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Sweet Liar



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The Summerhouse

Forever...A Novel of Good and Evil, Love and Hope

Published by POCKET BOOKS

Jude Deveraux

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New York London Toronto Sydney Singapore


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Prologue

Louisville, Kentucky

January 1991

“Why would my father do something like this to me? I thought he loved me,” Samantha Elliot said to the man who had been her father’s lawyer and friend for as long as she could remember. That the soft-spoken man had colluded with her father intensified the hurt and the sense of abandonment that she was feeling.

Not that she needed anything to intensify the pain she already felt. Three hours ago she had stood by the grave of her father and watched with hot, dry eyes as they lowered his coffin into the ground. She was only twenty-eight years old, yet she had already seen more death than most people experience in a lifetime. She was the only one left now. Her parents were gone; her grandparents were gone; and Richard, her husband, might as well be dead, for she’d received the final divorce papers on the day her father died.

“Samantha,” the attorney said, his voice soft and pleading. “Your father did love you. He loved you very, very much, and it’s because he loved you that he made this request of you.” He was watching her closely; his wife had said she was worried that Samantha had not shed a tear since her father had died. “Good,” the attorney had said. “She has her father’s strength.”

“But her father wasn’t strong, was he?” his wife had snapped in return. “It was always Samantha who had the strength. And now she’s stood by and watched her father shrivel and die before her eyes yet she’s taken it all without a tear.”

“Dave always said Samantha was his rock.” The lawyer closed his briefcase and left the house before his wife could say anything more, for he was dreading what she was going to say when the contents of David Elliot’s will became public knowledge.

Now, watching Samantha as she stood in her father’s library, he could feel sweat trickling down his neck as he remembered trying to talk Dave Elliot out of this will, but he’d not been able to persuade him. By the time Dave had made this last will, he weighed ninety-two pounds and could barely speak. “I owe her a chance,” Dave had whispered. “I took her life away from her and now I’m going to give it back. I owe her.”

“Samantha is a young woman. An adult woman who has to make her own decisions,” the lawyer had answered, but he might as well not have said anything for all the attention Dave paid him; her mind was set.

“It’s just for one year. That’s all I ask of her. One year. She’ll love New York.”

She’ll hate New York, the attorney thought but didn’t voice his opinion. He had known Samantha all her twenty-eight years. He’d given her piggyback rides when she was a child, and he’d seen her laugh and play like other children. He’d seen her run races and play tricks on her parents, and he’d seen her pleased with a good grade on a test and crying when she’d not done as well. He’d seen Samantha argue with her mother over the color of a dress or whether she could wear lipstick or not. Until she was twelve years old, she’d been a normal child in every way.

But looking at her now, just a few hours after Dave’s funeral, he could see what she had become. She was an old woman in a young woman’s body, hiding her beauty under a proper little dark suit that would have suited a woman three times her age. In fact, it seemed that she did everything she could to hide her femininity: She pulled her pretty hair back, she wore little to no cosmetics, her clothes were

shapeless, too long, and nondescript. But worse than her outward appearance was the inner Samantha. For many years now Samantha had rarely smiled, and he couldn't remember when he'd last seen her laugh.

When she did smile, he thought, she was very, very pretty. His mind slid backward, remembering time a few years ago, before Samantha married, before she left Louisville, when she had come home after a visit to the gym. Dave was in the den on the telephone, and she hadn't known anyone else was in the house. Standing by the sliding-glass patio doors, a glass of iced tea in his hands, the attorney had been about to say hello to Samantha when she removed her wrap and started doing stretches in the living room, her shapely leg with a slim thigh and curving calf propped on the back of the couch. The attorney forgot all about her being the daughter of a friend and had stared in open-mouthed admiration at a young woman that for years he'd thought of as rather plain. Her hair had come loose from its confining band and little coils clung to her face in soft, curling tendrils of spun gold; her skin was rosy from her workout, and her eyes were thick lashed and brilliant blue. He'd never noticed that her lips were so full that they looked almost pouty or that her nose had an impudent little tilt to it. Nor had he noticed that she had a body that should have been immortalized in a magazine spread with curves where they should be and all of her tightly toned.

"They do grow up, don't they," Dave had said from behind him, startling the lawyer, who turned red from being caught gaping at a girl young enough to be his daughter. Obviously, what he had been thinking showed on his face. Embarrassed, he turned away and went outside with Dave.

It was years later, while Dave was preparing his will, that he said that he'd taken all the "juice" out of Samantha. "I've done things to her that a father shouldn't do to a child," he'd said, and the lawyer, all too vividly remembering Samantha's curvy little body in a red leotard, had quickly put away his papers and left the house. He remembered too well that afternoon when he'd felt stirrings of forbidden lust that he should not have for a friend's daughter. Even though Dave was on his deathbed, he didn't want to hear confessions of the type that Dave seemed on the verge of making. He didn't want to hear confessions of what should never happen but all too often did.

Now, the attorney wondered what Dave had done to Samantha—if he had done anything—but he was not going to ask, for he was not brave enough to step into a world he'd rather not hear about.

"I don't want to do this," Samantha said, looking down at her hands. "I have other plans."

"It's only for one year," the lawyer answered, repeating Dave's words. "And you'll receive a great deal of money at the end of the year."

As Samantha walked to the window, she put her hand on the brocade curtains. One of the last things she and her mother had done together was choose these curtains, and Samantha remembered looking at hundreds of samples of fabric before deciding on exactly the right color and texture. In the backyard was a tree her grandfather and she had planted when Samantha was a toddler. When she was ten Granddad Cal had carved a big C + S on the trunk, saying that, this way, they'd be together as long as the tree lived. Turning, she looked around the room, the room that had been her father's, the place where she'd sat on her father's knee, the place she and both her parents had played and laughed together. Richard had proposed to her in this room.

Solemnly, she went to her father's big desk and picked up the rock he had used for a paperweight. On its smooth surface, painted in blue paint in a child's crude lettering, were the words *I love you Daddy*. She had made the paperweight for him when she was in the third grade.

Two weeks before her father died, while Samantha was nursing him, at a time when she thought they had become the closest they had ever been, he had secretly sold the house and most of its contents. She hadn't thought much about herself in those weeks before her father died, but he had repeatedly asked her what she was going to do after his death. Reluctantly, Samantha had said she would probably live in the house, take a few college courses, teach some computer classes on the side, and c

what other people did who weren't working six days a week as Samantha had been doing for the last two years. Her father hadn't said a word in reply to her answer—but obviously he had not liked her answer.

Samantha put the paperweight down and looked at the attorney. “He gave no reason for selling the house?”

“He said only that he wanted you to spend one year in New York and during that time you were to look for your grandmother. I don't believe he thought she was still alive; I think he meant for you to see if you could find out where she went after she left her family. Your father had intended to search through records himself and see if he could find out what happened to her, but he...”

“He didn't have time to do many things he wanted to do,” Samantha said, causing the lawyer to frown, for she sounded bitter. “So now I am to search for her in his place?”

The lawyer cleared his throat nervously, wondering how soon he could politely leave. “I don't think he literally meant search, I think he was afraid you'd stay here in this house alone and see no one. I think he thought that since your mother had no relatives and with Dave gone there would be no one left on his side of the family except his mother, if she's still alive, that is, so...” He trailed off.

Samantha looked away from the man so he couldn't see her face; she wanted to give away nothing of what she was feeling. Pain—betrayal—as deep as hers was not something she wanted anyone to see. Right now what she wanted most was to be alone. She wanted this man to leave her house, wanted him to close the front door behind him and never open it again. When the house was empty, she wanted to crawl into a warm, dark place and close her eyes and never open them again. How many terrible things could a person live through and still survive?

Pulling a ring of keys from his pocket, the attorney put them on the desk. “These are the keys to your father's apartment. Dave had everything arranged. He was going to take an early retirement and move to New York so that he could search for his mother. He rented an apartment, even furnished it. Everything was ready, but then he decided to go for a checkup and...and the cancer was found.”

When Samantha didn't turn around, the attorney backed toward the door. “Samantha, again, I am sorry about Dave. I loved the man and I know you did too. And, however it may seem now, he loved you too. He loved you very much and he wanted the best for you, so I'm sure that whatever he did, he did for love of you.” He was talking too fast and he knew it. Maybe he ought to offer her something. If nothing else, he should give her a shoulder to cry on, but the truth was he didn't want to hear about pain such as Samantha must be feeling. He felt sorry for the kid—so many deaths in such a short life—but he didn't offer her a shoulder. He wanted to go home now, home to his healthy, smiling wife, and leave this house forever. Maybe Dave was right to have sold it, maybe there were so many bad memories here that only abandonment would clear them away.

“I'm leaving the papers for the apartment on the desk,” he said quickly, backing up. “The landlord will give you the keys to the outer door when you get there, and here, on the floor, I left the box of your grandmother's things.”

As he put his hand on the knob of the front door, he felt rather like a runner dying for the starting gun to sound so he could get away. “If you need anything else, please let me know. Samantha?”

She nodded, but she didn't turn around when she heard him leave. Instead, she continued to look out at the leafless yard behind her father's house. But not his house anymore. Nor was it hers. When she was growing up, she'd thought that someday she'd raise children in this house, but...Blinking a few times to clear her vision, she realized she now had ninety days in which to vacate her childhood home.

Turning, she looked at the packet of papers on her father's desk—the desk that now belonged to someone else. She was tempted to walk away from the entire deal. She could support herself; when it came to that, she very well knew that she could support another person too, but if she didn't do what

her father wanted, she would lose all the money he'd left, money from the sale of the house and the money he had saved for years as well as the money he'd inherited from his father. She knew that if she were careful, the money she'd inherit would make her financially independent for the rest of her life and she could live where she wanted, do what she wanted to do.

But for some reason, her father had decided that before she could have the money she had to spend a year in a big, dirty city looking through musty old files in the hope of finding some trace of a woman who had walked out on her family when Samantha, her granddaughter, was eight months old. The woman had left behind a husband who adored her, a son who loved her, a daughter-in-law who missed her, and a granddaughter who would someday need her desperately.

Turning, Samantha picked up the rock paperweight and for a moment she considered throwing the rock through the window. But the impulse was short-lived, and carefully, slowly, she put the rock back on the desk. If her father wanted her to try to find his mother, then that is what Samantha would do. Hadn't she been doing exactly what he wanted for years?

She started to leave the room, but pausing at the door, she turned back, picked up the old-fashioned hatbox her father had left her, the one he had said contained all his mother's effects, and carried it upstairs with her. She felt no curiosity about the box, no desire to look inside it. In fact, Samantha was sure that, all in all, it was better not to think about anything, better not to remember. Better to do than to think, she thought, and right now she had a great deal of packing to do.

New York
April 1991

Fifteen minutes after Samantha Elliot landed in New York, her wallet was stolen. She knew it was her own fault, because she had reached inside her purse to get a tissue and forgotten to close the zipper, so all the thief had to do was slip his or her hand inside and remove her wallet. One MasterCard, one American Express gone, as well as most of her money. At least she'd had sense enough to put a hundred and fifty dollars in her carryon, so she wasn't destitute.

After she discovered the theft, she had the brand-new learning experience of canceling her credit cards. To Samantha everything that had happened was traumatic: coming to the big, bad city of New York for the first time, being welcomed by a pickpocket, and having to cancel her charge cards. To the bored young woman behind the claims counter, these were all things that happened fifty times a day. Handing Samantha forms to fill out, she pointed to a wall chart with the credit card companies' telephone numbers on them and told her to call them. While Samantha was on the telephone, the woman managed to crack her gum, polish her nails, talk to her boyfriend on the phone, and tell her colleague what she wanted for lunch, all at the same time. Samantha tried to tell the young woman about her lost wallet, tried to tell her that the wallet had belonged to her mother and had a leather lining printed with what her father had called a psychedelic design. But the woman gave Samantha a blank look and said, "Yeah, sure." If the woman hadn't just demonstrated that she had enough intelligence to do several tasks at the same time, Samantha would have thought from the blank expression in her eyes that she was terminally stupid.

By the time Samantha got away from the lost articles department, her suitcase had been locked in a glass-fronted room and she had to find a guard to open it—no mean feat, because no one she spoke to knew who had the key to the room. In fact, no one seemed to know the locked room even existed.

By the time she got her suitcase, pulling it along behind her on a wheeled cart, her carryon slung over her shoulder, she was shaking with exhaustion and frustration.

Now all she had to do was get a taxi, the first taxi she had ridden in in her life, and get into the city.

Thirty minutes later, she was inside the dirtiest automobile she had ever seen. It stunk of cigarette smoke so strongly she thought she might be sick, but when she tried to roll down the window, she found that both of the inside handles of the doors were missing. She would have spoken to the driver but his name on the paper under the meter seemed to be spelled mostly with x's and k's, and he didn't seem to speak much English.

Looking out the dirty window of the cab, trying not to breathe, she attempted the impossible task of not thinking of anything at all, not where she was, why she was there, or how long she was going to have to stay.

The cab drove under a bridge that looked as though it should have been condemned, then down streets filled on both sides with tiny, dirty-windowed shops. When the driver asked for the address for the third time, Samantha gave it to him yet again, trying not to relay her frustration to him. The paper her father's attorney had given her said the apartment was in a brownstone, located in the East Sixties between Park and Lexington.

When the driver slowed, looking for the address, she was on a street that seemed quieter and less cluttered than the other areas they had driven through. After the cab stopped, she paid the driver and quickly tried to calculate the tip, then removed her two bags without his help from the floor of the cab.

Looking up at the building in front of her, she saw a five-story house that was only two windows wide. It was a very pretty town house, with a tall staircase leading up to a door with a fanlight over it. A wisteria vine growing up the left side of the house all the way to the roof was covered with purple buds just about to burst into bloom.

Samantha pushed the doorbell, then waited. There was no answer. Even after three rings and fifteen minutes, there still was no answer.

“Of course,” she said, sitting down on her suitcase. What had she expected? That the landlord would be there to give her a key to the outside door? Just because she had written him and informed him of her arrival time didn’t mean he should bother himself to be there to open the door for her. What did it matter to him that she wanted a shower and to sit down on something that wasn’t moving?

As she sat on her suitcase waiting for the man, wondering if he was going to show up at all, she speculated about what she would do in a city the size of New York with no place to stay. Could she take a taxi to a hotel and spend the night there? Could she get her father’s attorney to wire her money until she could open a bank account in New York?

Several more minutes went by, but no one came, nor did any of the passersby seem to notice her. A couple of men smiled at her, but she pointedly looked away.

While Samantha was sitting at the top of the stairs, she looked to the side and noticed that the ground level was another door into the house. Maybe that was the front door of the house and she was to knock there.

Not knowing whether it was safe or not to leave her bags on the top of the stoop, she decided to leave them and pray they weren’t stolen. Going down the stairs and around them to the ground floor door, she walked around a pretty wrought-iron spike-tipped fence and knocked several times, but there was no answer.

Taking a deep breath, her fists clenched, she looked back up at her suitcases sitting safely at the top of the stairs. Beside the ground floor door was a box of red geraniums, and the sight of the flowers made her smile. At least the flowers seemed happy: They were well cared for, not a dead leaf was on them, the soil was moist but not wet, and the flowers were heavy with bloom.

Still smiling, she started toward the stairs, but just as she rounded the corner, a football came whizzing so close over her head that she ducked. When the flying football was followed by what looked to be a couple hundred pounds of male clad in denim shorts and a sweat shirt with both armholes torn out to the waist, Samantha moved to slam herself flat against the wall of the stairs.

At least she tried to get out of the way of the man, but she wasn’t fast enough. He caught the football as it sailed over her head, then, startled, he saw her just as he was about to land on her. At the same time that he released the ball, he reached out to catch Samantha before she fell against the spike of the fence.

Giving a little gasp as she nearly fell, his hands caught her and pulled her to him in a protective way.

For a moment she stood encircled by his arms. He was taller than her five foot four, probably just at six feet, but the protective way he bent toward her made them almost eye level with each other. They were nearly isolated, with the tall stairs behind them, the next house’s stairs not far in front of them, the fence and flower box nearby. Samantha started to say thank you to the man, but as she looked at him, she forgot what she was going to say.

He was an extraordinarily good-looking man, with black, curling hair, heavy black brows, and dark eyes with eyelashes any female would kill for, all atop a full-lipped mouth that looked as though it belonged on a sculpture by Michelangelo. He might have looked feminine if his nose hadn’t been broken a couple of times and he didn’t have three days’ growth of black whiskers on his chin and if his finely sculpted head weren’t sitting on top of a body that bulged with muscle. No, he didn’t look

feminine. All the eyelashes in the world couldn't make this man look less than one hundred percent male. In fact, maleness oozed from him, making Samantha feel small and helpless, as though she were wearing yards of lavender lace. He even smelled male, not the artificial smell that could be purchased in a store; this man smelled of pure male sweat, a little beer, and acres of bronzed skin warmed by sun and exercise.

But it was the man's mouth that fascinated her. He had the most beautiful mouth she'd ever seen on a human being. It was full and sculptured, looking both hard and soft at the same time, and she couldn't take her eyes off of it. When she saw those lips moving toward her own, she didn't move away. He placed his lips on hers, softly at first, as though asking permission. Samantha, reacting on instinct and need and to something even more basic, opened her mouth slightly under his, and he pressed closer. Had her life depended on it, she couldn't have moved her lips away from his warm, sweet mouth, but when she put her hand up in half-hearted protest, she came in contact with his shoulder. It had been a long time since she had felt male skin near her own. And she had never felt a shoulder such as this one. Hard, firm muscle rounded over the top of his arm, and Samantha's hand curved over the muscle, her fingers digging into the resilient flesh.

When her hand closed over his arm, he leaned closer, his big, hard, heavy body pressing against hers, pinning her close to the wall. Samantha's hand slipped to his back, slipped under his open-sided shirt and met with the contours of the muscle on his back.

A moan escaping her lips, her body began to sink into his.

Putting one big hand behind her head, he turned her to the side and began to kiss her with all the passion she had missed in her life. He kissed her the way she had always wanted to be kissed, had dreamed of being kissed, kissed her the way fairy tales are supposed to end, the way all the books said a kiss should feel—the way no one had ever kissed her before.

As he moved one of his big, muscular thighs between her much smaller ones, Samantha's arm went fully around his neck, pulling him closer, pulling him as close as he could come to her.

Moving his mouth away from hers, he kissed her neck, kissed her ear lobe as his hands moved down her back. Cupping her buttocks in his hands, he moved her so most of her weight was on his thigh, then ran one hand down the length of her leg and lifted it, settling her ankle about his waist.

“Hey Mike, you're drawin' a crowd.”

At first Samantha didn't hear the voice, didn't hear anything; she only felt.

It was the man who broke away. Pulling his lips from her skin, he put his hand to her cheek, caressing her cheek with his thumb while looking into her eyes, smiling at her.

“Hey, Mike, this your long-lost cousin or somebody you picked up on the street?”

Leaning forward, the man gave Samantha one more soft kiss then took her ankle from his waist and held her hand.

It was when he moved away from her that Samantha began to think again. And the first emotion she felt was horror, absolute, sheer horror at what she had done. She tried to snatch her hand from the man's grasp, but he held her fast.

There were three sweaty men who looked as though they wore their cigarettes rolled up in their shirt sleeves and drank beer for breakfast standing in front of them, all with leers on their faces, and with smirking expressions, as though they knew something they weren't supposed to know. “You gonna introduce us or not?”

“Sure,” the man said, holding onto Samantha's hand in spite of her tugs as he pulled her forward. “I'd like you to meet...” Turning, he looked at her in question.

Samantha looked away from him; she didn't want to look in his face again. No mirror was needed to tell her that her own face was brilliant red with embarrassment. “Samantha Elliot,” she managed to whisper.

“Oh, yeah?” the man holding her hand said, then looked back at the three men, who were nudging each other at this new knowledge that Mike didn’t know the woman he had moments before been kissing as though he meant to swallow her whole.

“I’d like you to meet my tenant,” the man said with a grin. “She’s going to be living in my house with me.” The pride and delight in his voice came through clearly.

Giving a sharp jerk on her hand, Samantha freed herself from his grip. She would have thought her mortification could not deepen, but at the realization of who this man was, it did. Horror, humiliation, panic, revulsion were all emotions that crowded into her, and she wanted to flee. Or die. Or preferably both.

“Some roommate!” Laughing in a vulgar way, one of the men looked her up and down.

“You wanta live with me, baby, just let me know,” the second man said.

“With you *and* your wife,” the third man said, hitting the second one in the ribs. “Honey, I’m not married. I’ll take real good care of you. Better than Mike would—or could.”

“Get out of here!” Mike yelled back good-naturedly, no animosity in his voice, just good humor. He picked up the football and tossed it to them.

One of the men caught the ball, and the three of them went down the street, punching each other and laughing as they walked.

The man turned to her. “I’m Mike.” Putting out his hand to shake, he didn’t seem to understand when Samantha only stared at him. “Michael Taggart.” When she still didn’t respond, he began to explain. “Your landlord. You wrote me a letter, remember?”

Not saying a word, Samantha walked past him, careful not to touch him, and went up the stairs. Her luggage was in her hands before he was beside her.

“Wait a minute while I open the door. I hope the apartment’s all right for you. I had a crew come in and clean the place and put clean sheets on your bed. I’m sorry I wasn’t here when you arrived, but I lost track of the time and—Hey! Where are you going?”

A suitcase in each hand, Samantha had gone down the stairs and was three houses down the block by the time he got the door unlocked.

Bounding down the stairs two at a time, Mike came to a stop in front of her and reached out to take her bags, but she jerked them away from him, trying to walk around him, but he wouldn’t let her pass.

“You’re not mad because I was late, are you?”

Giving him a quick, hard glare, Samantha again tried to move around him. After three pivots and his blocking of every one of them, she turned and started walking in the other direction, but he blocked her that way too. Finally, she stopped and glared at him. “Would you please let me pass?”

“I don’t understand,” he said. “Where are you going?”

Intelligent stupid people, she thought. Was this city full of them? Still glaring at him, she said, “Mr. Taggart, I am going to find a hotel.”

“A hotel? But I have your apartment ready for you. You haven’t even seen it yet, so you can’t dislike it. It’s not me, is it? I told you I was sorry I was late. I’m not usually late, but my watch got wet last week and it’s in the shop and I couldn’t tell what time it was. And those bozos I was with probably couldn’t tell time if they had a watch and could figure out how to buckle it on.”

Giving him a look that was meant to wither him on the spot, Samantha moved around him.

He wasn’t to be put off so easily as he stepped back in front of her and started walking backward. “It’s the guys, isn’t it? Pretty crude, aren’t they? I apologize for them. I only see them when I want to toss a ball around with someone and at the gym. I mean, I don’t see them socially, if that’s what’s worrying you. You won’t have to see them in our house. I promise.”

Halting for a moment, Samantha had to marvel at the man. How could he be so very beautiful and understand so very little? She forced herself to look away from him. It was his beauty that had gotten

her into trouble in the first place.

When she started walking again, he was beside her. “If it’s not that I was late and it’s not the guy then what’s the problem?” he asked.

At the corner of the block, she stopped. Now what was she to do? she wondered. She had no idea where she was or where she was going, but she saw lots of yellow taxis driving by. In the movie people hailed taxis by standing on the curb and lifting their arms, so she hoisted her tote bag onto her shoulder and raised her arm. Within seconds a taxi came to a halt in front of her. Acting as though there was something she’d done a thousand times, she put her hand on the car door.

“Wait a minute!” Mike said as she started to open the door to the cab. “You can’t leave. You’ve never been in the city before, and you don’t know where you’re going.”

“I am going as far away from you as I can get,” she answered, not looking at him.

Mike’s face was the embodiment of surprise. “But I thought you liked me.”

With a gasp of exasperation, Samantha started to get into the cab.

But Mike stopped her by taking her suitcase, then her arm, both of which he held firmly. “You’re not leaving,” he said; then, glancing into the cab at the driver, he said, “Beat it.”

The driver took one look at Mike, at the muscles bulging on his body, most of them exposed by the skimpy clothing he was wearing, and asked no questions, not even waiting for Mike to slam the door before he sped away.

“All right,” Mike said quietly, as though talking to a skittish horse. “I don’t know what’s going on but we’re going to talk about it.”

“Where? In your house? The house where I’m supposed to live with you?” Samantha asked angrily.

“Is that what this is all about? You’re mad at me because I kissed you?” Giving her a slow, smug smile, his voice lowered significantly. “I rather thought you liked my kissing you,” he said, stepping closer to her.

“Get away from me.” She took a step backward. “I know this is a city that’s not supposed to care but I imagine someone will pay attention if I start screaming.”

At that Mike stepped back and looked at her. She was dressed in a prim little “outfit”—that’s the only word he could think of to describe what she had on—of navy blue. It was a very plain dress with a skirt that reached below her knees and a jacket with a white collar and cuffs. Somehow, that boring little dress managed to completely hide every curve of her body. If Mike hadn’t just had his hands all over her and hadn’t felt for himself what an incredible body she had, he would have thought she was as straight as a stick. When he’d kissed her, he’d found his hand at the small of her back, atop what seemed to be a rather deliciously curved fanny, and he’d run his hand down the length of her, over the lovely curve of her bottom, down firm, perfect thighs, down to her ankle and her slim little foot. He would have taken odds on it being impossible to hide a body like hers under any amount of clothing but somehow she had done it.

Looking at her face, he saw that she was a cross between pretty and cute, but she wore very little makeup, as though she meant to detract from her prettiness rather than enhance it, and her hair was pulled tightly back from her face. He could tell her hair was long, and the way she wore it made it look absolutely straight, but a wisp had escaped from the band at the back and the stray strand curled along her cheek. Remembering his thumb pulling that strand loose, Mike now wished he could touch it again.

Looking at her now, it was difficult to believe that this was the woman he’d kissed, for there was no sexiness in her face or her body. Actually, in her prim little dress, her blonde hair pulled back in a neat and utterly tidy bun, he would have thought she was the mother of a couple of children and taught Sunday school. If he had passed her on the street, he wouldn’t have looked twice at her. But he remembered vividly that he’d seen her looking very different a few minutes ago. The lusty, desirable

hungry beauty who had kissed him was in there somewhere.

When he had leaped around the stairs to catch the football, he had nearly trampled her, and out of instinct, he had caught her before she fell against the spikes of the railing. He had opened his mouth to ask if she was all right, but when he had looked into her eyes, he'd not been able to say a word, for she was looking at him as though she thought he was the best-looking, sexiest, most desirable man in the world. Mike had known since he was a kid that he was attractive to girls and he'd used his looks whenever possible, but no woman had looked at him as this one had.

Of course he had to concede that maybe he had been looking at her in much the same way. Her big, soft blue eyes had been filled with surprise and desire, looking at him from over a small, pert nose that was set atop a mouth so full and lush that he thought he might die from wanting it so much.

He'd kissed her, at first not sure if he should, because he didn't want to do anything to scare her away, but the moment his lips touched hers, he knew he couldn't stop himself, knew he couldn't hold back. No woman had ever kissed him as this one did. It wasn't just desire he felt coming from her, but hunger. She kissed him as though she'd been locked in a prison for the last ten years and now that she'd been released, he was the man she wanted most in the world.

Right now Mike didn't understand what was going on with her. How could she kiss him like this and ten minutes later look at him as though she detested him? For that matter how could this proper little lady be the same enchantress who'd wrapped her leg around his waist?

Mike didn't have answers, nor did he understand anything that was going on, but he knew one thing for certain: He couldn't let her get away from him. He *had* to find out what was making her want to get away from him. For his part he'd like to pick her up and carry her back to his house and keep her there, maybe forever. But if she wanted something from him first, like maybe for him to climb to the heavens, pick up a dozen or so stars, string them together, and hang them in her bedroom, he thought he would like to know so he could start tying ladders together.

"I apologize for whatever I did to offend you," he said, although he didn't mean a word of it. All he could remember was her ankle on his waist.

Samantha narrowed her eyes at him. "Is that supposed to make me believe you?" Taking a deep breath, she tried to calm down, for she was aware that they were beginning to draw the attention of the people on the street.

"Couldn't we go somewhere and talk about this?" he asked.

"Your house maybe?"

Missing the sarcasm in her voice, Mike thought that was a fine idea but didn't say so.

"There's nothing to talk about."

This time there was no missing her insinuation that she believed his house to be a den of sin. Mike took a deep breath. "We'll go back to the house, sit on the stoop—in plain sight of all of New York—and talk about whatever the problem is. Later, if you still want to leave, I'll help you find a hotel."

Samantha knew she shouldn't listen to him; she should hail another cab and find somewhere to spend the night.

"Look, you don't even know where you're going, do you? You can't get into a cab and say, 'Take me to a hotel.' Not any more. You don't know where you'll end up, so at least let me call and make a reservation for you."

Seeing her hesitation, Mike took the opportunity to start walking toward his house, hoping she would follow her suitcase and tote bag. Not wanting to press his luck with the headway he'd made with her, he didn't say any more as he walked, moving slowly, but stopping now and then to make sure she was following him.

When he reached the town house, he carried her bags to the top of the stairs, set them down, and turned to her. "Now, you want to tell me what's wrong?"

Looking down at her hands, Samantha knew that she was very tired from the long, exhausting day. For that matter, it had been a long, exhausting year. "I think the problem is obvious," she said, trying not to look at him because he had on so very little clothing. While he stood there leaning against the rail, he reached inside the old sideless sweat shirt he wore to scratch his chest, and Samantha saw his stomach covered with washboard muscle. When he said nothing, she spoke again, this time intending to make herself very clear. "I do not plan to live in the same house with a man who will spend his time chasing me all over the place. I am in mourning for my father, I have just ended my marriage, and I do not want more complications."

Perhaps Mike shouldn't have taken offense at her words, but she made him sound like a dirty old man who couldn't keep his hands off the luscious young girl. Resisting the temptation to point out the mistake he had by no means forced himself on her, he was also tempted to tell her that all they had shared was a kiss, nothing more, and that there was no reason to act as though he were a convicted rapist who had just tried to molest her.

"All right," he said in a cold tone. "What are the rules?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Oh yes you do. Anybody who dresses as you do must live by rules, lots of them. Now tell me what your rules are."

At that Samantha picked up her tote bag and reached for her suitcase, but putting his hand on it, he wouldn't let her have it.

"All right," he said again, this time with a sigh of defeat. "I apologize again. Couldn't we start over?"

"No," she said. "It's not possible. Would you please release my bag so I can leave?"

Mike wasn't going to let her leave. Besides the fact that he wanted her so badly there was something else running down his chest even though it was a cool day, there was his promise to her father. He was aware that she knew nothing about how close he had been with her father, didn't know that Dave and Mike had spent quite a bit of time together until Dave had told him Samantha was coming home. After that announcement Dave had confined their friendship to letters, which had been sent to the attorney because for some reason, Dave hadn't wanted Mike and Samantha to meet, at least not while Dave was alive. Then, two days before Dave died, he had called Mike, although by then Dave had been too weak for Mike to hear all of what he had to say, but Mike had understood the essence of it. Dave had said he was sending Samantha to him in New York and he had asked Mike to take care of her. At the time Mike hadn't felt he'd had any other choice, so he'd given his word that he'd protect her and watch over her. But so far, Mike didn't think these last few minutes were what Dave had in mind.

Mike looked down at Samantha's two bags. "Which one has your overnight things in it?"

Samantha thought that was a very odd question, but then the last few minutes had been the oddest of her life.

Not waiting for her answer, he picked up her tote bag and opened the door to the house. "Five minutes, that's all I ask. Give me five minutes, then ring the bell."

"Would you please give me back my bag?"

"What time is it now?"

"Quarter after four," she answered automatically after a glance at her watch.

"Okay, at twenty after ring the bell."

Shutting the door behind him, he left Samantha standing alone on the stoop, half of her luggage missing. When she pressed the doorbell, there was no answer. She was tempted to take her large case and leave, but the fact that her remaining money was hidden in her tote bag made her sit down on her suitcase and wait.

Trying not to think of her father, trying not to ask herself why he had done this to her, and

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