

“Heart Strings”

by

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Had Samantha Sunday not been in the front hallway, the gentle knock on her door may have gone unnoticed. Latching her sinewy fingers around the handle, she tugged at the door, which caught on the Polynesian area rug beneath it. She would have moved the rug a long time ago, if not for the fragile and heavy monk’s chair that anchored it in place. She despised the chair. It was the one piece of furniture she wished Richard had taken with him. But its high value kept her from moving it, which risked breaking an arm or a leg. No, that would be blamed on the movers when she would eventually sell it. And so the rug remained at the mercy of the chair.

“Good evening. Are you Samantha?” asked the slight man on the other side of the door; his voice emerged from deep within his throat, thick and determined.

“Yes. You must be Paul. Please come in.” Samantha stepped aside while Paul reached down with his right hand, picked up his guitar case, and maneuvered his way through the door.

“Lovely home you have, Ms. Sunday.” Paul tipped his head toward Samantha, who watched with intrigue as dark curls tumbled to his forehead when he removed his black wool beret.

“Thank you, and please call me Samantha. We’ll use the study. It’s this way.”

Samantha turned and led him through the living room, pacing herself to not appear too anxious.

The bookshelves along the wall displayed several classics by Faulkner, Hemingway, and Browning on the top shelves. A number of Frank Lloyd Wright-style architecture books that Richard had left behind remained on the bottom shelves. Next month the librarian at the university was to sort through them; they were taking up valuable shelf space. The rest of the shelves were lined with Samantha’s collection of romance novels. She hadn’t displayed them while married, and they were now meant as an inspiration for her to return to writing after a fifteen-year hiatus. Several of her manuscripts, dating back to the seventies, rested in a box in the attic. At the time, she was living in Southern California and publishers were showing interest, but Richard showed more interest, and she was swept away to Arizona by the illusion of the perfect life he presented. The manuscripts, along with her guitar, blue jean cutoffs, and tapestries, had been boxed up and stored in the attic of their new house when they moved to Arizona. The tide of the Pacific coastline had ripped her abandoned dreams out to sea when she married Richard and left California, leaving Samantha as a housewife dressed in Chanel and entertaining Richard’s business associates with delightful hors d’oeuvres and saucy baked salmon dishes that he never knew were prepared by the local market.

When they first moved in and Richard was away on business, Samantha would sneak up into the attic and pour through the boxes to reconnect with the girl who had retreated deep inside her. On the rare occasion that she talked to Richard about revisiting the manuscripts, her words were met with chuckles and reminders that she wasn’t a

gypsy dream chaser anymore. And, oh, don't forget Mr. McCormick and the missus were coming to dinner on Friday. As the years became decades, she visited the memories less often and eventually forgot that they sat in a box ten feet above her head.

After reaching the end of the narrow hallway, she turned into the second door on the left, the study. The other doors were closed, had been for several years. Some of the rooms had been empty and dark since the day they moved in, while others had contained hobby items of Richard's. The movers loaded those items in their truck, closing the doors behind them when they left. But the study door was left ajar on most days.

"You can put your case down anywhere you'd like," Samantha instructed as she turned on a Tiffany lamp that was given as an anniversary gift. Their fifth, she thought. The lamp sat on an end table by the lightly worn brown leather couch. The drawn curtains filtered in an adequate amount of sunlight. Opening and closing blinds each morning and evening became a tiresome effort that she had given up on long ago.

"This will do," Paul gestured toward the couch. There was only one other chair, which sat in a tight corner, a wooden desk chair that rocked back and forth as effortlessly as it swiveled.

"Fine. Can I get you something to drink?"

"Water would be good. Wet my whistle, so to speak," Paul said as he made himself comfortable on the couch.

Samantha watched his hands deftly open the guitar case and retrieve his Taylor 712 six-string guitar. She admired its Indian rosewood back and sides before leaving the room to fetch her own guitar, a classic 1965 Martin 21 acoustic, and his glass of water.

Reentering the study and anxious to begin, Samantha said, “I heard you playing while I was in the kitchen. Pleasant sound.” She smiled at him as she placed his glass of water on a ceramic coaster next to the Tiffany lamp.

“Don’t worry. We’ll have you playing your favorite songs in no time.” Paul eased over, making room for her on the couch. “I usually make my students sit in straight-backed chairs, but this will work.”

Samantha looked at the printed sheet of note and chord samples on the music stand in front of her. “Is that what I’m learning today?” she asked. The note and chord dots on the grid resembled a partially played game of checkers.

“Yes, some of it. How much do you remember from when you used to play?”

“That was so long ago. Another lifetime, really. I don’t remember much of the chords and notes, but I guess they’ll come back to me as we go.”

Paul reached across and placed his finger on the bars that lay across the neck of her guitar. “As a reminder, these are the frets. They’re numbered one, two, three, four, and so on,” he explained as he ran his fingers along the neck and downward, slipping over each fret as he counted. “And this is the soundhole.” His finger had made its way down the neck to the opening of the body.

“Yes, I remember,” Samantha said, eyeing his hands. They weren’t just strong; they seemed to create pleasure in what they touched, each movement made with intention.

Paul swept his hand back up to the top of her guitar and took one of the six pegs between his fingers, “These are the tuning pegs. They’re for adjusting the strings, which tune the guitar.”

“Okay,” Samantha said, refocusing on the guitar. “Frets, soundhole, and tuning pegs. Yup, it’s all coming back to me now. Well, the parts anyway,” Samantha said, impatient for the awkward reacquaintance of her favorite instrument to pass.

Paul gripped his guitar and began strumming. His pick sat loosely between his fingers, flowing across the strings with purpose. “Each string plays an integral part of creating a song,” he began to explain, breathing his words with the same fluid motion. “We’ll go over notes and chords later. Right now I just want you to strum your guitar. Don’t worry about how it sounds. Just play so you can get used to the feel of the strings, the weight in your hands, and the pick. Like this.” Soft sounds emanated from his guitar. One, two, three, four. One, two, three, four. Samantha followed suit.

“You’re getting it,” he smiled warmly. “Are you sure you haven’t played more recently?”

“Yes, I’m quite sure,” Samantha laughed. “Haven’t played since the days of my blue jean cutoffs.”

“Ah, that long ago? I used to love my old jean cutoffs. Levi’s, of course.”

“Mine were so worn out. I’d pull each frayed string one by one around the edge until it caught on the seam and I’d have to yank it off.”

“Where’d you play?”

“Mostly with friends on the beaches in Southern California.” Samantha ran her hands along the body of her guitar, remembering a time when a day didn’t go by that she didn’t hold it. “We thought we were so good, but it didn’t really matter if we were or not. We were having fun.”

The next hour of listening to Paul play and talk consumed her attention like a child at a puppet show. Absorbed with creating music, she fell into his rhythm and relearned the simple notes and chords she hadn't experienced in a long while. Her house had been so empty, so quiet, for so long. She was taken aback by the blatant change and by the kindness of the wholesome man who sat on her couch, drawing her in like fall's equatorial undercurrent.

"I'd forgotten how much this means to me," she told him when the hour was up. She looked at his eyes, his face, his hands—her own hands wrapped tenderly around the peak of the neck and the body of the instrument embraced between her long legs.

"You did great. Next time it'll be even easier. You'll see." Paul leaned over and collapsed his music stand. His hands trembled as he placed it on the floor next to the guitar case. The curls atop his forehead flopped to the other side, blocking his eyes from Samantha's view until the backside of his hand brushed them away. "By then your calluses will have developed too," he added before taking a final sip of water.

"Oh, great," she said, looking down at her soft fingers. She somehow knew it'd be worth it though.

Paul packed his Taylor 712 away in its case and clutched the music stand in his hand. "Practice, practice, practice," he said.

"Fifty dollars for today, right?" Samantha removed her wallet from her purse.

"Yes, that'll do." Paul took the cash from her hand and placed it in his shirt's left pocket. He stopped at the front door to retrieve his beret, under which he tucked his curls, and walked out of the door without looking back. Samantha watched as he walked down

the driveway, wondering if he'd turn. When all he did was pause for a brief moment before continuing, she stepped inside and contemplated moving the area rug once again.

Simple tunes devoured Samantha's practice time over the next several days. Her days filled with volunteering at the library, another avenue to reinvigorate her writing. Except for a few telemarketers, she didn't receive phone calls. Nor did she spend much time on her computer, a laptop her sister, Amanda, had given her as a birthday present years ago. An occasional e-mail from Amanda was all that filled her inbox. Samantha's so-called friends while she was married kept their allegiances to Richard after the divorce, given that their husbands were friends and business associates of his. Most of the wives couldn't pick their own brand of mouthwash, let alone their own friends. Samantha was different though. Always had been, and when Richard left her, not one of the wives called. They'd signed on for their perfect life and were determined to keep it so. Occasionally, she'd see one of them in the grocery store with their kids hanging onto the cart, begging for candy or Lucky Charms. The wife of the day would act distracted when Samantha passed by. Kids were terrific camouflage.

Three years after the divorce, Samantha remained in the house they'd bought when they had wed. She'd thought about selling it, but she didn't know where else to live. Thanks to her attorney, the settlement she received from the divorce allotted her the freedom of not having to work. Other than her sister, she had no family left, and she sure as hell didn't want to move to Wyoming. No, Arizona worked just fine.

During each evening leading up to her next lesson, Samantha strummed the steel strings of her Martin, thinking about Paul's hands, the way he balanced his leg on the ball of his

foot while he played, and the way his fingers stroked the strings, creating music that left her wanting to hear more.

“Good evening,” Samantha said as Paul made his way through her front door once again. He removed his beret, unveiling the glossy locks that made Samantha’s knees turn to milk. This time she thought she spotted a twinkle in the green eyes beneath them.

The couch in the study felt smaller than it had the week before. Her Martin lay on the floor, strings exposed as it sat in its open case the same way the frayed strings of her jean cutoffs exposed her California tanned legs, luring men on the beach to sit on her tapestry decades ago.

“Let’s spend the first few minutes tuning your guitar. I’m assuming you practiced quite a bit,” Paul said. He fished out a small battery-operated tuning device and turned it on. Green and yellow lights lit up like an airport’s landing strip. “Okay, strum your sixth string,” he said, holding the gauge close to her strings. Samantha gripped her pick and stroked it across the bottom string. The lights all turned green.

“Perfect. Next string.” And so on up, each string created a flash of green lights. “Are you sure you practiced?” he asked. “Each string is still in tune.” Now the twinkle amongst the green backdrop of his eye was evident.

Samantha grinned. “Yes, I’m sure. It must be my touch,” she replied. “Maybe I’m not doing it right.”

“No, I doubt that’s the problem. Let’s get to work then.” Paul placed the sheet of notes and chords on the music stand and pointed to the G note. “We’re going to start with this one today,” he said. Samantha emulated Paul’s positioning on his guitar and stroked the string that created the G note.

“Perfect,” Paul said. “Let’s go on to some of the other notes so you can start putting them together into a song.” He turned the page on the music stand. “Sorry I don’t have a beach for you.”

Samantha started to speak, but Paul winked at her, leaving her words on her lips. Her worries of fumbling along were assuaged by Paul’s presence. He masterfully generated harmony from his instrument that wrapped the room like a warm blanket. Years of accumulated loneliness dissipated with each strike of a chord, each glance at his hands, each tune created.

“How ’bout ‘Anticipation,’ and ‘Brown Eyed Girl’?” Samantha begged when Paul asked her what songs she wanted to learn.

“That’s certainly enthusiastic!” was all he said, but the next week he brought songbooks from the seventies. They sang along, laughing when out of tune, smiling when they’d hit a note correctly. The finger positioning grew complicated, yet Paul consistently managed to teach her to adapt by showing her tricks of the trade. A lightening of her spirit radiated; the sensation was surreal and engulfed her body inside out. An inner knowing of peace had arrived, but she was not ready to share it with anyone—as though doing so would risk losing it. She went to bed that night knowing she had been transformed, and for the first time since she left California, she felt excitement toward the days that lay ahead.

The only recent drop of the attic’s ladder was when Samantha retrieved her guitar. The box she climbed the ladder to recover on Thursday morning sat in the far corner, where it had been placed over twenty years ago and was simply marked, “Manuscripts. 1972–

1974.” Next to it, a smaller box was marked, “Tapestries.” Both boxes were brought down to the study.

Clearing the antique secretary next to the window, Samantha piled the manuscripts in order by date. The first one, “Heart Strings,” spanned over two hundred pages. Much of that manuscript was penned late at night in her studio apartment. Built over a garage near Venice Beach, the apartment was her first place as an adult. Slanted ceilings created ambiance, she convinced herself when she moved in after her parents’ death, never returning to the home she had grown up in. That house was later sold and the funds were split between the sisters. Samantha paid her way through UCLA, while Amanda moved to Wyoming and never looked back.

Yellow-stained paper didn’t deter Samantha as she began typing the text before her onto her laptop, starting with the cover page: “Heart Strings, by Samantha Sunday.” There were five manuscripts in all, each originally typed on a manual typewriter. She’d start with the top one and see where it led her. Without a thought, Samantha leaned over and drew the curtains open, allowing a thick ray of sun to stream across the tattered papers.

The following Monday, a warm spring day for early May, Paul’s beret came off as it had every other week. The same dark curls relaxed against the forehead beneath them. And the same couch welcomed the musicians.

“Is there anything in particular you’d like to work on today?” Paul asked her as he sat in his spot on the couch.

“Yeah, will you teach me a love song?” Samantha asked as she tugged at the strings of her faded cutoff jeans.