

Chapter 1

Samantha Whitwell turned into the parking lot of the Hyatt Regency and looked for a space as close to the front door as possible. Fortunately, someone in the first row was just leaving. *Must be my lucky night*, she thought as she pulled her Toyota Rav 4 into the prime spot. She went behind the vehicle, opened the tailgate, and removed two instrument cases. Lugging her guitar and saxophone into the lobby, she followed the signs to the ballroom. The place was a madhouse of activity, and Sam moved carefully to the stage, trying not to get in the way of the numerous hotel personnel who were busting about, making final preparations for the party.

She smiled at the woman standing at the keyboard. "Hi, Lisa."

"Hi, sis." Several phrases of electric piano music filled the room. "How's it sound?"

"Great!" Sam climbed onto the raised platform and exchanged pleasantries with her band mates as she unpacked and tuned her instruments.

"I'll be right back." Lisa stepped down from the stage. "I'm going to get my name tag."

With a leap, Sam landed next to her sister. "I'll go with you."

The women strolled toward the lobby.

"So, how do you feel about playing at your twenty-fifth high school reunion?" Sam asked.

"Old."

"Aw, c'mon." Sam poked her with an elbow. "You're not *that* old."

Lisa returned the jab. "Easy for you to say. I'll always be older than you."

"But wouldn't you rather just be a guest? I mean — it's your reunion."

"I doubt I would've come if it weren't for the fact the band is playing. You're the one who's been to all your reunions. You should feel right at home tonight."

"But this time I get to see *your* classmates. That's even better," Sam teased. "Hey, were you able to talk Mike into coming?"

"Yeah. I promised to point out a few people I've told him stories about from my high school days."

At the registration table, the volunteer had just finished arranging the name tags in alphabetical order. He saw his former classmate and smiled. "Lisa, how are you? I'm glad we were able to get your band tonight."

While Lisa talked with her friend, Sam perused the name tags. As she picked up her sister's, one near it caught her eye. *Christina Mellekas? She's going to be here? I remember—*

"*May I please have my name tag?*"

"Oh. Sure." Sam handed it over. "Guess what?" she whispered as they walked back to the ballroom. "Tina Mellekas is going to be here."

"Really?" Lisa whispered in reply. "Is that a secret?"

"Um...no."

"Why are we whispering, then?"

Sam shrugged and spoke at a more normal volume. "Will you introduce me to her?"

"Me? I hardly know her myself."

"She was on the track team with you, wasn't she?" Sam asked, though she already knew the answer. Tina had been the star of the team.

“We were more like acquaintances than friends.” Narrowing her eyes, Lisa looked at her sister suspiciously. “Why this sudden interest in meeting Tina? No one has seen her in years.”

“I don’t know. But if she does come, will you introduce me?”

“All right,” Lisa conceded, knowing Sam wouldn’t give up until she agreed.

“Promise?”

Lisa held up her hand with her little finger crooked. “Pinky swear.”

Grinning in victory, Sam locked her baby finger around her sister’s. They’d never reneged on a pinky swear in their lives.

Returning to the ballroom, they joined Robbie, Kyle, and Bryan for a sound check before they finalized the song list for the sets.

Lisa looked at the wall clock. “We have about half an hour before we start, so let’s take a break ’til then.”

“I’m going to go outside and get some fresh air,” Sam informed her sister. “Want to join me?”

“Nah. I’ll stay here and say hi to the early arrivals.”

“Okay.” Sam wandered back to the lobby. Exiting through a door that led to the rear of the hotel, she was happy to discover a large garden area with benches. She sat down and inhaled the fragrant air. *Whatever kind of flowers those are, they sure smell good.* Tucking one leg beneath her, she thought back to the spring of her freshman year in high school.

Because she had to wait for Lisa to give her a ride home, Sam was at track practice every day. She would go to the top row of the bleachers, sit in the farthest corner, and open her books to study. However, not much studying actually got done. She had good intentions and usually accomplished about ten minutes of work before the boys and girls started coming out of the locker rooms. Then, as the books lay open on her lap, her gaze invariably went to the track. From her vantage point, she had an ideal view of the whole field.

Tina Mellekas was, by far, the best athlete on the team. She was always focused, repeating her events as many times as it took to perfect her form. And some form it was.

Sam smiled at the memory.

Long and lean, with jet-black hair pulled back into a ponytail and her face serious in concentration, Tina practiced diligently.

The only person Sam had ever seen crack Tina’s solemn demeanor was her brother, Steven. It was obvious to everyone that the funny, outgoing sophomore idolized his big sister. Steven was on the boys’ track team and he was trying hard to be as proficient at it as his sibling. Every now and then he would sneak up behind Tina and say something that made the reserved girl smile brilliantly. Watching from the bleachers, Sam often wondered what he had said that could cause such an amazing transformation.

Sam had always been fascinated with what made people tick, and Tina Mellekas was definitely intriguing. Though as often as she’d seen the track star practice, she’d never learned much about her.

Maybe tonight I’ll get a second chance.

Sam glanced at her watch. *Uh-oh, I need to get to work.* Jumping up from the bench, she quickly headed back to the ballroom.

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Tina paced around the hotel room for what seemed like the hundredth time.

This wasn't a good idea. I shouldn't be here. Whatever possessed me to think I should come to my high school reunion? I must have been out of my mind. If I stay here arguing with myself much longer, the reunion will be over and I won't have to worry about it.

Just do it, T. Sighing heavily, she left the room and slowly walked to the elevator. Staring at the steel door, she debated whether to press the button or bolt back to her room. At that moment, the door opened and a young couple exited. Tina looked at the empty car. *Well, there's a sign if ever there was one. I guess I'm destined to go to this reunion.* Taking a deep breath, she stepped into the elevator.

Disembarking at the lobby, she heard music coming from her left and followed the sound. At the entrance of the ballroom, she stopped and leaned against the door frame. The familiar feeling of being on the outside looking in settled over her as she surveyed the scene. The party was in full swing. Most of the attendees were dancing to music being played by a band onstage in the front of the room. *What song is that? Something that was a hit on the radio when I was in school...can't think of the name of it.* She recognized many of her old classmates and chuckled to herself as she noticed they were grouped into the same cliques they had belonged to in high school. Seeing a relatively unoccupied space near the back, Tina forced her feet to move. *If I can just get over there and hang around for a little while, I'll consider this a success.*

"Class of '74 rules!"

The shout from the crowd made Sam smile as she wiped the sweat from her face. The band was well into their second set. They had begun the night with soft background music during dinner. Now they were providing dance tunes, mostly from the seventies and early eighties. Soon they would be shifting into Sam's favorites — sixties classics. Placing her damp towel next to her sax stand, she reflected on the evening thus far. She had seen quite a few people she remembered from Lisa's class and was astonished at how different some of them looked, most notably the football player, Timmy Grant. He'd been extremely popular in high school and dozens of girls had had crushes on him. And there he was with a pudgy belly and practically bald. *You never can tell how people are going to turn out.*

Tina observed the proceedings from the back of the room. Several people came up and talked briefly with her, but otherwise, she kept to herself. The noise level dropped abruptly as a song ended and the leader of the band made an announcement. Tina's attention drifted to the stage. *Isn't that Lisa from the track team? Yeah. And there...the blonde guitar player...that's her sister. Hmm, she cut her hair.*

"All right, folks," Lisa said into the microphone, "we're going to do one more and then take a short break. However, we'll be back with lots more dance music, so don't go away." A cheer erupted from the audience as the band launched into a golden oldie.

Tina couldn't believe it. "Wild Thing"? Memories of her brother playing air guitar to that very song flickered through her mind. *I miss you, Steven. So many things remind me of you. Nothing's been the same...nothing.*

Sam looked out at the throng of partying alumni. Her eyes roamed beyond the dance floor to the clusters of people along the sides of the room. Next, she scanned across the back and caught sight of a tall figure. Oh my goodness. She missed the chord change and glanced at her sister. Geez, only three chords in this one, she's going to ask how I could mess that up. When the song was over, Sam hastily put her instrument in its stand and rushed to her sister. "Lisa."

"What is it, Sam? You forgetting how to play the guitar tonight?"

"No. She's here."

"Who's here?"

Sam pulled Lisa close and whispered in her ear, "Tina Mellekas."

"What is it about that woman that makes you whisper?"

"You promised you'd introduce me."

“Let me get Mike and I’ll introduce him, too, then we’re going to get our picture taken. They have a photographer here, just like at a prom. Isn’t that great?”

“Yeah, great.” Sam nudged her sister forward. “Let’s go.”

Lisa meandered through the crowd, eventually locating her husband. She hooked her arm through his and kissed him on the cheek. “Hey, handsome, do you think I could get my picture taken with you? I want proof that you actually attended this shindig.”

“Sure.”

“Are the kids over at Marie’s?”

“Yeah, I’m going to pick them up on the way home. As a matter of fact, I need to get going soon,” he said.

Sam cleared her throat.

Lisa rolled her eyes. “Okay, but first, let’s go say hi to Tina. She was on the track team with me, but she hasn’t been around in years.”

As the trio moved toward the rear of the room, Mike asked his wife, “Where’s she been?”

“Nobody really knows.”

They were almost to where Tina was standing, and a fluttering in Sam’s stomach surprised her. *Why in the heck am I nervous? She was the big track star in high school, but now we’re both adults.*

“Hi, Tina,” Lisa said. “I don’t know if you remember me...”

“Of course I do. From the track team.”

Sam barely heard the rest of their exchange as she concentrated fully on Tina Mellekas. The tall woman was wearing a knee-length, sleeveless black dress that revealed a healthy tan and physically fit body. Dark hair fell naturally over her shoulders and, even though the light was dim, Sam could see a bit of gray over her left temple. She’s going to have a shock of gray hair there soon. As the conversation continued, she examined Tina’s profile. It was exactly as she remembered, except this was much better — being this close. There are probably a thousand words I could use to describe her, but it will only take three to sum it up quite nicely: drop-dead gorgeous.

“And this is my little sister, Samantha.”

The sound of her name drew Sam from her musings.

Tina held out her hand. “Nice to meet you.”

Sam found herself looking into the most beautiful blue eyes she’d ever seen. She managed to reach forward, grasp the offered hand, and say, “N-Nice to meet you, too.”

“Well,” Lisa said, “Mike and I need to go get our picture taken. We’re glad you came tonight, Tina.”

Sam watched with dismay as the couple walked off. They’re leaving me alone with her? What’ll I do now?

There was an extended silence, during which Sam racked her brain for something, anything, to say. She saw that Tina was holding a hotel key card. Hmm...no purse...and she’s staying here at the hotel? Maybe I can ask her about that.

Tina was ready to leave. She’d been at the event less than an hour, but it was more than enough for her. Why is this girl still here? I guess I should say something. “The band is very good.”

Relieved that one of them had finally spoken, Sam responded enthusiastically. “Thanks! We have a strong following locally and a steady amount of work. We do weddings and clubs, really just about anything. My sister started the band years ago and it’s kind of evolved...” Her voice trailed off as she realized she was babbling.

Good Lord, she sure can talk. Tina couldn’t help but grin at the blonde’s exuberance.

As she peeked up to see if the former track star was even listening, Sam’s breath caught. The serious look on Tina’s face had given way to a small grin. *Wow. She has little wrinkles around her eyes when she smiles. And those eyes. ...* Time seemed to stand still. Sam saw pain, sorrow, guilt, and...a good heart. How she saw all that, sensed all that, she didn’t know. It was just very clear. *She’s the one.*

Feeling as if the younger woman were looking right inside her, Tina broke the eye contact. "I think you're needed."

"What?"

"The band." Tina pointed to the musicians returning to the stage.

"Oh, yes. I have to get going. Are you staying for a while?"

"No. This isn't my kind of thing."

Sam's mind was racing, trying to think of what to say to give her an opportunity to see Tina again. The sound of the keyboard disrupted her train of thought. She knew her sister was signaling her to return to work. "Um...I've really got to go."

"Well, don't let me keep you."

I'd love for you to keep me. "Bye." Sam gave a little wave and a smile before she turned and jogged to the stage.

Tina made her way to the door. That one would be trouble. Good thing I'm out of here on Monday. She stopped to take a final look around. The band had started playing a popular sixties tune, and it seemed like everybody in the room was dancing, singing, or both.

I still don't fit in here. I shouldn't have tried to come home.

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Sam was exhausted. As usual, the third set had been the longest, and she felt drained and dehydrated. She was soaked with sweat, her bangs sticking to her forehead and shirt clinging to her chest. The band members were the only ones left in the ballroom. Even the hotel personnel had finished cleaning up and were gone. This was always the most difficult part of the night for Sam. Instruments had to be packed, yards and yards of cords wound, and then everything had to be loaded into Robbie's and Bryan's trucks. It didn't matter how tired they all were, it was part of the job.

Lisa called out, "I'm going to get us some drinks. I'll be right back."

While she was getting the refreshments, the rest of the musicians moved the gear over to a side door where the trucks could pull up. Sitting on the amps and equipment boxes, they chatted as they waited for the bandleader.

Lisa returned carrying a tray full of beverages. "Here we go — a well-deserved drink after a hard night's work."

Sam accepted a bottle of water and took a big gulp. "Thanks, sis, I needed that."

"No problem." Lisa took a swallow of beer. "By the way, guess who I saw in the bar?"

"Who?"

"Tina."

"Really?"

"Really."

"Um...Lisa?"

"Yes?"

"Would you do me a favor and take my guitar and sax home for me?"

"Suddenly feel the need for a drink from the bar, huh?"

Sam felt a blush rise to her cheeks. "Well, maybe just one."

"Be careful, okay?"

"I will."

Lisa smiled as her sister dashed out of the ballroom. *I saw the twinkle in your eye when you looked at her. I just hope you meant it when you said you'd be careful.*

The bar was almost deserted and Sam had no trouble spotting Tina seated at the far end.

The bartender hustled over to his new customer. "Good evening, miss. What can I get for you?"

"I'll have a light beer, and please give the lady," she glanced at Tina, "another of whatever she's drinking."

"She's made it pretty clear she doesn't want company," the bartender said as he served Sam her beer. "You sure?"

"Yeah, I'm sure." Sam saw that Tina had changed into jeans and a white V-neck tee shirt. Can it be possible that she looks even better now than she did in that black dress? Heck, she'd look good in a burlap sack. Sam paid for the drinks, took her beer, and headed in Tina's direction. Okay, you wanted a chance to talk to her again and here it is. Now, what in the world are you going to say?

Tina was monitoring Sam's approach in her peripheral vision. The blonde had a compact, athletic build and she walked with a spring in her step. Her hair, cut in a short, layered fashion, was still damp with sweat, as was her shirt. She had expressive green eyes and a smile that lit up her face.

Sam sat in the empty chair next to Tina. "Hi."

"So, we meet again."

"Um...yeah."

The bartender put a beer in front of Tina. "Compliments of the little lady."

The dark-haired woman nodded at Sam. "Thanks."

"You're welcome. I...I want you to know, I think it's great that you came to the reunion."

"Why?"

"Well, you're one of the few people from Lisa's class that I distinctly remember. I always got a ride home from school with my sister, so I used to be at track practice every day. I just wondered how you were doing."

Tina stared at the TV above the bar and didn't reply.

She sure isn't making this easy. Sam decided to be more blunt. "I'd...um...like for us to be friends."

"Friends?"

"Why not? Unless you seniors are still worried about being seen hanging around with freshmen."

Tina looked at the rows of liquor bottles, her drink, the bartender, anything but the woman next to her. She's so wholesome. I'd ruin her life in nothing flat. "I don't think that would be a good idea. Besides, I'm leaving Monday morning."

"Are you busy tomorrow night?"

"Tomorrow night?" Tina immediately tried to think of a feasible excuse.

"Yeah, it's the big Labor Day celebration. It's fun. All summer there are concerts at the park. On the last weekend, the orchestra performs and there's a fireworks display. It's really cool. I'm in the orchestra, but I could pick you up and bring you to the park. You can listen to the concert and then we can watch the fireworks together. I'll even make a picnic dinner. I—"

"Look," Tina cut in harshly, "I'm not sure why you're doing this. We don't even know each other." She instantly regretted the remark when she saw the dejected look on Sam's face. Lighten up, T. You came to this reunion thinking it might be the first step in getting your life in order. And here is somebody actually making an effort to know you, maybe even become a friend. Don't push her away.

The air-conditioning in the bar kicked on and Sam shivered.

"Are you cold?"

"It's okay. I'm fine."

Tina regarded Sam's damp shirt and raised an eyebrow at the obvious lie. "Here." She removed her jacket from the back of her chair. "Put this on."

The blonde put her hands up in protest. "Oh, no. I'll get it all sweaty."

Tina stood and held out the brown suede jacket. "C'mon. A little sweat won't hurt it. It's the least I can do for the gracious woman who bought me a drink."

"Well, all right." Sam slipped her arms into the sleeves of the coat. Oh, my. This is nice. "Thank you."

"What time is the concert?"

"It starts at seven thirty, but I'd need to be there around six forty-five for the orchestra."

"Okay."

"Okay?"

"Yes. Okay. I'll go."

The smile that brightened Sam's face made Tina glad she'd said yes. *It won't kill me to go, and if it makes her that happy, well, it's worth it.*

"How about if I pick you up here at the hotel at six thirty? What kind of sandwich do you want?"

"Whatever you're having will be fine."

The bartender came over to check on his customers. "Can I get you anything else, ladies? Last call."

"No, thanks," they replied in unison.

"Well, I guess I should get going." Sam began to take off the jacket.

"Leave it on. I'll walk you to your car."

"That's not necessary. I—"

"Are you coming or not?" Tina strode toward the exit.

Hmm. You like to get your own way. Sam had to jog to catch up with the long-legged woman. "Do you always stay up this late?" she asked as they walked through the lobby and out of the hotel.

"A lot of times, yes. I don't sleep very well."

"Oh." *Wonder what that's all about.* Sam stopped next to her Toyota, took off the suede coat and gave it to Tina. "Thanks for letting me wear this. I'll pick you up tomorrow night at six thirty, right?"

"Yes."

"Good night."

"Good night, Samantha."

Tina watched as Sam got in the car and drove away. She waited until the vehicle was out of sight before she returned to the hotel.

Sam looked in the rearview mirror as long as she could. She could see Tina standing there until she made the turn onto the main road. *Samantha...I like the way she says that.*