

## The Soldier's Sweetheart: A Single Dad Romance (Serendipity Sweethearts)

By Deb Kastner

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But when the widower goes to work for a local beauty, he gets much, much more. Samantha Howell is ready with a helping hand for everyone else, but insists on taking care of her problems on her own. Will wants to be her hero, but too much stands in their way. For a future with Samantha, he has to bury the past. But forgiving himself may be his most difficult mission ever....

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## **Bibliography**

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### Editorial Review

#### About the Author

The only thing that beats a romantic happily-ever-after ending is a happily-ever-after ending in Christ. Writing for Harlequin's Love Inspired series line, Deb Kastner strives to create a cord of three strands between the hero, the heroine, and the Lord.

Deb lives and writes in beautiful Colorado. She shares her life with her biggest blessings--her family--her husband Joe, their three daughters, a preschool-aged granddaughter and a baby grandson. Getting writing time in is challenging, but playing pat-a-cake with a baby and singing the ABC song for the hundred-millionth time can't be beat!

Deb is currently working on her 18th novel for Harlequin's Love Inspired line. She's thrilled that most of her backlist is now available for the Kindle. She feels especially blessed to be able to include faith as a natural and genuine part of her characters lives.

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*Sell Sam's Grocery?*

Samantha Howell snorted in outrage and crumpled the fancy-shmancy letter, written on white-linen paper, in her fist.

*Over her dead body.*

Her stomach tightened into uncomfortable knots, the same as it always did when she heard the name Stay-n-Shop. Didn't these people know what the word *no* meant? Just because they were a large corporation didn't mean they could walk over the little people, did it?

Actually, it kind of did. In fact, that was exactly what it meant. And unfortunately for Samantha, she was the "little people" in question.

Fury kindled in her chest as she flattened the note with her palm. As much as she wanted to toss the missive in the nearest trash can, she knew she needed to keep it. This wasn't the first time she'd heard from this giant bear of a company, but if they had their way, it would be the last. Stay-n-Shop had taken out a ninety-day option on land just inside the southern border of Serendipity. If she didn't sell to them, they'd "have no choice but to pursue permits and zoning" and begin building a store of their own. In short, the big-box store would drive Sam's Grocery out of business.

She chewed absently on her bottom lip as she reread the letter once again, her thoughts buzzing through her head like a swarm of angry wasps.

What was she going to do to save her store? What *could* she do?

"Excuse me, miss?"

The bell rang over the door and a moment later, a man's deep, unfamiliar voice registered in her ear.

"I'm sorry to disturb you. I'm looking for Samantha Howell. I was told I might find her here." His tone was as smooth as honey, with just the hint of a Texas accent.

"I'm..." she started to say, frantically sliding the crumpled letter under the nearby dry-goods inventory. Her breath hitched as she met the stranger's uncompromising brown-eyed gaze. She swallowed hard, trying to recover her composure.

"... Samantha Howell."

Having lived her whole life in the small town, it was a rare event for her to not recognize someone. Very few visitors ever came through Serendipity, Texas. The town wasn't even on the state map. She knew nearly every customer who frequented the store by name and could recount their lives down to the most current events.

Even more peculiar, she surmised the man was military, despite the fact that he was in street clothes. The severe set of his shoulders, his trim blond hair and the way he clasped his hands behind his back were dead giveaways. And his tan T-shirt was ironed, with a sharp crease lining each sleeve. Only military guys ironed their T-shirts.

She wondered which branch of the service he was in. Before leaving for Fort Benning for Basic Combat Training, her brother, Seth, had tried to enlighten her on the differences between the branches. At the time, she hadn't really been paying attention. Her brother was always talking about Army this or Army that.

To Samantha, military was military. She appreciated their service to the country, and she hung up her flag every Memorial Day and Fourth of July just like any other homegrown patriot would do, but it had all been lip service, without any truly meaningful connection to her real life.

Once Seth enlisted, that changed.

Now every newscast about the American troops, every update on the radio, was personal. It was frightening. It was family.

*Seth.*

In a matter of milliseconds, Samantha went from being curious about a handsome stranger to completely panicked over a brother living in consistently deadly conditions. She felt as if she'd been zapped with electricity from an open socket. All thoughts of Stay-n-Shop and her own problems instantly fled.

Was this man here about her brother?

*Oh, dear Lord. Not Seth.*

As the man's solemn gaze held hers, fear and adrenaline jolted her pulse. Her stomach rose into her throat in stinging, nauseating waves, then plunged back down again like a giant, out-of-control roller coaster.

The stranger's expression was grim, his mouth a thin, straight line slashing across hard, angular features. She could read nothing reassuring in his eyes and horrible scenarios spread like wildfire through her mind.

It couldn't be. Not her brother.

Seth had only entered the Army infantry last year. Immediately after his advanced training, he'd been deployed to Afghanistan, where he was working under extremely dangerous circumstances, with guns and bombs and who knew what else threatening him on a daily basis.

And now this military man had suddenly appeared, asking for her by name. Didn't the Army send a guy out when—

*Oh, God, she pleaded silently, her heart pounding in her ears as she gasped for breath. No, no, no. Dear Lord, please don't let this be about Seth. Please don't let him be wounded.*

*Or worse.*

Samantha gritted her teeth and shook her head. This couldn't be happening. Not to her sweet, charming baby brother, who'd always been the life of the family.

"Is Seth...?" she started to ask, her raw voice cracking under the strain and tears burning in her eyes. The man wasn't in uniform. Wasn't he supposed to be in uniform? "Where is he? Is he okay?"

Confused, the man's dark blond eyebrows dropped low over his eyes, but then his gaze suddenly widened in comprehension. His throat worked as he searched for words.

"No, ma'am. I mean, yes, ma'am. Seth is fine. That's not why I'm here at all." One side of his mouth twitched with strain as he lifted a hand and shook his head. "I'm sorry I gave you the wrong impression. I can see that I've unintentionally frightened you."

*Frightened her?* He'd scared her half to death with his sober expression. Her heart was pounding so hard she thought he could probably hear it from where he was standing.

"Seth is enjoying his tour of duty—or, at least, as much as a person can find pleasure in their deployment. He was born for military service, as I'm sure you're well aware. He excels in the infantry."

Relief washed over her in waves. This soldier had seen her brother, and Seth was safe and sound.

*Thank You, Lord.*

"Actually," the man continued, shifting from one foot to the other and clearing his throat, "Seth *is* why I'm here, although not for the reason you supposed. I assumed..." He cleared his throat again. "Although in Seth's defense, everything happened rather quickly."

Samantha's relief turned to bewilderment.

*What* had happened quickly? Seth could be airheaded at times, but forgetting to mention he was sending a soldier to their town defied being a card-carrying space cadet, even for him.

"I'm afraid I don't understand." A gross understatement, but a place to start. She leaned forward on her elbows and clasped her hands before her. "Obviously, I'm confused here. Can we begin again?"

The man took a step back and squared his already taut shoulders, as if she'd just invaded his personal space. Or maybe it was a figurative movement, a physical gesture indicating that he was preparing to start their

encounter all over again.

"I'm Corporal—er—William Davenport. I've obviously caught you off guard with my arrival." His eyebrows lowered as he tilted his head toward her. "You don't know why I am here, nor were you aware that I was coming."

It wasn't a question, but Samantha shook her head, silently reevaluating the figure of masculinity blocking the stream of sunlight pouring in from the front glass window. "I'm afraid not, Mr. Davenport. I believe I'm at a distinct disadvantage here."

But she was quickly coming up to speed. Seth, easily diverted, had forgotten to call and let her know that his friend was coming to Serendipity to...

What?

Visit? Pass through town on his way elsewhere? Get some country air before returning to active duty?

It's too bad her parents' bed-and-breakfast wasn't up and running yet. If it was a little closer to their grand opening, this soldier might have been their first paying customer.

Now that Seth's safety wasn't an issue, she realized there was more her brother had neglected to mention—like how easy William Davenport was on the eyes. Even the scar marring his upper lip gave credence to his rough-cut masculinity. Her best friends, Alexis and Mary, would turn green with envy when she told them about her encounter with the man. If she could unobtrusively snap a picture of him with her cell phone before he left, even better. Then she'd really be able to rub it in.

"Please, call me Will," the man continued, breaking into her thoughts. "I'm recently retired from active duty—a civilian now."

*Will.* It was a strong name, fitting for the sturdy man before her. His voice had lowered with his brief explanation, and she had the distinct impression that he was uncomfortable with the civilian status he was declaring.

"I'm here to fill the position you have open."

"I'm sorry?" Samantha queried, so taken aback by his statement that she jerked upright, sending both the dry-goods inventory and her briefly forgotten corporate letter flying. She watched in horror as each piece of paper floated slowly and in what felt like an intentional and deliberate way to the floor—directly in front of Will.

Her chest tightened. Maybe it was silly, but she had her pride, and she didn't like anyone reading her private business. But it had very literally landed at his feet, and there was nothing she could do about it.

It was a given that he had to go and pick up the papers off the floor. What else was there for him to do, since the Stay-n-Shop missive covered the tip of one of his meticulously shined black cowboy boots?

Samantha couldn't tell whether or not he glanced at the letter as he scooped it up. He gave nothing away in his expression and his eyes were dark and unreadable. She fought the urge to reach out and snatch the paper out of his hand, and then decided that would be too obvious a move, calling attention to the fact that she was

uncomfortable with him reading the letter. Instead, she stood frozen, her hands fisted at her sides.

Without a single word, he turned and reached for the other piece of paper. Samantha quietly sighed in relief when he placed the grocery inventory over the legal missive. He spent a good deal more time looking at the dry-goods register, which made her almost as uncomfortable as the thought of him looking at the Stay-n-Shop letter.

His lips pursed briefly, his right eyebrow twitching once before his expression returned to stone. Had Samantha looked away even for a second, she would have missed the odd mix of emotions that momentarily registered on his face.

He lifted his gaze from the inventory and took a long look around the store, apparently taking stock of what Sam's Grocery carried, glancing back and forth between the products on the shelves and the list he still carried in his hand.

Was he judging the place? He gave no further indication one way or another of what he was thinking as he perused the shop.

"This is it, then? Your whole dry-goods inventory?" he asked, handing both pages back to Samantha as if they'd been his to begin with. He had a commanding air about him that Samantha didn't particularly care for. She considered herself a friendly and easygoing woman, but when it came to Sam's Grocery, she was used to being in charge, and she certainly wasn't used to being questioned about the state of her dry-goods inventory—especially by a stranger. Add to that the fact that she'd already had a long and stressful afternoon, and she was ripe for contention.

"Yes," she answered brusquely, not that it was any of his business. "So?"

"I am—I mean, I *was*—a unit supply specialist in the Army. I'm not sure how well that experience is going to segue into working for a small-town grocery, but I'll do my best. You'll find I'm quite diligent in my work habits."

"Yeah—about that." She jumped in before he had the opportunity to elaborate on why he was qualified for this job—the one he mistakenly thought was on the table for him, or worse yet, thanks to her capricious brother, believed was already a signed-and-sealed deal. She was still a little unclear on that point. "I'm not quite sure I understand which position, exactly, you think we have open. As you observed, Serendipity is a small town, and this is a family grocery. We don't have much occasion to hire help here."

Clearing his throat, Will glanced behind him. Samantha followed his gaze and thought she saw a slight shadow flitting across the sunshine pouring in through the glass window, but she quickly brushed it off as nothing. It was probably only some animal scavenging for free treats.

"I guessed this was a family-operated business by the name on the sign outside. You're Samantha, the owner of the place and Seth's sister. That's the reason I asked specifically for you."

"Yup, that's me. My parents, Samuel and Amanda, recently retired and left the grocery to me," Samantha explained. "It's something of a legacy."

"Indeed."

Was he being condescending? Samantha's hackles rose until she met his earnest gaze—not warm, by any means, but sincere and intense.

"And do you do this all by yourself, or do you have other employees?"

"I have a woman who comes in and prepares the fresh deli products—you know, potato salad and cooked hens and the like. We sell baked goods acquired by the local cafe. My parents come in a couple of days a week to help out." She gestured to the rest of the store. "Other than that, you're looking at her—manager, stocker, cashier and bag-person," she said, relaxing a little. Maybe if she smiled at him he'd lose some of the somber tension from his face.

Smiles were supposed to be viral, right?

"Seth spoke of you often," Will commented in the rich, quiet manner that Samantha was beginning to realize was his normal tone of voice—not at all what she'd expect from an Army guy, based on what she knew of her brother.

"I'm sorry I can't say the same," Samantha said, regarding Will with new eyes. "Unfortunately, Seth neglected to mention you."

"He said you work too hard and never get a break, and frankly, he's worried about you. That's part of the reason I'm here—to take some of that burden from you."

As he spoke, Samantha noticed that Will's lips naturally turned down at the corners—they didn't lend themselves to an easy grin.

"Seth and I realized we could assist each other in what could possibly be an advantageous relationship for both of us," he continued. "Besides, you know your brother—once he gets something in his mind, it's hard to convince him otherwise." Will shrugged one shoulder. "So here I am."

"I see," she replied, though in truth, she didn't. The way Will was speaking, it almost sounded like he was here against his better judgment.

It was definitely against Samantha's. She wished Seth was here so she could knock him in the head. What was he thinking, sending someone who was probably a slap-happy, risk-taking adrenaline junkie to fill what was, for the most part, a repetitive and predictable position?

A *slow* job. Not that an employment opportunity really existed, but even if it did, nothing in Serendipity moved fast, nor did it change much from day to day. She couldn't imagine how Will would adapt to such sluggish surroundings.

## **Users Review**

### **From reader reviews:**

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