



Silhouette[®]

1698
December

Santa Brought a Son

MELISSA McCLONE

SILHOUETTE
Romance[®]



Melissa McClone
Santa Brought A Son

«HarperCollins»

McClone M.

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FROM THE DESK OF EMILY WINTERS Bachelor #4: Reed Connors Title: VP of Global Marketing This month's scheme: Surprise him with his long-lost love—and secret child! I've always thought there was something missing in Reed Connors's life. And now that our research has turned up his high school sweetheart Samantha Wilson, I think I know exactly what it is. Luckily, Christmas is just around the corner, and so is the perfect excuse to send the ambitious executive back to his hometown. Now all we need is a nudge from Santa, and one little boy—who's been very good this year—just might get the gift he's always wanted....

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Wintersoft's CEO is on a husband hunt
for his daughter. Trouble is, Emily has uncovered
his scheme. But can she marry off the eligible
executives before Dad sets his crazy plan in motion?
"Come with me."

Reed laced his fingers with hers
and led her to the Christmas tree.

"Tonight Timmy told me what he wanted Santa to bring him for Christmas."

"What's that?" Samantha asked.

"A new dad."

She blew out a puff of air. Reed was here, but she didn't know what that meant long-term for herself or their son. "That's a tall order even for Kris Kringle."

"I'd hate for Timmy to be disappointed on Christmas morning." Mischief glimmered in his eyes. "Santa's already brought me a son, but there's something else I desire."

"Wh-what's that?" She swallowed. Hard.

He pulled a small box from between the branches of the tree and handed it to her. "Open this first."

Dear Reader,

Discover a guilt-free way to enjoy this holiday season. Treat yourself to four calorie-free, but oh-so-satisfying brand-new Silhouette Romance titles this month.

Start with Santa Brought a Son (#1698) by Melissa McClone. This heartwarming reunion romance is the fourth book in Silhouette Romance's new six-book continuity, MARRYING THE BOSS'S DAUGHTER.

Would a duty-bound prince forsake tradition to marry an enchanting commoner? Find out in The Prince & the Marriage Pact (#1699), the latest episode in THE CARRAMER TRUST miniseries by reader favorite Valerie Parv.

Then, it's anyone's guess if a wacky survival challenge can end happily ever after. Join the fun as the romantic winners of a crazy contest are revealed in The Bachelor's Dare (#1700) by Shirley Jump.

And in Donna Clayton's The Nanny's Plan (#1701), a would-be sophisticate is put through the ringer by a drop-dead gorgeous, absentminded professor and his rascally twin nephews.

So pick a cozy spot, relax and enjoy all four of these tender holiday confections that Silhouette Romance has cooked up just for you.

Happy holidays!

Mavis C. Allen

Associate Senior Editor

Santa Brought a Son

Melissa McClone



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For Rose

Books by Melissa McClone

Silhouette Romance

If the Ring Fits...#1431

The Wedding Lullaby #1485

His Band of Gold #1537

In Deep Waters #1608

The Wedding Adventure #1661 Santa Brought a Son #1698

Yours Truly

Fiancé for the Night

MELISSA McCLONE

With a degree in mechanical engineering from Stanford University, the last thing Melissa McClone ever thought she would be doing is writing romance novels, but analyzing engines for a major U.S. airline just couldn't compete with her "happily-ever-afters."

When she isn't writing, caring for her three young children or doing laundry, Melissa loves to curl up on the couch with a cup of tea, her cats and a good book. She enjoys watching home-decorating shows to get ideas for her house—a 1939 cottage that is slowly being renovated.

Melissa lives in Lake Oswego, Oregon, with her own real-life hero husband, two daughters, son, two lovable but oh-so-spoiled indoor cats and a no-longer-stray out-door kitty who decided to call the garage home. Melissa loves to hear from readers. You can write to her at P.O. Box 63, Lake Oswego, OR 97034.

FROM THE DESK OF EMILY WINTERS

Three

~~Six~~ Bachelor Executives To Go

Bachelor #1: Love, Your Secret Admirer

Matthew Burke—Hmm...his sweet assistant clearly has googly eyes for her workaholic boss. Maybe I can make some office magic happen.

Bachelor #2: Her Pregnant Agenda

Grant Lawson—The guy's a dead ringer for Pierce Brosnan—who wouldn't want to fall into his strong, protective arms?

Bachelor #3: Fill-in Fiancée

Brett Hamilton—The playboy from England is really a British lord. Can I find him a princess...or has he found her already?

Bachelor #4: Santa Brought a Son

Reed Connors—The ambitious VP seems to have a heavy heart. Only his true love could have broken it. But where is she now?

Bachelor #5: Rules of Engagement

Nate Leeman—Definitely a lone wolf kind of guy. A bit hard around the edges, but I'll bet there's a tender, aching heart inside.

Bachelor #6: One Bachelor To Go

Jack Devon—The guy is so frustratingly elusive. Arrogant and implacable, too! He's going last on my matchmaking list until I can figure out what kind of woman a mystery man like him prefers....

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Prologue

As “Jingle Bells” played from speakers hidden among the fake snow and icicles at the mall’s version of the North Pole, Timmy Wilson stared at the line of kids waiting to visit Santa Claus. He was almost eight years old, too old to believe in Santa, let alone sit on his lap, but Grandma told him this was important to his mom so here he was.

“Tell Santa what you want for Christmas,” Grandma said.

“Shouldn’t Santa know what every kid wants?”

Grandma sighed. “That’s what your father used to say.”

Timmy missed his dad more than anything. He’d been in Heaven for three years, and Timmy figured his dad must play baseball everyday up there. “I wish he was here and could teach me how to throw a curve ball.”

She blinked. “Me, too, Timmy. Me, too.”

A girl, wearing an elf’s costume and pointy shoes, led him to Santa, who sat in a large chair. It sort of reminded Timmy of a king’s throne. This Santa had a real beard and small gold-rimmed glasses. His fancy red suit looked new, and his black leather boots shone. Much better than the Santa from the Main Street Thanksgiving Parade.

Timmy glanced around hoping none of his little league teammates were at the mall, too. He could just imagine the teasing he’d get if they saw him.

“Would you rather sit or stand?” Santa asked.

“Stand,” Timmy admitted, “but the picture is for my mom and she’d probably like me on your lap.”

Santa patted his knee. “Climb up. We’ll make it fast.”

Timmy sat on Santa’s lap. It wasn’t so bad. This Santa didn’t wear padding. He also smelled good, sort of like a candy cane and a cookie.

Mrs. Claus stood behind a camera. “Smile.”

The flash blinded Timmy. He rubbed his eyes.

“What do you want for Christmas?” Santa asked.

“I already sent you a letter.” The picture had been taken. Now all Timmy wanted was to be done so he could get a smoothie. “After Thanksgiving.”

“That’s right. You asked for a Gameboy Advance, a skateboard and a book on pitching.” Santa’s blue eyes twinkled. “But there’s something else you want, something you haven’t told anyone about.”

No way. He couldn’t know that. Not unless he had super-mind-reading power or if he was the real thing. And if he was the real Santa... Timmy felt all shivery inside like the time Grandpa let him eat chocolate cake with ice cream for breakfast. He nodded. “Can you...”

“That’s a big request,” Santa answered before Timmy could get the words out. “I’ll try, but I might need a little help. It’s a busy time of year. Maybe an elf could help me out. Or an angel.” Santa adjusted his glasses. “Christmas is a time for miracles. Do you believe in miracles, Timmy?”

“I’ll believe in anything if it gets me a new dad.”

Chapter One

The wedding invitation sat in the middle of Reed Connors's desk. The embossed ivory card should have blended in with the other pieces of paper competing for his attention, but the invitation might as well have been printed on orange fluorescent paper. No way could he ignore it any longer.

Reed had received the invitation a month ago. His best friend from high school was getting married. But Reed had been too busy to reply, had shoved the damn thing in his briefcase and forgotten about it. Until now.

He replayed the voice mail message.

"Hey, Reed, it's Mark Slayter," his best friend's familiar voice said. "Long time no see, bud. I know you're busy, but we're trying to get a final head count for the caterer so I need to know whether you're coming to the wedding or not. All the guys will be there and we'd love to see you. It's been too long. Don't know if it makes a difference, but Samantha Wilson will be there, too. I know you remember her, even if you forgot the rest of us losers. Take care, dude, and let me know ASAP."

Mark would mention Samantha Brown Wilson. No one else knew about Reed's special friendship with the most beautiful, most popular girl at Fernville High School, and Mark had never told a soul, even though the group of nerds they'd hung out with pretty much shared everything. Reed had never had a friend as loyal as Mark had been. Reed doubted he ever would.

Thinking back, he remembered what a fool he'd been with Samantha—a lovesick fool. Not surprising. He'd been the stereotypical geek and could have written the book on being a high school loser. He'd come a long way since then.

As Reed stared at his schedule for December, he tapped his pen against a stack of manila folders. The rapid tattoo helped him concentrate when he brainstormed the newest marketing strategy and tried to build brand equity for Wintersoft Software, but in this case it was only making an annoying sound. A trip to Frankfurt, a conference in San Jose, a tradeshow in Las Vegas. Meetings with investment analysts. A trip to Fernville, Virginia, for Mark's wedding was impossible.

"Working late...again?" A cheery, feminine voice asked from the doorway of his office.

He didn't have to look up to know it was Carmella Lopez, Executive Assistant to CEO Lloyd Winters. She reminded him of everyone's favorite aunt except she dressed like the perfect professional in stylish jacket and skirt ensembles, cooked the most amazing rice and beans this side of the Rio Grande and was easier to confide in than an anonymous bartender.

"It's not that late." Reed glanced out the window behind him and saw lights from the other Boston skyscrapers in the night sky. He'd not only missed the sunset, but dinner. Worse, he was still wearing his jacket and tie. "Lost track of time."

"Seems to be a habit of yours." The warmth of her smile echoed in her voice.

"You shouldn't talk. You're here, too."

"Lloyd likes me to be around when he's in the office."

"You treat him too well."

"He's a good...boss."

"Exactly." Reed grinned. "Don't want the boss to think I'm a slackard."

"With the hours you put in, no one would think that." She walked to his desk and handed him a folder. "Lloyd wants you to review the latest info on the Utopia project."

Reed placed it on the top of the media plan and advertising-effectiveness reports in his jam-packed in box and made a mental note to call Nate Leeman, Senior V.P. of Technology, to see if Utopia was on schedule or not. "I'll read it tonight."

"It's already so late." Carmella's gaze clouded with concern. "You have to sleep sometime."

"Who needs sleep when I have all this?" He motioned to his office full of artwork from the countries he'd traveled to with his job—a job he loved more than anything. Ensuring Wintersoft's

product names and marketing strategies were meaningful and translatable into all markets and cultures was challenging. Dealing with all the planning surrounding a new product's introduction when he could never count on the delivery date could be a huge headache and stress, but he wouldn't change a thing. At twenty-eight, he was the youngest V.P. at the company and he wasn't about to stop there.

She pointed to the top of Reed's cluttered desk. "Is that a wedding invitation?"

He nodded. Carmella stuck her nose into everyone's business, but he didn't mind. She truly cared about her coworkers and dispensed advice with motherly warmth.

"Is another V.P. getting married?"

"Not that I know of." In the past three months, three of Wintersoft's male executives had gotten married or engaged. First Matt Burke, then Grant Lawson and the latest, Brett Hamilton. The whole thing made Reed wary. Marriage was the last thing on his mind. Work left little time for casual dating, let alone anything more serious. "Brett had better be the last one or I'm going to stop drinking the water around here."

"Now that Arianna has had her twins, we'll have to see if that's in the water, too."

"Not funny." A girlfriend was a time drain, but children? Forget it. His job left no room for a family. He had the perfect life. Why spoil a good thing?

"So who's getting married?" Carmella asked.

"My best friend from high school."

"Sounds like fun."

About as much fun as a four-day marketing blitz through ten European countries with your boss at your side. "I'm not going."

Carmella sat in the chair opposite his desk. "Why not?"

"Too busy." Work was the way to achieve all he wanted. Reed had tasted success and wanted more. That took a sacrifice—his personal life—but it was worth it. "I'll send a nice gift."

"But if he was your best friend..."

Reed shrugged, though blowing off Mark's wedding might be a bigger deal than Reed was making it. "I was close to Mark and the few others we hung out with, but we all drifted apart after high school."

"He still invited you," Carmella said. "That has to count for something."

"I get invited to a lot of weddings." Reed stared at the invitation. "Co-workers, work-related acquaintances who just want something from me."

"Your friend only wants a day. That isn't a lot to ask of a best friend."

"If I didn't have so much work—"

She tsked. "Work is an excuse."

Reed didn't—couldn't—answer. Carmella had a way of seeing through a person. She considered it a gift, but on more than one occasion, like now, he wished she'd returned it and exchanged it for another.

"It's the same one you used when I asked why you haven't been in a serious relationship since you started at Wintersoft."

"I date," he said finally.

"But never the same woman."

"Nothing wrong with that."

"There is if you don't want to spend the rest of your life alone." She stared at him with an observant gleam in her eyes. "I'm wondering if there isn't another reason. The only woman you've mentioned by name is Samantha, your high school sweetheart. I know that was years ago, but are you sure you got over her?"

"Yes."

Carmella didn't look convinced.

“Samantha wasn’t my sweetheart,” Reed admitted. Only in his dreams had she been his. Except for six wonderful days. “We were only together a short time when I was in college. I was too much of a geek to have a girlfriend in high school. Brainy not brawny.”

“You must have been a late bloomer because you have both now.”

“Thanks.” Reed had struggled and worked hard to become the man he was today.

“So...will she be at the wedding?”

“Yes.” He thought about Samantha. Her long, silky blond hair. Her sparkling blue eyes. Her warm, seductive laughter. Reed’s collar felt a little tight. He loosened his tie. “And so will her husband,” he added more for his benefit than Carmella’s.

Her eyes widened. “Samantha got married? When?”

“I’m not sure. She was two years younger than me.” But Reed knew who she’d married—Art Wilson, the one she’d chosen over him. In a way, Reed owed Samantha. If she had chosen him instead, he doubted he would have been so focused in college and in making his dreams a reality.

“When was the last time you saw her?”

“Spring break of my sophomore year of college,” he answered. “That’s the last time I was in Fernville. Once my parents moved here to Boston and my friends went away to college, there was no reason to go back.”

“Your friend’s wedding sounds like a very good reason.”

Patrick, Wes and Dan would probably attend, too. Reed hadn’t seen them in years. Or Mark for that matter. The wedding would be a lot of fun. Reed stared at his schedule. There had to be a way....

Carmella picked up the response card. “You’ve missed the deadline, but don’t let that stop you.”

If Reed sent someone else to the conference in San Jose, he would free up enough time to go to the wedding. “I won’t.”

As she handed him the response card, her brow wrinkled. “So you’re going to the wedding?”

Reed smiled. “I’m going.”

“He’s going,” Carmella whispered to Emily Winters when she stepped into the crowded elevator about to descend from the fiftieth floor.

Emily knew the “he” in question was Reed Connors. Handsome, ambitious and a few years younger than her—Reed was not only a co-worker, but also one of the potential husband candidates her father most likely had in mind. No way did she want her father telling any of her fellow co-workers they should take an interest in her. Talk about embarrassing. Not to mention the fact she wasn’t interested in getting married, period.

The other passengers exited on the forty-ninth floor. The doors closed. Emily hit the stop button. No one could eavesdrop on them here. “What about the girl from Reed’s hometown?”

“She’s going, too,” Carmella admitted. “But she got married.”

So much for that plan. Emily massaged her temples.

“Who knows if she’s still married,” Carmella said. “But if she is, Reed needs to get her out of his system so he can fall in love with someone else. He’s not as over her as he thinks.”

“And if she’s not married?”

“Then your job got a whole lot easier.” Carmella laughed. “Chances are we’d have one less bachelor to worry about.”

Emily sighed. “If only we didn’t have to worry about any of them.”

“I agree, but we’re halfway there.” Excitement filled Carmella’s voice. “Three bachelors down, three to go.”

She made it sound so easy, and in a way it was. Carmella researched the men using their personnel files, and Emily found them their perfect match. But she hated having to resort to this. “I guess.”

Carmella’s brown eyes narrowed. “Isn’t this what you wanted? To make sure all six of the single male executives were off the market so your father couldn’t marry you off to one of them?”

Emily hesitated, torn by conflicting emotions. “Yes, but this whole matchmaking plan seems so crazy. I’ve been feeling...selfish.”

“Have you considered the alternative?” Carmella asked.

“Yes. And I’m not going to marry one of the three remaining bachelors.” Emily raised her chin. “They’re great guys, but I’m not ready to settle down. I just got the promotion and I need to concentrate on my career.”

“Work won’t keep you warm on a cold winter’s night.”

A smile tugged on the corners of Emily’s lips. “You sound like my father.”

“He loves you.”

“I know,” she said. “That’s why he’s so concerned about my marital status. But I already made the mistake of letting him pick out one husband from the company roster. I don’t want to spend the rest of my life alone, but I won’t marry another co-worker that he chooses for me.”

“Speaking of your ex-husband, Todd stopped by to see me.”

“Me, too.”

Carmella raised an arched brow. “And?”

“Nothing,” Emily admitted. “He’s upset over losing his job. The golden boy’s rocket isn’t climbing so high anymore and he doesn’t know what to do about it.”

“That’s not your fault.”

“If we hadn’t gotten married he’d still be working here and wouldn’t have had to take a job with another company and be laid off.” Frustration laced each of her words. Worry creased her forehead. “I wish my father understood why I don’t want to get into that situation again. It’s humiliating and wrong.”

“You mean the world to your father, Emily. He’d never do anything on purpose to embarrass you.”

“Then he should realize I’ll marry when I’m ready.” She pulled the stop button out and the elevator descended. “Not anytime before that.”

“What about our plan?” Carmella asked. “Should I keep researching the final three or stop?”

Doubts swirled in Emily’s mind. She thought about the three remaining bachelor executives: Reed Connors, Nate Leeman and Jack Devon. Nate was a brilliant workaholic who seemed to live at the office. Jack was a ladies’ man according to Boston Magazine, who named him one of the city’s “Fifty Hottest Bachelors,” and a mystery to all who worked with him. And Reed worked hard and had lofty ambitions that could play right into her father’s hand. “Let’s see what happens with Reed first.”

Samantha Wilson stood midway up the aisle of the empty church holding the bridesmaid bouquet she’d found on the altar and surveyed her hard work. On the end of each pew, a miniature wreath decorated with tiny berries, cinnamon sticks and pinecones hung from red-and-green-plaid ribbon tied in bows. At the front of the church, potted red and white poinsettias created a cascading effect on the steps leading up to the altar. And the altar was decorated with fresh pine boughs and garland. Pinecones, holly, berries and the same red-and-green-plaid ribbon from the pew wreaths provided a splash of color and texture to the greenery that filled the church with a Christmasy pine scent.

A satisfied feeling settled in the center of her chest. The bride and groom had wanted a Christmas wedding theme, and Samantha had done her best to give it to them. Not only here, but at the reception site, too.

She ran through her mental checklist. Almost everything was ready. Soon the church would be filled with friends and family, witnesses to Mark Slayter’s and Kelli Jefferson’s exchange of wedding vows.

A lump formed in Samantha’s throat. As a girl, she’d dreamed about having a big wedding in a church overflowing with everyone she’d ever known, walking down the aisle with her father, wearing a white gown fit for a fairy princess. But reality had been a wedding at city hall with only her future

in-laws, Helen and Frank Wilson, in attendance. Samantha's parents hadn't given her the courtesy of an RSVP. The only white on the floral-print dress she'd normally worn to church had been the collar.

No diamond ring or bouquet of roses or exotic honeymoon, either. She touched Helen's strand of pearls for a moment and let go of them. So she didn't get the wedding of her dreams. She got something much better.

Samantha noticed a crooked bow on a pew wreath. She shifted the bouquet to her left hand and adjusted the ribbon until it was perfect.

"Sam?"

The name echoed in the church and she froze. No one had called her that in years. As she glanced toward the back, a man in a navy suit stepped from the vestibule. Dark-brown hair, warm chocolate eyes and a smile that made her legs feel like wilted rose stems. She tightened her grip on the bouquet. "Y-y-yes."

"It is you," Reed Connors said.

The closer he came, the harder it was to breathe. She clutched the end of a pew and took deep breaths until she was strong enough to face him.

His looks had matured. His nose was the same, straight except for a bump where he'd gotten hit with a snowball junior year, but his cheekbones looked chiseled, more defined. His jaw looked stronger and his lips seemed more full. He'd grown taller and filled out, too. His suit fit perfectly, accentuating his wide shoulders and perfect posture.

"Reed." With her heart pounding in her chest, she struggled to remain calm. He'd never called, never wrote, never returned to Fernville in almost nine years. And now to walk back into her life... An odd combination of fear and resentment made its way down her spine. "What are you doing here?"

"Mark's wedding."

Samantha had forgotten Reed and Mark had been best friends in high school. She'd pushed that, and a million other little details from the past, to the back of her mind. Sometimes it was too painful to remember.

Reed glanced at his watch. "Look's like we're both early. Mark wanted me to stop by before the ceremony."

"I've been here for hours. I'm doing the flowers," she said a little too quickly. "I mean, I'm a guest, too, but I'm also the florist. I have my own flower shop here in town."

His eyes widened, but returned to normal in an instant. Strange, he had never been this calm and collected before. He'd been so shy and adoring whenever he helped her with homework. It had made her feel feminine and cherished. A way she hadn't felt with anyone else.

But the man standing in front of her didn't look as though he got nervous about anything or anyone. And man was the only way to describe him.

Reed Connors had gone from brainy looking and skinny to gorgeous and a hunk. Had it taken a kiss to turn him from frog to prince? She swallowed. Hard. Not that she had any intention of falling under his spell again.

Besides she'd never cared what he looked like. She'd seen beneath his being too thin with thick glasses and a bad case of acne to the caring person underneath. At least, she'd thought he'd cared. Thought he'd loved her. But she'd been wrong. About Reed, about so many things. She stared at the bouquet in her left hand.

"You stayed in Fernville?" he asked.

"I...I...we stayed."

She waited for him to ask about Timmy. Her son.

Their son.

But Reed didn't. Damn him. After all this time, she thought Reed would have been at least curious about Timmy. She pushed her disappointment aside for the millionth time, but a permanent

sorrow bore down on her. Reed must have ice running through his veins. Nothing else would explain his actions.

But she had to remember it was for the best. No one knew the truth about her son. No one except her, Art and Reed. And she had to keep it that way.

Reed's assessing gaze made Samantha feel tongue-tied and self-conscious in her found-on-sale-at-the-consignment-store black dress. She pushed back a stray hair that had slipped out of her French twist.

The tables had turned.

She was no longer the girl she'd been. No longer the daughter of the wealthy Browns who could never live up to the example set by her perfect older brother. Samantha had known her parents' love had to be earned, but she never thought they could harden their hearts against her so easily and kick her out of the house when she'd told them she was pregnant, a month before high school graduation. She'd been alone, penniless and homeless. Thanks to Reed, her entire life had been altered.

Shattered.

But she had picked up the pieces, and with help from Art and his parents, moved on. She was now part of the Wilson family, and had to be careful so nothing she did would change that. But Reed's presence was another living reminder of her biggest mistake. If Frank and Helen found out... Samantha squared her shoulders.

"Has life gotten more exciting here?" Reed asked.

"No, but I like it."

"You never used to like it."

"True." In high school she couldn't wait to leave the confines of Fernville. The small town had threatened to suffocate her and her dreams. Now someone would have to drag her away from the comfort of the town she fondly called home. "Things, people change."

"Not you." One corner of his mouth lifted. "You look the same. Only better."

His compliment sent an unexpected rush of emotion through her. Her cheeks warmed, and she smoothed the skirt of her dress. "You're only being polite."

"I'm not," he admitted. "You look great."

"So do you. In your suit and everything." Darn, the more she said the stupider she sounded. That wouldn't do at all. So what if he wore a designer suit and expensive leather shoes and looked like a male model? Reed, of all men, should not be having this effect on her. Not that it was really an effect. She was merely flustered by his sudden appearance. "I mean—"

"I know what you mean."

Reed and she might have been different back when, but Samantha had believed he understood her like no one else, not even Art. She could be herself and not worry whether he would like her or not. But when push came to shove, Art had been the one who'd known what she needed in a way that defied logic, not Reed. The fact he still hadn't asked about Timmy proved how little either of them had understood or known about each other. Well, she wasn't about to offer any information.

Reed glanced around. "You've done a beautiful job transforming the church into a holiday wonderland, but what happened to moving to the big city, becoming a lawyer and fighting to right the injustices of the world?"

A teenage pregnancy, being disowned by her parents, getting married the day after high school graduation, a part-time job at a grocery store and a baby at age eighteen. "Life."

"Care to elaborate?"

"Not really." He knew some of the story, but hadn't cared enough to do anything. And he still didn't care. It was better this way. She had to protect her family and would—no matter what the cost. She straightened, wishing she'd worn high heels so she could even out his height advantage. "What about you? Have you taken the business world by storm?"

"Not quite. I work for a financial software company in Boston. I'm V.P. of global marketing."

His dreams had been the most important thing in his life. More important than her and their baby. She hoped the price he'd paid was worth it. "Still planning to make your first million before you turn thirty?"

"We'll see."

No, he would see. There was no room for him in her life. What they had shared the spring of her senior year of high school had been like a dream—a dream come true for a few short days. He'd come back from college and she'd seen something different in him, felt things she'd never felt before and done things without a thought to the consequences or the future. Reed had swept her off her feet and stolen her heart.

Until their time together, she had never felt loved. Not by her parents who wanted her to be perfect, not by her then ex-boyfriend Art who didn't want her unless she had sex with him, not by anyone. But Reed had made her feel the way she'd longed to feel—loved only for who she was. As if no matter what she did or said, he would still love her. Or so she thought. Samantha had been wrong. Their story hadn't had a fairy-tale ending. No happily ever after for them.

But she was older and wiser. She would not repeat the mistakes of the past. And that's where Reed belonged.

In her past.

The only thing he could do in the present was destroy her life by letting the truth about Timmy come out. If he wanted to pretend he didn't have a son, fine. She was more than happy to oblige.

With her resolve firmly in place, she forced a smile. "It's been nice seeing you, but I need to return the missing bouquet to an upset bridesmaid and light the luminaries outside the church before the guests arrive."

"I'll see you later," he said.

Not if I can help it. She was going to stay as far away from Reed Connors as possible. Too much was at stake to let him near her again. "We'll see."

Reed watched Samantha walk down the aisle and into the vestibule. She looked sexy in her little black dress. The sway of her hips hypnotized him as if he were under a spell or dreaming. The slamming of a church door told him he was doing neither. He was wide awake.

He had believed he was over Samantha Brown and had gotten her out of his system years ago. He had.

Samantha Wilson, however, was another story. Such a beauty. Her bright, blue eyes contained an intriguing soulfulness. He was itching to pull the pins from her blond hair to see whether she'd cut the length to match her new matter-of-fact personality. Her figure had improved over the years—no cheerleader outfit necessary to show off her curves in all the right places. And she seemed more confident, self-possessed, mature. Qualities he'd never associated with her before. Qualities he found surprisingly attractive.

His system was going haywire. Talk about circuit overload. But there was no customer-service number to call. The engineering department would be no help, either. He was on his own. And for once he didn't like it.

Instead of feeling like a man in control of his own destiny, he felt like an insecure, uncertain teenager. He hated that.

He was successful, in demand, everything he wanted to be, yet Samantha still made him feel like the dork he'd once been.

Reed took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. He couldn't allow her to get to him like this.

Once upon a time, she'd been the princess and he the court jester, strictly there for her entertainment and to make sure she didn't fail any of her classes.

But things had changed.

She was a florist in a no-nothing town, perfectly attainable if not for her marital status. He, on the other hand, was achieving all he'd dreamed about.

Reed had everything he'd ever wanted.
Everything except Samantha.

Chapter Two

As the new Mr. and Mrs. Mark Slayter finished their stroll down the aisle to the tune of Beethoven's "Ode to Joy," the bells in the steeple chimed. Reed followed the stream of wedding guests outside to the steps of the 275-year-old church. People milled about as if it were a spring afternoon, not early December with a wintry chill in the air.

"I'm Rebecca," an attractive woman with hazel-green eyes said to him. "Are you a friend of the groom or the bride?"

"The groom," Reed answered. "Rebecca Donnelly, right?"

"You know my name, but I'm positive we've never met before." She smiled seductively. "I would never forget a man like you."

"You sat next to me in physics and world history senior year." Her blank look didn't surprise him. "Reed Connors."

Her mouth gaped. "I'm sorry, Reed. I didn't recognize you."

"That's okay," he said. "I only lived in Fernville a couple of years. No reason for you to remember me."

She pursed her glossed lips. "Can I make it up to you?"

"Possibly." His hint of suggestiveness left Rebecca nodding and batting her heavily mascara-covered eyelashes.

As he made the one-block stroll to the reception, Reed searched for his friends from high school. They had to be here, but he didn't see them. He reached the reception site, the town's recreation center. An odd choice for a wedding reception considering he used to compete in chess tournaments there. The only difference between then and now was a new sign out front.

Inside, a framed picture of Mark and Kelli sat on an easel. A white mat with guests' signatures and greetings surrounded the photo. Reed picked up the pen, scribbled the words "May the force be with you as you live long and prosper together" and signed his name. Mark would understand as only a former Star Wars/Trekkie geek would.

With his seat-assignment card in hand, Reed stepped through the pine-garland-trimmed entrance to the multipurpose room and was transported from the recreation center's nondescript decor into a romantic winter wonderland.

The scent of pine permeated the air. White gauzy fabric with sparkling snowflakes on it covered the walls. Garland entwined with white lights was draped over them. Next to the dance floor stood a twelve-foot Christmas tree decorated with white lights, red bows and crystal hearts. A smiling angel, with wings spread wide, graced the top of the tall tree. Reed's assistant had sent a gift for him, and he wondered if it was under the tree with the other wedding presents.

Had Samantha done all this? The girl he remembered hadn't seemed interested in flowers unless they were for a prom corsage. Though she'd been more concerned about whether they clashed with the color and style of her dress. But Reed had thought he'd seen more in her. Too bad he'd been wrong.

Reed passed a group of carolers dressed like characters from a Dickens novel and made his way to the other side of the room. He located table four.

"Hey." Reed was happy to see three of his closest friends from high school and two women seated here. "I've been wondering where you guys were. It's been a long time."

"I don't believe it." Wes Harkens, who had a goatee and a lot less hair than Reed remembered, rose from his seat and shook his hand. "Mark said you were coming, but I didn't see you at the church so I thought you hadn't made it."

"I was with Mark until right before the ceremony," Reed said, thinking how good it had been to catch up on the past eight years with his old friend. "Mark was as cool as a cucumber, but once I saw Kelli, I understood."

As his three buddies nodded knowingly, the attractive brunette sighed. “Don’t you guys think about anything else?”

“Sorry, honey. We don’t.” Dan Crenshaw, as tall as ever, but no longer as skinny as a twig, laughed. “I thought a million-dollar deal would spring up and keep you away, Reed.”

He smiled. “I don’t make the deals, just make sure everyone knows about them and Wintersoft.”

“But you must be doing well. Wintersoft is a great company.” Patrick Fitzgerald, who looked eighteen not twenty-eight, hugged him. “Good to see you, Reed.”

“You, too,” he said.

The introductions continued. Reed met Dan’s fiancée, Jenn, and Wes’s wife, a pregnant, auburn-haired beauty named Claire. For two guys who’d never dated in high school, they had done well in the spouse department. Patrick, who hadn’t outgrown his thick black-rimmed glasses and too-short pants, seemed to have come alone, but two empty seats at the table still remained.

“Looks like we’ll have all the single women to ourselves,” Reed said to Patrick.

“Maybe you will.”

“Thank goodness,” a familiar feminine voice said. “I never thought I’d find it.”

One glance and Reed’s heart skipped a beat. He felt the same way he had the first time Samantha had bounced into the computer lab in her short cheerleader skirt and tight sweater asking for help with her algebra homework. She had never meant to be a tease, but she had been a natural flirt who drove all males, regardless of age, to the brink of insanity.

“Table four.” She glanced at her table-assignment card and at each of the table’s occupants. Her gaze lingered on Reed for a moment longer than the others, and he wondered if anyone else noticed or saw the wariness in her eyes. “Looks like I’m at the right place.”

All three of his friends stared at Samantha with the same look of awe they had in high school. Patrick nearly tripped over himself to pull out her chair. He pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose. “Here you go, Samantha.”

Her face glowed with a radiance Reed didn’t remember. Must be the lighting. No one could look that good.

“Thank you,” she said.

Patrick’s red cheeks brought back so many memories about Samantha for Reed. His senior year he’d hacked into the school computer system to get her class schedule. The first day back at school he’d managed to “bump” into her between every class, but more than once he’d been too shy to say anything but hello. He’d been so pathetic. At least that was in the past.

Reed sat, leaving an empty seat between him and Samantha. The smart thing to do, he told himself, even though the idea of sitting next to Art Wilson—the man who had tormented him through high school and married the girl of Reed’s teenaged dreams—didn’t thrill him, but he was an adult and no longer in a losing competition. He could handle it. And Art.

Samantha picked up her flute of champagne. “Wasn’t the ceremony lovely?”

“I cried,” Claire admitted.

“You cry during commercials. Even when you aren’t pregnant.” Jenn laughed. “The bridesmaid dresses are gorgeous.”

“They are beautiful, but now you can see why I told Kelli no when she asked me to be a bridesmaid?” Claire patted her big-enough-to-burst belly. “I’m much too big to prance around in a sexy bridesmaid dress.”

“You’re all baby.” Wes’s voice, so soft and full of affection, was a 180 degrees different from when he used to talk like Commander Data from *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. “You look beautiful.”

Claire shrugged. “Thanks, but I didn’t want an album of wedding party pictures showing how ‘beautiful’ and big I look.”

“These are nice.” Dan adjusted the centerpiece, a small pine wreath circling a vanilla-scented candle. “I can’t wait to see what you do for our wedding, Samantha.”

“She won’t be able to top what she did at ours,” Wes admitted while Claire agreed.

Samantha’s eyes reflected her gratitude. “Thanks, but I only did what Kelli and Mark wanted done.”

Reed watched the exchange in amazement. The entire table acted as if they were friends, not acquaintances. He didn’t get it. Samantha would have never been caught dead talking to any of these guys in high school. She had been nice to him and treated him differently from others who weren’t in her clique. She’d made him feel special, but he’d helped her pass all her freshman and sophomore math and science courses. He’d believed friendship had grown from the tutoring. They’d been an odd pair—the beauty and brain—sharing their dreams for the future and what they wanted out of life. They had exchanged letters once he left for college until spring break of his sophomore year when they’d become lovers and the truth about how she felt—or rather didn’t feel—about him came out.

The DJ announced the arrival of the bride and groom, Mr. and Mrs. Mark Slayter, and the wedding guests clapped. A harpist took over from the carolers, and a sit-down prime rib dinner was served. The conversation never lagged. Reed’s friends wanted to know about his job and life in Boston. After that, stories about their high school days and being pathetic geeks kept them entertained. Samantha didn’t talk much.

He stared at her. She was so elegant, so stunning. His gaze drifted to her lips. He remembered every contour, every detail of those soft lips, even her taste. He remembered so much more about her, about the days and the night they had spent together. Too bad it hadn’t meant the same to her as it had to him. Reed reached for his glass of ice water.

What he needed was a strong dose of reality. Something to remind him Samantha was no longer on the market and put an end to the fantasy forming in his mind.

“Where’s Art?” Reed asked her. “At home with the kids?”

Everyone at the table stared at Samantha. Not even the crystal-handled cake knife could cut through the tension.

Wes started to speak, but Samantha interrupted him. “I—it’s okay. I’ll do it.”

“Do what?” Reed asked, feeling like the last one to learn a worm virus was about to destroy his hard drive.

She toyed with the edge of her napkin. “Art was involved in a motorcycle accident three years ago, and his injuries were too severe. He died.”

Reed felt as if he’d been punched in the solar plexus. He also felt like a jerk. “I’m sorry. I had no idea.”

“You had no reason to know.”

But he should have known. Reed glanced at her bare ring finger. How could he not have noticed before? Why hadn’t he asked about Art earlier? But then again, Reed had believed Samantha was living a happily ever after like she’d dreamed about. “You doing okay?”

The question sounded ridiculous once the words were out, but he’d felt compelled to say something.

Her steady gaze met his. “I’m doing fine.”

Fine.

Samantha deserved better than that. But it wasn’t up to him to give it to her. He knew that, both logically and realistically. Art might be out of the picture, but so was Reed. His flight was leaving tomorrow. His life was in Boston.

But you’re here now.

So what? He’d come to Fernville to have fun. He wasn’t looking for a second chance. Maybe a fling...

Samantha rose. “The lights on the tree are flickering. I need to fix them.”

“Want some help?” Patrick asked.

“Thanks, but it’s happened before and I know what to do.”

As Samantha walked away, Claire sighed. “Come on, you guys. Don’t make her do it alone.”

“Reed?” Jenn suggested.

“Be right back.” Reed stood. He should have done this on his own. Proactive, not reactive. That’s how he handled things now, but around Samantha he felt a little unsure and awkward, reminding him of his high school days. It didn’t make sense.

Standing at the tree, she tightened the miniature bulbs.

“Can I help?” he asked.

“No, thanks.” She didn’t glance up. “I’ve got it under control.”

Reed wished he could say the same. He touched one of the crystal hearts on the tree. Time to pull himself together. Samantha shouldn’t have him reverting to his former insecurities. Okay, she was beautiful, but he’d dated beautiful women before. Must be guilt over bringing up Art. It couldn’t be anything else. “I wanted to apologize for what I said back at the table.”

“No need.”

“I’m still sorry.” He checked for a loose bulb on the string of lights. “I would never want to cause you any pain.”

“Now that’s a good one.”

Her bitterness surprised him. She’s the one who didn’t want him. Perhaps she was having regrets. “I know it was a long time ago, but we once meant something to each other.”

“Did we?”

“Yes, we did.” At least he had thought so.

She raised a shoulder. “All that was a big mistake.”

Just as he’d assumed, their time together had meant nothing to her. “A mistake,” he repeated.

“I knew you would agree.”

But he didn’t. Not really. Being with Samantha had been both the best and the worst time of his life. A time of wonder and love. A time of rejection and disappointment. But he wouldn’t call it a mistake. Perhaps a lesson learned. “Sam—”

“Found it.” She fiddled with the wires, and the lights stayed on. “No more flickering.”

Reed wished he could say the same thing about his feelings for Samantha. His emotions seemed to be flickering on and off, and he didn’t know how to fix that.

“The bride and groom want to be on their way, so let’s get all the single women on the dance floor for the bouquet toss,” the DJ announced.

“That’s my cue to get the bride her bouquet. Excuse me.” Samantha rose, grateful for a valid reason to get away from Reed if only for a few minutes. She’d been upset at his returning to Fernville, but now she was annoyed at him. She hated the pity in his eyes. His need to apologize for bringing up Art.

So she was a widow? It wasn’t by choice, but she’d learned to live with it. Because of Timmy, she’d had no choice.

Timmy. The thought of her son filled her with warmth. Like her own parents, Reed had made the wrong choice where his child was concerned. He hadn’t wanted to be any part of Timmy’s life. Or hers. She wondered if he ever had regrets. She wondered if her own parents did. Not that it mattered. She’d only been wanted and loved on their terms. She and Timmy were better off without them in their lives.

She picked up the smaller throw-away bouquet made with fire-and-ice roses and sprigs of pine and made her way through the crowded room to the dance floor. The sweet scent of the roses tickled her nostrils, reminding her this was a wedding not a wake. She was here to enjoy herself. No sense letting Reed Connors get to her. He wouldn’t be in Fernville forever. He didn’t care enough to cause problems. Time to stop overreacting. Didn’t she deserve a night out and some fun?

At the dance floor, Samantha handed the bouquet to a beaming Kelli. "Here you go."

"Thanks." Kelli sniffed the roses. "Make sure you stand where I can see you."

"Okay." But it was far from okay. Getting stung by a bee would be less painful than battling the other women for a chance at the bouquet, but Samantha wasn't about to disappoint her friend. She stood on the parquet dance floor, trying not to get jostled by a woman dressed in a hot pink dress, who jockeyed for a better position.

"One, two..." Before the DJ reached three, Kelli tossed the bouquet over her right shoulder. The flowers soared through the air. A woman in a teal suit reached up, but was a second too late. The bouquet landed right in Samantha's hands. She stared at the white roses with the red tips. Their coy scent wasn't so sweet now, but Kelli was clapping and smiling. That's the only thing that mattered.

Samantha clutched the bouquet to her chest and grinned at her friend. "I can't believe my luck," she said dryly.

As she walked off the dance floor, Mark removed the garter from Kelli's left leg while men whistled and cheered. The DJ counted down again. On three, Mark fired the blue satin garter over his shoulder and into the crowd of bachelors. As the garter approached, the men backed away. The garter arced toward the floor when a hand snagged it out of the air.

"Whoever caught that wanted it bad," Claire said.

She was such a romantic. Samantha knew better. "He probably had too much to drink and doesn't realize what he's done."

As Reed approached, he twirled the garter on his finger.

Jenn raised a finely arched brow. "You caught the garter?"

"I promised Mark if no one tried to catch it, I would." Reed placed the garter on his arm. "Wedding traditions mean a lot to Kelli, and Mark didn't want her to be disappointed."

Tears glistened in Claire's eyes. "That is so sweet."

Samantha couldn't believe it. Reed sounded so much like the boy she'd known in high school she felt a tug on her heart.

"Would the pair who caught the garter and bouquet please join the bride and groom on the dance floor?" the DJ asked.

No, she couldn't. A momentary panic sent her rising from her chair. Reed stood also. Mark waved at them; Kelli grinned. At least the bride and groom were happy about this.

It wasn't a big deal, Samantha told herself as Reed led her back to the dance floor. One dance at a wedding in front of more than 150 people meant nothing. She repeated that to herself when he placed one hand on her shoulder and held her hand with the other. And repeated it again as they swayed to the music—a romantic ballad from one of the summer's biggest movies.

It was only a dance.

Too bad it didn't feel that way.

Reed's arms weren't around her pulling her close, but they might as well have been. His warmth and strength seeped into her. Shivery sensations shot through her. Dancing with him felt like second nature. A nature better left untapped, a little voice cautioned. But she ignored it. Samantha had been alone for so long, she'd forgotten how nice it felt to dance and be held. His gentle touch sent tingles up her arm and down to the tips of her black leather pumps. Nerve endings came alive. Her heart, too. It went against all reason, but she hoped this once the song was a long one.

Glancing up at Reed, her breath caught in her throat. Years ago, she'd dreamed of being on the dance floor with him at a wedding. Their wedding. But like all dreams, hers hadn't come true. And she had one person to blame. She looked away.

"Ladies and gentlemen," the DJ announced. "Let's give the couple dancing under the mistletoe some encouragement?"

Guests tapped flatware against their glasses. Because of the clinking, Samantha assumed the DJ meant the bride and groom, but Kelli smiled and pointed toward the ceiling. Samantha didn't

have to look up to know what was above her and Reed. She'd been the one to hang the mistletoe on the dance floor.

Reed's eyes darkened. "Shall we?"

No. That's the last thing she wanted to do. Now or ever.

But one brief kiss was nothing more than a holiday tradition. And it would mean a lot to Kelli. One peck wasn't about to set the town gossips' tongues wagging. Or change anything. Past, present, future. "Why not?"

She waited for Reed to take the lead. He lowered his mouth to hers. The moment his lips touched her, sensation rocketed through her. Electric shock, chemical reaction, you name it—she felt it. Talk about a swoonworthy kiss. If Reed hadn't wrapped his arm around her she would have fallen. She waited for him to back away but he didn't.

Stop, she should stop.

But kissing him felt so good. So right. So perfect.

He wasn't stopping. She didn't want to stop, either. His taste intoxicated her, a dangerous elixir that should be marked off-limits. His scent hadn't changed over the years and reminded her of the magical kisses they'd shared before.

Memories rushed back. Buried emotions, too. The years faded. The distance between them seemed to disappear.

More, she wanted more.

She leaned into him. Reed took the hint and pulled her closer. Her breasts pressed against his firm chest. Strong, he was stronger than she remembered. This wasn't a boy holding her but a man. She wished he never had to let go.

For the first time in a long while, she belonged. She could be Sam. Not Samantha. Not Mom... Timmy.

What was she doing?

She jerked away. Applause filled the room. Samantha didn't want to guess what shade of red her cheeks were at the moment. Most likely the same color as the holly-red tablecloths or roses in Kelli's bridal bouquet. Thank goodness the lights had been turned down.

The applause continued. Reed bowed. Not to be outdone, she curtsied. If he was unaffected by the kiss and the attention, so was she. No matter she had trouble catching her breath and her hands trembled. Never mind it was all she could do not to run to the nearest exit.

"Sorry," Samantha mumbled as she made her way back to their table. "Too much champagne."

"No apology necessary, though I think the champagne had little to do with it."

She froze. "What do you mean by that?"

"It's called chemistry," he whispered, and a shiver of delight inched down her spine.

"No." She stepped away from him. "We simply got carried away."

"It wouldn't be the first time."

His words sent heat coiling within her. No, she couldn't let this happen. Not here. Not with Reed. Not again.

She tilted her chin. "But it's going to be the last."

Chapter Three

After a restless night, Reed buttoned his coat and stepped out of Marabelle Bailey's Fernville B&B. The mouth-watering aroma of freshly baked apple-cinnamon coffee cake disappeared when he shut the front door.

A light dusting of snow covered the sidewalks and tree branches. The chilly air reminded him of going to school on winter mornings like this—his boots crunching through the layers of snow and ice as he dodged snowballs thrown his way. Nerds, geeks and dweebs had made the perfect targets back then. Reed shoved his gloved hands into his jacket pockets.

A giant Christmas tree decorated with twinkling lights and large multicolored balls graced the town square. The Douglas fir towered over the garland-draped gazebo where musicians performed during the summertime. The scene was pure Currier & Ives, but Reed felt too much like Scrooge to enjoy it.

The ghosts of his past had been out in full force ever since the wedding last night. Catching up and spending time with his high school buddies had been good. He'd forgotten how much fun his friends were. But seeing Samantha after all these years and kissing her...

Something physical still existed between them. Something good. Kissing her had been better than he remembered. Better than any kiss he remembered. And this time he couldn't chalk the feeling up to inexperience. Despite his fear as a teenager that no woman would ever want him, he'd had enough practice over the years.

If Samantha had shown him any interest last night, he would have been all over it. All over her. But she wanted nothing to do with him. He'd seen it in her eyes and heard it in her voice. Her rejection was more bittersweet than painful. A relief rather than a regret. And he wasn't about to slink away without a word the way he'd done almost nine years ago. He was through being a loser. This time he would accept defeat and face her like a man. He would say goodbye, get the closure he should have gotten before and move on.

The insides of the shops surrounding the town square were dark except for the Fernville Coffee Shop and Fernville Flowers. A Closed sign hung in the window of the flower shop. Samantha stood on a ladder hanging something from the ceiling. She wore a pair of faded jeans and a gray sweater. Pink used to be her color of choice. No matter. Tastes changed over the years. What color she preferred to wear wasn't his business. Saying goodbye was. He had two hours until he needed to leave for the airport. Better get to it. Reed knocked on the glass door.

Samantha's gaze met his. No smile, no reaction at all. She climbed down from the ladder and walked to the door. Her hair was pulled back, but the style was more romantic than severe with stray tendrils framing her face. Too bad those did nothing to soften the rest of her. With the automatic movements of a robot, she unlocked the door and cracked it open. "A little early to be out and about don't you think?"

The tightness of her mouth told him she didn't want him here. He would make this quick. "I didn't get a chance to say goodbye last night."

"That hasn't stopped you before."

Her words stung, but she was right. He had ended it badly before. Hell, he hadn't even ended it. Just run away. "That's why I'm here. I wanted to say goodbye this time."

Only the cracked door separated her from him, but the silence seemed to increase the distance between them. He could hear the footsteps of someone behind him, the sound of a car's engine idling nearby and the beating of his own heart.

"That's all you want?" she asked.

He nodded.

She glanced back into the shop. Her hair was woven into a single braid. He remembered when she wore two braids. The style had been more sexy than childlike. He felt a twinge in his groin.

Don't think about her. Don't think about the past. Don't think about anything except the reason you are here.

"Okay, goodbye." She stared past him as if he were invisible. Funny, but that's how he'd felt in high school around everyone but her. "Have a safe trip back to Boston. And have a wonderful life, too."

The temperature had dropped more than a few degrees, and he couldn't blame it all on the weather. She might as well have slammed the door in his face.

"Feel better?" Samantha asked.

Reed felt the same way he had the last time he saw her. All tied up in knots and wondering what the future held without her in his life. But this time Art wasn't standing in his way. No one was. And if Reed truly wanted her, he was man enough to get her this time around. "No."

She fiddled with the door lock. "What more do you want?"

He wanted to leave. He had to return to Boston, to his job. He had no time for a long-distance relationship, let alone an affair. But something held him in his place.

Why wasn't closure enough, now that he had it? Because "goodbye" didn't resolve what they had shared so long ago. She had been his first love, his first lover. And last night's kiss had awakened both dormant feelings and memories. Good ones and bad. He realized this wasn't about saying goodbye. Not at all.

Plump snowflakes fell from the sky, landing on the sidewalk and on him. "Sam..."

"It's Samantha."

"Samantha," he repeated. "What happened during spring break—"

"Was years ago," she interrupted. "Forget about it."

Logically he knew she was correct, but Reed wanted her to admit she'd made a mistake choosing Art over him. And Reed didn't want to leave until he got that. But the longer he stood there, the better he understood it wasn't going to happen.

Snow fell harder. The darkening sky told him this wasn't a passing flurry, though the weather forecast hadn't called for snow. "Would you mind if I came inside and called the airline about my flight?"

She looked into the shop again. "This isn't a good time."

"It'll only take a minute."

With a hint of annoyance in her eyes, she stepped back and opened the door. "Okay."

It wasn't the warmest invitation he'd ever received, but he brushed the snow off him and stepped inside. "Thanks."

Her store overflowed with holiday cheer. A contrast to the reception he'd received from its owner. The scent of vanilla, cinnamon and pine reminded him of his grandmother's house. White twinkling lights entwined in garland added a touch of whimsy. Stockings of different shapes and sizes were hung on the walls. Ornaments decorated several Christmas trees. Icicles and snowflakes dangled from the ceiling. Menorahs and dradels filled an entire display rack. Only Christmas carols were missing.

A red Santa hat lay on a table, and Reed placed it on his head. "Ho-ho-ho." He expected a smile. He didn't get one. "Nice shop. Very christmasy."

"The phone is on the counter by the cash register."

"I have my cell phone," Reed admitted. He called the airline. His flight was delayed. If the snow continued to fall, it would be canceled. Renting a car and trying to get ahead of the storm seemed like his best option. He didn't want to intrude on Samantha any longer. She'd made her choice; he was making his. He had a life now. He wasn't the same boy he'd once been.

A scream tore through the silence. A blur of blue raced from the back into the store toppling a three-foot-tall Father Christmas figurine. Samantha's quick reflexes kept it from hitting the floor.

A boy wearing a blue sweatshirt and jeans held up a Gameboy. Brown hair stuck out from his baseball cap. "Look. I made it to level six, Mom."

Mom? It shouldn't matter that she'd had a child with another man—her husband—but still Reed's heart tightened. He'd thought of her having kids, but in a detached first-comes-marriage-then-comes-baby sort of way, but seeing it was different. And affected him more than he could have imagined.

He did a double take. The kid looked too old to be hers. Guess she and Art hadn't waited to start a family.

She smiled, though her face had lost some of its color. "That's great, honey."

The tenderness in her voice took Reed by surprise. She sounded like a mom. When he was younger, he'd imagined her as a girlfriend, lover, wife, but never a mother. Of course, he'd been twenty the last time he saw her, and children hadn't been on the edge of his radar screen. The same way they weren't now.

"I didn't have to use the clues from the magazine." The boy bounced from foot to foot. "I did it all on my own."

"You'll have to teach me," she said.

Samantha eyed Reed. Her piercing gaze seemed to be searching for something. What, he didn't know.

"Okay." The boy grinned and a dimple appeared on his left cheek.

Reed touched the spot of his own dimple. Same left side.

The boy looked up at him and his smile widened. "I like your hat."

Reed had forgotten he was wearing it. "Thanks."

"My dad used to wear a Santa hat every Christmas," he said.

"Timmy, this is Mr. Connors." Samantha sounded hoarse, and she cleared her throat. "Reed, this is Timmy."

"Do you play video games?" Timmy asked.

"Yes." Reed and his high school friends had spent their free time playing video and computers games, collecting Star Wars figurines and watching Star Trek reruns and its various sequel series. "But I play more computer games now."

"Mr. Connors went to high school with me and your dad," she emphasized the last word. All of her features seemed tight. The wariness Reed had glimpsed last night was back.

"I want to be a pitcher like my dad." As Timmy drew his brows together, two lines formed about his nose. Just like Samantha used to do when she was concerned about an upcoming test or homework assignment. "But I need to learn to throw a curve ball first. Do you know how?"

"Playing catch is more my style," Reed admitted. "I never could throw a curve ball myself."

"That's okay," Timmy said. "Playing catch is fun, too. I want a new mitt for my birthday."

"When's your birthday?" Reed asked.

"In twelve days. I'll be eight." Timmy smiled. "I'm having my birthday party at the ice rink after school. We're going to skate, play hockey and eat lots of cake."

"Sounds fun."

But eight? Samantha must have gotten pregnant right after graduation. Reed subtracted nine months from Timmy's birthday. The date fell right around spring break. The spring break when they'd made love. Reed glanced at Timmy, at his brown hair and eyes. Art and Samantha had been Fernville High's blond-haired, blue-eyed golden couple. Reed's pulse quickened.

Theoretically he could be Timmy's father, but that wasn't possible. They'd used protection. Besides, she would have told him if he were going to be a father. No woman in her right mind would

keep a child a secret. No, Timmy wasn't his. She must have gone straight from his bed to Art's, as Reed had always suspected. The truth disappointed more than hurt.

“Want to come to my party?” Timmy asked.

Samantha almost dropped a glass Santa ornament she was hanging on a tree. “That's polite of you to invite Mr. Connors, but he lives in Boston.”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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