over, Mark hadn't wasted time or money on dining out at romantic restaurants, except on our anniversary.

In the early years of our marriage, when I'd complained that he no longer loved me, Mark had told me not to be silly. He'd married me, hadn't he? Although Mark wasn't the romantic lover of my girlish dreams, I'd never had cause to doubt his love.

So needless to say, I wasn't impressed by Don Westen's choice of restaurant. The intimate atmosphere of the restaurant wasn't right for a first date, especially a blind one. I had no intention of gazing into his eyes across the table or letting him take any liberties with me.

To make matters worse, I'd allowed Ta-tea to persuade me to wear a dress that clung to every curve of my body. Not that I'd needed much persuasion. I was secretly very proud that at thirty-five, I was still able to wear the same size clothes I'd worn when I was twenty.

As the waiter escorted me to the table, I became aware that I was being watched by a man at a table in the middle of the dimly lit restaurant. To my surprise, the waiter stopped at the man's table.

He smiled and got to his feet. "Hello, Samantha, I'm Don Westen."

I was disappointed to see that he was only medium height and build which meant he only had about a two or three inch advantage over me. He was a far cry from my big, strong Mark, who at six-foot-six, had swept me off my feet both figuratively and literally. Still, Don had a nice, dimpled smile and a warm, deep voice. And he was cute with thick, dark hair, but I'd made up my mind not to be impressed. Most people called me Sam. I kind of liked the way he used my full name. So I gave him a very brief smile. "Yes. I'm Samantha. Hello," I said.

He seated me before resuming his seat. “I want to thank you for agreeing to have dinner with me tonight, Samantha. I’ve just moved back to town after fifteen years of living out of state and I really don’t know any women.”

As he spoke, his dark gaze held a look that left no doubt in my mind that he found me attractive.

I hadn’t been out to dinner in awhile and hadn’t actually worn a dress since Mark’s funeral. It felt great to know he liked the effort I’d made.

I glanced at him, met his gaze, and found it difficult to look away.

He had the sexiest eyes I’d ever seen. It was disconcerting to find myself fighting the urge to lose myself in them.

“Yes, well I’m sure you’ll soon meet plenty of women.”

“Will I?”

I nodded. “Trust me. Ta-tea will see to that,” I told him. “She’ll soon introduce you to so many of us that you’d have your pick.”

“I’m not a lady’s man.”

I blinked at him. Oh, hell. Was he about to tell me he was bi? “Oh?”

He shook his head. “I was hoping to meet just one special woman, Samantha.”

“Oh.” I wasn’t quite sure why, but I experienced a surge of relief at his declaration. “She can take care of that too.”

He shrugged. "I'm thinking that won't be necessary after tonight. At least that's what I'm hoping."

As his meaning became clear, I felt a tingling sensation along the back of my neck that I hadn't felt since the last time Mark had made love to me. It had been so long since a man had flirted with me, I wasn't quite sure how to handle myself.

I moistened my lips and had to force myself not to look away from his gaze, which suddenly seemed so intense. "You know, most people call me Sam," I said, annoyed at the way my voice quivered. *Get a grip, woman. He's just a man and not even your type.*

"Do they?"

I nodded and swallowed hard.

"I hope you'll allow me to call you, Samantha."

"Samantha?"

"It would be a shame to shorten such a beautiful name, Samantha."

He made my name sound so sweet and soft that I was in danger of blushing like a silly teenager. "Fine. Call me Samantha."

"And you'll call me Don?"

"You want me to call you Don?"

"It's my name."

“Oh. Of course it is.” I paused, biting my lip. I knew I sounded like an idiot, but I couldn’t seem to think clearly with him smiling so intimately into my eyes. “I’ll call you Don.”

“Great. Don and Samantha. They have kind of a nice ring to them. Don’t they?”

As if sensing my unease with the turn the conversation had taken, he changed the subject. We started to discuss books.

As I slowly relaxed, I tried not to enjoy myself that evening. I kept telling myself that it wouldn’t do for me to get accustomed to dining out—especially with him. After all, I’d taken over the running of the business after Mark’s death. That meant I had to work long hours and had to be willing to roll up my sleeves and help out if push came to shove. And lately, push often came to shove. My busy work schedule didn’t leave much time for courting and trying to look glamorous.

I’d become very used to living in jeans, sweats, and work clothes. So glamorous isn’t a word I’d normally associate with myself. Still, his constant long stares of appreciation left me feeling very desirable if not actually glamorous.

He had such an easy, beguiling way about him that I found it impossible not to smile back at him when he turned one of his frequent, slow smiles on me. And when he told me about himself, I listened attentively. By the end of the evening, I

knew he was thirty-six, had never been married, and was one of eight boys. He was interested in settling down to have children very soon.

The only disappointment in our marriage had been Mark's inability to father children. I have to admit the thought that Don wanted kids intrigued me. "How soon?" I asked, ignoring the voice of sanity that urged me not to show any interest in him that he might misinterpret.

"Very soon, Samantha. All my brothers are married and have children. My parents are beginning to despair of my ever marrying," he said.

"Why haven't you married?" Though he wasn't handsome, he had an undeniable magnetism that was very exciting. "It certainly couldn't be from a lack of opportunity," I said confidently, and then could've bitten off my tongue the moment the words left my mouth.

"I believe that's a compliment, Samantha. Thank you."

He smiled so charmingly that I caught my breath. When he smiled like that with his eyes alit, it was hard not to think he was far more than just cute. A lot more. I shrugged but didn't answer because God only knew what I would have said then.

He sighed. "I'm an old-fashioned guy who doesn't believe in settling for second best. I've never married because I haven't met the right woman. At least I hadn't."

That time I felt the blood rushing up into my cheeks. Even an inexperienced teenager couldn't have misunderstood his meaning.

Commonsense told me he was talking nonsense because he was thinking with his third leg. Still, it was hard to keep that in mind with him smiling at me like that—making me feel as if I were the only woman in the world worth looking at.

I stared down at the tablecloth, embarrassed that I was acting so gauche.

"My apologies. I didn't mean to embarrass you, Samantha," he said gently.

I jerked up my head at his tone. I didn't like him treating me as if I weren't self-sufficient. "I'm not embarrassed," I lied shamelessly.

"That's a relief."

Why did everything he say suddenly sound like a come-on? *It's time to get yourself away from him before you lose your mind completely and say or do something you'll regret.* "But it's getting late and I have an early day tomorrow," I said.

He nodded and looked around to signal the waiter.

Call me contrary, but I was annoyed that he didn't attempt to change my mind.

I offered to pay my share, but he wouldn't have it. When I insisted, he gave me a long cool stare. After meeting his determined gaze, I shrugged and looked away. "Thanks," I muttered.

“No, Samantha. Thank *you* for having dinner with me.”

Oh, he was good. He managed to sound as if I’d done him a huge favor.

I went to the ladies’ room and then we left the restaurant.

He didn’t touch me as he walked me to my car, but I was as physically aware of him as if he had drawn me into his arms. When his hand brushed mine, I felt a tingle of desire I hadn’t expected.

I kept my gaze forward while clenching my other hand into a fist. *Keep it together, Sam.*

At my car, I reluctantly turned to face him.

“I really enjoyed this evening,” he said.

I wasn’t quite sure how I felt about our evening. While I wasn’t sure I’d enjoyed it, I knew I was glad that I’d allowed myself to be talked into meeting him. I didn’t know what to say, so I smiled at him instead.

“I hope we can do it again, very soon, Samantha.”

Oh, I liked the way he said my name.

He stood very close to me.

My heart beat so fast that I was almost short of breath. I’d been sure he was going to ask to see me again, and I’d intended to say no. Instead, I found myself hedging. “Well, I don’t have much time.”

“Why not? Don’t you think making time for yourself is worth the effort?”

The question caught me off guard. It took me several moments to gather my thoughts. “I run a business that requires me to be ready and willing to pitch in if necessary. So my schedule is generally very full.”

“I’m sure it is, but I’m very flexible, Samantha. Whenever you have a few hours, would be fine with me.”

I wanted to say no, but after spending the entire evening feeling as if he were beguiling me, the word just wouldn’t come. “Okay.” With trembling hands, I got a business card out of my handbag and handed it to him. “You’ll have better luck catching me at the office than at home.”

He leaned closer to me as he took the card.

For one wonderful moment I thought he was going to kiss me, and my heart jumped into my throat. I think I probably parted my lips in anticipation of a slow, hot kiss I could almost taste.

But he only opened my car door. “I’ll call you at your office then. Good night, Samantha.”

I felt a wave of disappointment. After all his intimate looks and hints, I’d kind of been looking forward to having to shove him away—after he’d devoured my lips once or twice.

“Good night,” I said and got in my car.

I spent the drive home telling myself I had no regrets. But it took longer than normal to fall asleep that night.

Chapter Two

In the morning, I woke feeling tired and more than a little irritable.

After two cups of coffee, I went to work.

To my surprise, Ta-tea didn't make an appearance until after lunch.

"All right, go ahead and ask," I told Ta-tea after watching her move aimlessly around my small office, getting in my way.

"Ask what?" She gave me an innocent look I knew better than to take at face value.

"Ta-tea, you didn't come here just to get in my way," I said, taking my rolodex away from her. "You want to know how last night went."

I shrugged and smiled. "So?"

I was glad I'd put the dozen roses that Don had sent that morning on the bathroom windowsill, where they would be out of the way. If I didn't see them, I would be less inclined to waste time day dreaming about him.

"Well, only if you want to talk about it," she said, trying to hide the eagerness in her voice. "What did you think of Donnie?"

I sighed. I'd enjoyed last night more than I'd wanted to, but I wasn't ready to admit it to Ta-tea, yet. I shrugged and didn't look at her. She knew me so well that if I met her gaze, she'd know what I was trying to hide from her. "He wasn't exactly what I thought he'd be." That was true enough.

"And?"

"And he's nice enough, I guess." What an understatement.

"Are you going to see him again?"

I stared at the phone on my desk, willing it to ring. But it didn't, so I had to answer. "I might," I admitted reluctantly.

"I knew it!" Ta-tea cried triumphantly. "That dress knocked him out, I bet. Listen, before you two go out again, Joan said she wants you to go shopping with her," she said of her seventeen-year-old daughter. Joan was going to New York to study fashion design in the fall.

I tried to tell Ta-tea that we hadn't made any definite plans to see each other again and that she was getting ahead of herself. I might have been talking to myself because she was so not listening. With a satisfied gleam in her eyes, she slid off my desk and walked toward the door. "Getting ahead of myself? Yeah? Whatever." She waved a hand in dismissal. "Don't forget dinner at our house on Sunday."

"I won't."

Giving me a wide smile, she waltzed out of my office.

Alone, I sat staring into space for several minutes, my thoughts on Don. What was he doing? Why hadn't he sent a message with the roses? When would he call me? When he did, should I accept or wait for a second invitation so I didn't look desperate.

But from the moment we met, he'd been surprising me. He continued the streak by not calling me.

I woke up early Sunday morning after a restless night. It had been nearly a week since I'd met Don. Though I hadn't been very encouraging, I'd fully expected him to call me. But then, I'd obviously read too much into the roses he'd sent. He'd probably met someone else and was no longer interested in me. I was dismayed by how sad the thought made me.

It would be a cold day in hell before I allowed Ta-tea to set me up on another blind date. As I cleaned my house, I avoided looking at the pictures of Mark I'd placed in nearly every room of the house we'd shared. I couldn't help feeling that I was being disloyal to his memory by constantly thinking about Don.

Having Sunday dinner with Ta-tea and her family had become a tradition in the past two years. At first it had been a balm to my loneliness, but now it was just a time to relax with my best friend and her family.

The Walshes lived ten blocks away. I usually drove to their house so that I wouldn't have to trouble Ta-tea or John for a ride home. But I was feeling a little depressed, and since it was a nice, breezy May evening, I decided to leave the car at home.

As I walked up the Walsh's driveway, I heard music coming from the backyard. I smiled; Joan was obviously home. I knocked on the door.

Don opened the door.

"Oh, hello!" I gushed, overjoyed to see him.

He treated me to one of his slow, intimate smiles that hinted I was the only woman in the world worth smiling at.

I sucked in a breath and was hard pressed not to throw my arms around his neck.

"It's good to see you again, Samantha."

When I stood staring at him in silence, he put his hand on my arm and drew me into the hallway. "John and Ta-tea are in the kitchen putting the finishing touches on dinner. They said you and I should go into the living room and keep each other company."

"I really should help them," I protested. My skin seemed to burn where his fingers touched my arm. As I stared at him, I was sorry I wasn't wearing something more glamorous than jeans and a T-shirt.

“Ta-tea was very emphatic about your needing to relax.” He placed a hand in the small of my back and guided me down the hall to the living room.

When I stood staring at him, he pushed me gently onto the sofa. “What can I get you?”

“Just a seltzer,” I said, dragging my gaze from his.

“That’s it?”

The last thing I needed was alcohol, which always made me looser than I wanted to be. And I already felt so giddy that I didn’t need any help. I nodded. “Yes. On the rocks.”

“One seltzer on the rocks coming up.”

I watched him make my drink before he walked across the carpet to hand it to me.

“Thanks.”

“You’re welcome,” he said and sank onto the sofa beside me.

Although he sat close, no part of his body touched mine. Still, I was so aware of him, I had to concentrate on breathing normally for several moments before I dared to glance at him.

He smiled at me. “So. How have you been?”

“Busy.” I glanced away and took a quick sip of my drink. “You?”

“Can’t say I’ve been particularly busy.”

Then why the hell hadn't he called me? I turned to silently stare that unasked question at him.

His smile widened.

I had the uneasy feeling he knew what I was thinking.

After a moment of silence, he casually put an arm along the back of the sofa.

Instead of heightening the tension between us, I found myself relaxing.

"I was wondering if you'd tell me about your husband, Samantha."

Talking about Mark to strangers was out of the question. I shook my head.

His fingers brushed against my shoulder. "I'm a good listener and I'd really like to know about the man you married. What was his name?"

"Mark."

"And what was Mark like?"

"He was perfect." I whispered the words.

His fingers brushed against the side of my neck. "Go on," he encouraged.

Turns out I was ready to talk because the words poured out and I found myself telling him all about the early years of our marriage, and how we'd come to mesh together so well I still ached with missing him.

"You loved him very much," Don said when I fell silent.

I nodded; surprised I didn't have to blink back tears as I usually did on the rare occasions that I exposed my pain enough to talk about Mark.

“Where did you two meet?”

“We met at one of Ta-tea’s parties when I was nineteen. I fell in love with him that same night, and I never stopped loving him,” I said.

He touched my neck. “He was a very lucky man to have your love for so long, Samantha,” he said, looking into my eyes.

“I was lucky, too.” I looked away from the blatant desire I saw in his gaze.

He stroked my neck. “You’ll be all right with me,” he promised.

Why did I believe him? We had nothing in common, he was white, and not my type at all. So why was my heart pounding? And why did I long to turn my head and lean against him with my lips parted and eager to be kissed?

Since Mark’s death, I had convinced myself I would live the rest of my life alone, content with his memory. I’d been so sure that even if another man could measure up to him, I wouldn’t want him. I’d loved once, very deeply. Surely, it wouldn’t happen twice.

But I couldn’t deny my excitement at being with Don. “I’m not ready for anything serious,” I told him, looking away.

He cupped a palm on my face and turned it back so he could gaze into my eyes. “I can wait until you are, Samantha.”

I shook my head. “And when I am...”

“It won’t be with a white guy?”

I blinked at him. “Who have you been talking to?”

He caressed my neck and leaned so close I could feel his breath on my mouth. “I like you and I’m hoping you like me too, Samantha.”

I swallowed slowly and leaned back.

He leaned closer and brushed his mouth against the corner of my lips. “I can wait until you’re ready to really get to know me like I want to know you.” He whispered the words in a husky voice.

Before I could do something foolish like turning my head and kissing him on his mouth, he dropped his hand from my neck and leaned away. When he spoke again, his voice was normal. “Can I get you another drink?”

I shook my head, not trusting my voice.

Ta-tea called us to dinner and I bounded to my feet and rushed out of the room.

His warm, intimate laughter teased my senses as I hurried into the dining room.

Dinner was a tense meal for me. It was difficult to keep my gaze from lingering on Don’s handsome face. Each time I stole a glance at him, I found him smiling at me. And my heartbeat raced.

Everyone pretended not to notice the tension between Don and I. And finally dinner was over.

When I offered to help clear the table, Ta-tea gave me her butter wouldn't-melt-in-my-mouth look. "Oh, didn't I tell you? We're all going to visit Mom. We'll clean up later." She smiled at Don. "Don, will you take Sam home?"

As I saw the gleam in Don's eyes, I was glad I'd worn my hair down so it covered my hot cheeks. I have dark skin but my face felt so hot, I wouldn't have been surprised if a hint of color red wasn't visible. "I'm walking home."

"Not tonight," Don said.

I turned to look at him. "It's a nice night and—"

"And I'm driving you home, Samantha." End of discussion.

He didn't actually say the words but they hung in the air between us. Instead of annoying me, they excited me. I happily capitulated. "Okay. Thanks."

During the short drive to my house, I was shocked at how much I wanted to feel his hands on my body. Each time I stole a glance at him, his gaze was on the road, his hands resting easily on the steering wheel. Meanwhile, I had to clench my hands to keep them away from him. I felt bewildered by my desire for him. How could I want any man as much as I'd wanted my beloved Mark? The knowledge that I did made me feel shameless.

"Would you like to come in for coffee?" I asked, aware that my voice was more than a little strained.

He nodded. "I'd love to, if it's no trouble."

“It’s no trouble at all.”

“I’m very glad to hear that, Samantha.”

I turned and walked inside.

He followed me into the kitchen and sat at the big, old wooden table that Mark and I had refinished together. “Whoever refinished this did a great job.”

I smiled. “Mark and I did it.”

He slid a hand over the top. “Lucky table.”

Oh, but he had a very nice way with words. “Thanks.” I turned away. My hands shook as I opened the cabinet. “I hope you don’t mind instant.”

“Of course not, Samantha.”

I was so unnerved by his presence, I dropped the coffee jar. Then I couldn’t open it. I rarely used four-letter words, but as I struggled with the lid, I felt several trembling on the tip of my tongue.

“Here, let me help you.”

“Oh, no!” I swung around to face him in a panic.

But he’d already got to his feet and stood behind me. In fact, he was already so close that my hands brushed his chest and I found myself staring into his eyes.

There were advantages to being with a male who was nearer my height, I thought as we stared into each other’s eyes.

“It’s all right, Samantha,” he said, and he took the jar from my numb fingers. He put the jar on the countertop. “Coffee isn’t high on the list of things I want at the moment.”

“It isn’t?”

Without answering, he took my hands in his.

I closed my eyes as he bent his head.

His lips felt like sweet, liquid fire as they touched my eyelids, my cheeks, the tip of my nose, and finally my waiting lips. After several gentle brushes of his mouth on mine, I melted into his arms and kissed him with a passion that left me weak with hunger.

He curled his fingers in my hair and kissed me until my panties flooded and I couldn’t breathe. When I realized I could feel him hardening against me, I was ready to spend the night with him.

But he was true to form. Instead of taking advantage of my need, he tore his lips away from mine and stepped back. He raked a hand through his hair. “Whew. I’d better go before things get out of hand.”

I stared at him in surprise. Go? Was I hearing things?

Apparently not. He pressed a soft kiss against my cheek. “Good night, Samantha.”

And he left—leaving me burning with desire. I took a long soak in the hopes of relieving some of my tension. The bath didn't help much. Later, as I lay sleeplessly and alone in the bed I'd shared with Mark, I burned with humiliation at the knowledge that Don had been the one to show restraint.

I finally fell asleep after assuring myself that the next time we saw each other I'd be the one to call a halt before things got too heated.

I wasn't sure when he'd call but I felt fairly certain he'd send more roses. But the following day passed without my hearing from him. As did the day after. And the one after that. After four days of silence from him, I worried that I'd probably frightened him away with my intensity.

Instead of working, I stood in front of my bedroom mirror, staring at myself with a critical eye. I was five-six with nice-sized breasts. I kept in shape and had no need to diet. I knew men generally found me attractive. So why hadn't I heard from Don?

Then one afternoon just as I was on my way to evaluate a remodeling job, the phone rang. I'd already turned on the answering machine. I was nearly at the door when I heard Don's voice.

"This is Don. I'm sorry I missed you, Samantha."

I made a mad dash back for the phone and snatched it up. "Hello, Don."

"Samantha. You sound breathless. Were you on your way out?"

“No.” I sat on the edge of my desk. Mr. Brown and the whole world would just have to wait. “How are you?”

“I’m fine. You?”

Great. Now that he’d finally called. “Good.”

“I’m very glad to hear it. I’m sure you’re busy so I won’t keep you. I just wanted to ask you to dinner with me.”

“Yes,” I said quickly and then bit my lip. I shouldn’t have sounded so eager. “I mean when did you have in mind?”

“Is tonight too soon?”

Not after waiting an eternity for his call. “No,” I admitted.

“Great.”

I smiled. Yeah. Great.

“Seven o’clock okay?”

“It’s fine.”

“And this time I want to pick you up.”

I smiled. “Okay.”

“I’ll see you at seven, Samantha.”

“Great. Bye.”

I left the office feeling on top of the world. I made sure I was home from work by five-thirty so I could spend at least fifteen minutes enjoying a warm,

soothing bath. After I dressed, I decided the mauve colored dress with the low-cut bodice looked nice against my dark skin. I hoped Don agreed with me.

Chapter Three

He arrived to pick me up with red roses and a bottle of white wine, a favorite of mine.

“This is my favorite wine.” I smiled appreciatively at him. “How did you know?”

He grinned at me. “I’ve been talking to Ta-tea about you.”

I was touched that he’d taken the time to find out what I liked. “Oh?”

He nodded. “We had a very enlightening talk.”

“Oh? What else did you ask her?”

He leaned so close that I could feel his breath against my face. “I asked her if I were your type.”

I stiffened. “What...what did she say?”

He lifted his head and met my gaze. “She said no.”

I felt panic at his words. “What?” *Ta-tea. How could you?* “Why didn’t you ask me?”

He smiled. “Not to worry. I told her I’d put all my energies into changing your type.”

He'd already done that. But I thought it was best to keep that knowledge to myself. At least for a little while longer. "Oh." I smiled. "Did you?"

He nodded. "And I think you should know I'm a man of my word."

"I think you should know I don't convince easily."

"I'll get the job done."

He'd already done that and I liked his confident attitude. I slipped my arm through his. "Let's get this date started."



For the next six weeks, Don turned all my girlish, romantic daydreams into reality. He sent me flowers, fresh fruit baskets arranged to look like flowers, heart-shaped balloons, expensive chocolates, and bottles of wine. To highlight his romantic side, he wrote me poems and called me everyday—sometimes to ask me out for dinner or dancing, sometimes just to hear my voice. Sometimes we went to the movies. Sometimes we had picnics in the park or went walking along the riverfront. At other times, we held hands like star struck lovers, or sometimes we had candlelight dinners at his apartment.

Though I felt guilty and disloyal, I couldn't stop myself from falling hard for Don. Lying in bed at night, I felt more than a little ashamed that I had such a strong physical reaction to him. But of course, it was just physical. "I mean, after

all, it's been over two years since Mark made love to me," I told Ta-tea one afternoon as we had lunch.

Ta-tea gave me a disapproving look. "Oh, Sam, get real. It's not just sex. Why can't you just admit that he's everything Mark wasn't?"

"What?"

Ta-tea gripped my hands in hers. "Don't look at me like that. You know I know that Mark was a wonderful, wonderful man. I know you two loved each other deeply."

"Yes we did. So what's your point?"

"But let's face it, Sam. He wasn't the romantic guy we used to spend so many nights dreaming about as teenagers."

I sucked in an annoyed breath.

She squeezed my hands. "Face it, Sam. Don is that man."

I shook my head angrily. "He's nothing like Mark."

"No he's not, but then who said he had to be?"

"I..."

"He makes you happy, Sam. You know Mark would have wanted you to be happy. Just let it happen with Don."

That was what I wanted more than anything—to let it happen. But it was so hard to let go of what Mark and I had shared for so many years. Still, I found

myself wanting Don more with each passing day. Though he was always very solicitous to me and gave the appearance of wanting me, he'd never try to go beyond kissing and caressing me. Even when he must have known I wanted him to make love to me, he held back.

One night after a romantic dinner cruise, I put my arms around his neck and pressed my lips and body against his. Though his kiss matched mine for passion, he pulled away after just a few heated kisses.

"Don't stop now," I whispered softly, rubbing my breasts against him.

He shuddered but eased me away from him with trembling hands on my shoulders. "I don't think that would be a good idea, Samantha." He took several deep breaths, and when he spoke again, his voice was steadier. "It's been awhile since I've been really close to anyone. And—"

His words chilled me. I'd clearly misunderstood him. I felt my face burning with shame as I turned away from him. "And you don't want to be close to me?" I interrupted him. I hadn't thought he was masculine enough for me. Maybe he didn't think I was feminine enough for him. "I'm sorry I bothered you," I said as evenly as I could.

"No." He caught my shoulders and swung me back around to face him. "That's not what I was going to say." He touched my hot cheeks gently. "I do want

to be close to you, Samantha. Hell, I want to make love to you, but I wouldn't want to coerce you into doing something you're not ready for."

"It wouldn't be coercion," I whispered, clinging to his jacket in relief.

"I wouldn't want you to be sorry tomorrow, Samantha."

I opened my mouth to say I wouldn't be sorry, but he pressed his fingers against my lips. "And I wouldn't want you to look back and feel you hadn't been properly romanced."

I bit back the urge to say I wouldn't feel that way. Clearly he didn't want any more intimacy that night. So I'd just have to go home and take a cold shower before bed.

He kissed my parted lips.

His mouth felt warm and insistent.

It took all of my willpower not to lean against him and suck his tongue into my mouth.

"Sweet dreams, my beautiful Samantha," he told me, his voice brusque.

Sleepless ones were more like it, I thought as he left me alone.



After a long sleepless night, I woke feeling tired and a little depressed.

I wasn't in the best of moods when Ta-tea came over for dinner that night.

"What's wrong, Sam?" she asked.

“He doesn’t want me, Ta-tea.”

Ta-tea, who usually spent her Monday nights lying in bed while Joan and John waited on her hand and foot, gave me a cool, unsympathetic look. “Sam, you’re being silly. Of course he wants you.”

“How do you know?” I demanded, clenching my hands into fists.

“Because John says he’s sick to death of hearing how beautiful and wonderful you are every time they’re together. He goes on and on about how he loves your skin tone and how the sound of your voice sends chills through him.”

I smiled. “He talks about me a lot?”

“All the time. To anyone who’ll listen. Okay? Now can we eat? You may be too love struck to be hungry, but I’ve been happily married for nineteen years and I’m starving.”

I stared at Ta-tea. “You mean you want to eat?”

“Yes, that’s what I mean.” She glanced around the kitchen. “I don’t see any pots and I don’t smell anything in the oven. Where is dinner?”

I made a face at her. “I didn’t cook.”

“You know, Sam, when you invite someone to dinner, it’s normal to have something that passes for dinner available when they arrive starving.”

I shrugged. “Next time.”

She shook her head. “You’re hopeless. Let’s go out. My treat.”

“You’re on,” I said, feeling better. “And it’ll be my treat.”

“You’re on.”

She linked her arm through mine and we went out together. Ta-tea was a great friend and went out of her way to make sure I enjoyed the night. When I returned home, there was a message from Don on my answering machine.

“Samantha, this is Don. I’ll be home for the rest of the night. Please call me when you have a few moments.”

My heart beat rapidly and my mouth felt dry as I dialed his number. “Hi Don,” I said when he answered.

“Samantha!”

He sounded so pleased to hear my voice; I felt a smile spreading across my face.

“One of my brothers has a place in the Poconos. I wondered if you’d like to spend a weekend there with me,” he said.

I nodded. Oh, yes. “When?”

I heard him sigh in apparent relief. “This weekend.”

“Oh.” I paused, giving myself time to delight at the thought of spending an entire weekend with him at a mountain retreat.

“The invitation has no strings attached, Samantha. I promise you.”

I felt a stab of disappointment at his unwanted promise. What did I have to do to make him want me enough to try to bed me? “You mean you won’t try to make love to me?”

He was silent so long that I thought he wasn’t going to answer. “No, that’s not what I mean. I *will* try, Samantha.”

Thank God!

“I want you so badly that I can almost taste my desire for you.”

Finally! I felt light-headed at the admission made in a suddenly husky voice that made me think of wild, hot sex.

“But I won’t pressure you into anything you’re not ready for.”

Even though I was more than ready for intimacy with him, the words wouldn’t come. I planned to show him once we were alone.

“I’d like to spend the weekend with you. Just the two of us?”

“Yes, Samantha. Just the two of us.”

“Great.”

We spoke for a few moments before hanging up.

I spent most of the night thinking of the coming weekend when I was determined to get laid.

That was the longest week in history. Each day seemed at least forty-eight hours long. The endless nights felt even longer. By the time he picked me up on Friday morning, I was so keyed up I could barely sit still for the long drive.

He portrayed no signs that he felt any of the tension I did. Whenever I looked at him, he appeared relaxed. His voice was level when he spoke to me.

Just as I wondered if I'd have to coerce him into sex, he turned his head to look at me. The desire I saw in his gaze sent a feeling of warmth through me.

When we arrived, we went through the motions of putting our clothes in separate rooms. Halfway through unpacking my case, I turned to find him standing in the doorway, staring at me.

He didn't have to say that he wanted me. The look in his eyes said it for him. I let my body do my talking for me. Without a word, I rushed into his arms.

I'd been fantasizing all week about what it would be like to be loved by Don.

We shared several hot, greedy kisses until I felt as if I were on fire and he started to grind against me. He gripped my ass and ground his groin against me.

Feeling the bulge of his cock, I gasped.

He pulled away from me. "You're overdressed, Samantha."

I sucked in a breath. "What do you plan to do about it?"

"Strip every piece of clothing off you."

I licked my lips. “Sounds like a plan to me. What are you waiting for?”

He rained soft, biting kisses against my body as he slowly undressed me. When I was naked, he stood staring at me in silence.

Normally I would have felt shy but the look in his eyes was so filled with desire, I knew he liked what he saw. “Your turn,” I told him, eager to feel him on top of me and inside me.

He pulled off his clothes in record time.

I didn’t have much time to admire his body because he quickly led me to the bed and pulled me down into his arms.

We kissed and caressed each other until he rose from the bed to don a condom. Moments later, he slipped between my eager thighs and slowly pushed his hard cock into my wet, neglected pussy.

Oh, God, after going so long without feeling a cock inside me, I was in heaven. I clutched him close, put my legs over his body, and moaned like an alley cat as he gave me a long, slow, incredibly delicious fuck that sent repeated chills through me before leaving me whimpering his name by the time we both came.

Afterward, he rolled onto his back and pulled my body on top of his. He caressed me until I fell asleep.

It wasn’t until I woke up from a dream about Mark later that afternoon, that I was consumed with guilt. After thirteen years of marriage to Mark, I’d given

myself to a man I hardly knew. I'd gone to Mark a virgin, after insisting we get married before we had sex. Yet, I'd eagerly slept with Don without the benefit of even a verbal commitment.

Don was still asleep, so I slipped out of bed, showered, dressed, and went for a walk in the woods behind the cabin.

Don found me there an hour later. He sat down beside me and put his arm along the back of the bench without touching me. "What's wrong, Samantha?"

I shook my head without looking at him. How could I expect him to understand the guilt I felt? Especially after he'd made a point of not wanting me to feel remorse after we'd made love. How could I now say I was sorry and that I felt guilty? "Nothing," I replied.

He turned my face toward him. "You've been crying. Tell me what's wrong."

I shook my head.

He hesitated before he spoke again. "Did I disappoint you in bed?"

"No!" I stroked a hand down his face. "Absolutely not."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure! You're a great lover."

"Then what's wrong? Why are you sitting out here alone?"

I bit my lips. "I just realized that our coming up here was a mistake."

"A mistake?"

“I know I said I was ready and I thought I was.”

He shook his head, a bewildered look on his face. “Did I hurt you?” –

“Oh, no, Don. You were passionate but gentle.”

“Was I too gentle? Didn’t I please you?” he asked softly.

I felt my cheeks burning as I thought about just how much he had pleased me. “It wasn’t anything you did or didn’t do. I enjoyed having you make love to me.”

“But?”

“But it was just a mistake. But I think I’d like to go home.”

“You want to go home now?”

I had to look away from the hurt look in his eyes. “Yes.”

“I don’t understand. What have I done?”

“Nothing!” I jumped up and moved away from him. “You did absolutely nothing wrong. In fact, you’ve done everything right. But this weekend was just a mistake. People make them all the time. I just need to go home now.”

He ran a hand through his hair and sat staring at me. “What does this mean for us, Samantha? What are you saying to me?”

“That I need to go home, nothing more. Please. Will you take me home?”

He nodded.

We returned to the cabin and packed our bags. The drive back to the city was made in silence. By the time we got back home, I was so consumed with guilt that I couldn't bear for him to kiss me. When he tried, I turned my head so that his lips landed on my cheek instead of my lips.

He sighed. "Can I call you, Samantha?" He sounded so hurt that I felt like crying.

"I'd rather you didn't—at least not for a while."

I would have turned away, but he put out a hand to stop me. "You have to at least tell me what I've done to offend you, Samantha. How can I make it right, if I don't know what I've done?"

"You can't make it right, Don because you haven't done a single thing wrong. I just need some time."

He nodded. "Okay."

I went inside, closing the door quickly and firmly behind me.

The next morning, I awoke to find that Ta-tea had used the key I'd given her to let herself in. She sat on the window seat in my bedroom, staring at me with a very disapproving look on her face.

I sighed. Third degree time.

"What happened, Sam?"

I knew what she meant. All the things I'd wanted so desperately to say to Don, but couldn't, came tumbling out with her.

When I'd finished, she blinked. "Are you nuts? You had a dream about Mark that made you feel guilty? Honey, in case you've forgotten, Mark is dead. It's time to get on with your life."

"I wanted to, but you don't know how unfaithful I felt. I've spent my entire adult life with Mark as the center of my life.

"There's nothing wrong with grieving, but you have to know when to move on. And when a man comes along and loves you and wants to marry you, it's time."

"What do you mean, wants to marry me?" I felt my heart racing. "How do you know?" I asked.

Ta-tea looked as if she'd like to hit me. "I went with him last week to pick out an engagement ring! He was going to ask you to marry him this weekend."

"He loves me and wants to marry me?"

"God only knows why," she said dryly. "He must be a glutton for punishment."

He loved me! And wanted to marry me! I jumped out of bed and pulled on a pair of jeans and a T-shirt. Then I grabbed my bag. "You can let yourself out, Ta-tea."

I didn't wait for her response before I rushed from the house. My heart beat like a drum when I rang his bell and waited for what felt like forever for him to answer the door.

When he did, the slow smile that lit his face warmed my heart. "Samantha! Oh, honey, I'm so glad to see you."

"I'm so sorry, Don!" I whispered. "Please let me explain about our aborted weekend."

"Later." He pulled me into his arms and buried his face in my hair. "You're here. That's all that matters. There's no need to explain anything."

I pressed my fingers against his lips. "There is. Please, I need you to listen and try to understand."

He took my hand and led me into his living room where we shared a loveseat.

After refusing a drink, I had my say.

He listened in silence, wiping away my tears when they ran down my cheeks. "Of course, I understand, Samantha. I want you to feel free to talk to me about anything at all."

"Why?"

He shrugged. "Isn't the why obvious?"

Yes, but I wanted to hear the words. "Not to me."

“Because I love you and—”

I pressed my fingers against his lips. “You do? You love me?”

“Oh, God, yes.” He briefly engulfed me in his arms before he released me and went on. “I love you so much I ache with it but I can wait until you’re ready to love and be loved again.”

Fresh tears ran down my cheeks. “Oh, Don. I love you, too!”

He sucked in a breath. “You do?”

I nodded.

“Then what’s the problem?”

“I just felt so guilty because I never expected to love another man as much as I’d loved Mark. Please just try to bear with me.”

“You need patience? I’m your man, Samantha.”

“I need and want to be loved as well,” I told him.

“I’m really your man.”

I ran my fingers through his hair. “My man? I need to be loved. What do you plan to do about it?”

He took my hand in his and led me to his bedroom.

After we undressed each other, we had a long, hot fuck before we lay in bed and talked about our future.

That was six months ago. We married five weeks later. Don and I are expecting a baby in seven months. At night when I'm lying in bed next to him after we've either made love or fucked like two horny bunnies, I feel so very thankful. I've been so fortunate. I've loved and been loved by two very different and wonderful men. Thank God Ta-tea knew me better than I knew myself and introduced me to my wonderful husband and the new love of my life.

The End

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Author Bio

Marilyn Lee lives, works, and writes on the East Coast. In addition to thoroughly enjoying writing erotic romances, she enjoys roller-skating, spending time with her large, extended family, and rooting for all her hometown sports teams. Her other interests include collecting Doc Savage pulp novels from the thirties and forties and collecting Marvel comics from the seventies and eighties (particularly Thor and The Avengers).

Her favorite TV shows are forensic shows, westerns (*Gunsmoke* and *Have Gun, Will Travel* are particular favorites), mysteries (loves the old Charlie Chan mysteries. Her all time favorite mystery movie is probably *Dead, Again*), and nearly every vampire movie or television show ever made (*Forever Knight* and *Count Yorga, Vampire* are favorites).

She loves to hear from readers who can email her at Mlee2057@AOL.com or who can visit her website, <http://www.marilynlee.org>. She has a Yahoo! Group called Love Bytes that readers can join by sending an email to: marilynlee-subscribe@yahoogroups.com

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