

the secret life of Samantha McGregor
BOOK THREE

playing
with fire

a novel

melody carlson



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Author's Note

I normally don't include a letter in my books, but because *The Secret Life of Samantha McGregor* series treads on some new territory, I want to make a few things as clear as possible.

First of all, this book is *fiction*—it's simply a story that's meant to entertain and to possibly point out some spiritual truths—but it is *not* a theological study on the proper use of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. While I do believe in the gifts of the Holy Spirit and in God's desire for all of us to do many wonderful things, I also realize that Samantha's gift, her ability to receive dreams and visions from God, is extremely rare. But it does make for a good story!

Second, my hope is that you won't envy Samantha's unusual gift or seek it for yourself, since that would be totally wrong! Don't forget that God is the giver of every good and perfect gift, and *He's* the One who decides who gets what and when it's appropriate to use. If you go around searching for your own gifts, you can put yourself at serious risk. Satan masquerades as an angel of light and delights in tricking those who look for gifts in the wrong places. Don't let that be you.

More than anything, I hope you'll follow Samantha's example by seeking out God and a committed relationship with Him. I hope you'll desire to walk closely with God every day, to make Him your best friend, and to be ready for whatever adventures and gifts He has in store for you. Just make sure they come from God!

And finally, remember that the Bible is our ultimate source for answers to all of life's questions. That's why I've included more Scripture in this series than usual. Also, please check out the resources and discussion questions in the back of this book.

I pray that this fictional journey will draw your heart closer to God and that He will be your lifeline—for today and for always!

Best blessings!

Melody Carlson

A Word from Samantha

The first time it happened, I thought it was pretty weird but kind of cool. The second time it happened, I got a little freaked. The third time it happened, I became seriously scared and had sort of a meltdown. That's when my mom decided to send me to a shrink. She thought I was going crazy. And I thought she was right for a change.

Turns out it was just God. Okay, not just God. Because, believe me, God is way more than just anything. Still, it was hard to explain this weird phenomenon to my mom or the shrink or anyone. It still is. Other than my best friend, Olivia, I don't think most people really get me.

But that's okay, because I know that God gets me. For that reason I try to keep this part of my life under wraps. For the most part anyway.

A Word from the Word...

And ye shall know that I am in the midst of Israel, and that I am the LORD your God, and none else: and my people shall never be ashamed. And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh; and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions: And also upon the servants and upon the handmaids in those days will I pour out my spirit. (Joel 2:27-29, RSV)

My eyes sting from the heat. I blink and rub at them, trying to see what's in front of me, but there's so much smoke I feel blind. And there's a nasty acrid smell that burns my throat as I attempt to breathe. It smells like something very bad is burning, something I shouldn't be inhaling.

As I stumble along, I try to hold my breath. I know that I need to escape this place—*fast!* But then I trip over a wooden crate and fall smack down onto what feels like a filthy cement floor. It's sticky and grimy down here with, I'm guessing, years' worth of crud ingrained into the surface.

Despite the filth, I think maybe I'm safer down here. I recall a fireman, back when I was little, telling our class that the smoke isn't as bad if you stay low. So I continue searching for the exit, crawling on my hands and knees. The air has gotten so thick that it feels like I'm fighting my way through a heavy curtain of murky darkness. I pull the neck of my T-shirt up over my face in an attempt to cover my nose and mouth. I can't see a thing except for the eerie red glow off to my left, and I need to get away from that—it's dangerous, deadly, and evil.

I must keep moving in the opposite direction of the fire. My time is limited, and I need to get out of here—now! Shards of glass cut into my hands and knees as I creep along, and I keep bumping into cardboard boxes and plastic bottles and other sorts of unknown debris cluttering the place. It seems as if someone has been in here knocking things over, throwing things about, creating a huge mess that has become my obstacle course...or perhaps my deathtrap if I don't escape.

I can't give up I tell myself as I continue navigating through my smoky prison. There must be a door somewhere. If I got into this place, there has to be a way out. I just wish I knew where it is. I inch my way forward, upright on my knees now, my arms outstretched and flailing in front of me. If only I could find a wall to follow. Something that would lead me to a door or a window, anything that could get me out of here.

The heat is almost unbearable now. It feels like the back of my shirt is melting into my skin, like my lungs are about to collapse. And the putrid stench makes me want to vomit. I suddenly wonder if this is what hell would feel like and how anyone could endure such torture. Is that where I am right now—in hell? But why? Why would I be in hell? Why would God allow that?

Finally my hands feel what seems to be a wall. I rise to my feet and quickly use the rough wooden surface to guide me. Splinters pierce my fingers, but that's minor compared to the burning heat and the deadly smell. I work my way along this wall until I reach what I think is a window. It's about three feet from the floor and feels as if a heavy, canvaslike cloth is covering the glass. I tug at the cloth,

but it's securely attached by what seem to be nails. Why would someone nail a window covering down?

And then I hear a loud sizzling, crackling noise behind me, back where the fire is increasing by the second. It's a menacing sound...almost demonic, like it wants to devour me, to burn me alive. I pound my fists against the cloth over the window, hoping to loosen this covering and force open the window and—

An earsplitting explosion knocks me off my feet, and I smack into the window.

When I come to my senses, I am lying facedown outside. I don't know how much time has passed, but I'm on pavement that's cool and damp, probably from a recent rain. I can tell that it's night by the darkness and the streetlight several feet away. The ground's wetness is such a welcome relief after the inferno I just escaped and the horrible explosion that I felt certain was going to kill me. But when I slowly roll over onto my back and open my eyes, I see by the glow of the streetlight that what I thought was water is actually my own blood. Bright red blood is flowing everywhere, like a river coming straight out of me. My arms and legs and entire body are sliced and shredded, probably a result of that explosion and my crashing through the window. I become dizzy from looking at the pool of my own blood, or perhaps it's simply from the loss of it. No human can possibly survive so much blood loss without medical assistance. Without help, I will die.

I attempt to scream, but my voice feels small and weak...and the street is completely vacant and quiet, not a car or pedestrian in sight. No one who can possibly come to my rescue.

“Dear God,” I sob, “please, please, help me! Help me!”
Then I lay my head back and close my eyes, preparing to die, because it won’t be long now. It won’t be long...

“*Samantha!*” Someone’s shaking me. “*Samantha!*”

I open my eyes once again, and my mother’s face hovers over me with a worried expression. I blink and sit up, realizing that I am safe and in my own bed. I look down at my arms and see that I’m not cut. I’m not bleeding.

“*Are you okay?*” Mom sits next to me on the bed. “I heard you screaming in your sleep. Sounds like you were having a pretty bad dream.”

I’m still trying to catch my breath, to slow down my heart rate.

“Are you okay?” she asks again.

I nod.

My mom’s face grows even more troubled now. “Was it one of *those* dreams?”

I know what she means by “those” dreams. I also know that she’d probably rather not hear about it, but I’m still so shaken, so frightened, that I need to talk. “I don’t know. All I know is that it was horrid.”

“Do you want to tell me about it?”

I frown. “Do you really want to hear?”

She sort of shrugs. “I’m awake... You might as well tell me.”

So I describe the dream to her, and her frown lines grow deeper as she listens. “That was awful. Do you think it means anything?”

“I don’t know, Mom. I never saw anyone else in the dream. Usually those dreams are warnings for someone else. But it’s like I was all alone in this one.”

“Surely you don’t think something like that could happen to you, do you?”

“I don’t know. I mean, I suppose the warning could be for me. And if I ever got into a situation that felt anything like that, well, I’d probably remember this dream and get out of there before things got worse.”

Mom sighs, pressing her lips together, and I can tell that I’ve pushed her beyond her comfort zone.

“The important thing to keep in mind,” I tell her, “is that when God gives me prophetic dreams, it’s almost always to help someone or to prevent something bad from happening.”

She just shakes her head, and I can tell she doesn’t get it, doesn’t want to get it, and I’m guessing she’d like to go back to bed. “Isn’t there a good chance that it was simply a nightmare, Samantha?”

“Maybe...”

“Can you go back to sleep now?” She glances at my alarm clock. “It’s not even four yet.”

“Yeah, I’ll read my Bible for a while.” I force a smile for her benefit. “That always makes me feel better.”

“Okay.” Then she leans over and kisses me on the forehead, something she hasn’t done since I was little and she would put me to bed. “Hope you have some better dreams now.”

“Me too.”

Although I try to appear brave and like I’m perfectly fine, I am haunted by that dream. It felt like the real deal. Yet how can I know for sure? And if it really was from God, what does it mean? Was it meant for me or somebody else?

Before I read my Bible, I get out my special notebook and carefully record all that I can remember from the dream. Just in case this really is a warning of some sort. But to be honest, I seriously hope it's not. The horror of that fire, the smell of that caustic smoke, the idea of being cut up like that and then bleeding to death... Well, it's pretty disturbing stuff.

Sometimes I wonder why God lets me in on these things. My friend Detective Ebony Hamilton says it must be because He can trust me with important things like this, but sometimes I feel more like I'm being tormented. Oh, I try not to think that consciously, because I do feel honored, and I sure don't want God to take this gift away from me. But sometimes, particularly on nights like this when it's hard to go back to sleep after such a vivid dream, I do sort of wonder. Then I remind myself that God's ways are way higher than mine, and even when it doesn't make sense to me, He knows what He's doing. I just need to trust Him.

I also need to pray. And so I do tonight. Usually when I've had a dream or vision like that, I pray for the person involved in the dream, whether I know them by name or simply by remembering the image I saw. The problem with tonight's dream is that there never really seemed to be anyone besides me. So I just pray for the people on my prayer list instead. I go through several of them and finally really lock into praying for my brother, Zach. He's due to come home in less than a week, so I pray that his stint in rehab has changed him for good. I pray that Zach will submit his heart to God and allow Him to direct his life and that God will open lots of exciting new doors for Zach.

After I finish praying, I can't get my older brother out of my head. And it's hard not to get sad when I think about his life. It's even harder to accept the fact that he had a serious methamphetamine addiction. And that it could've sent him to jail for a long time if Ebony hadn't intervened. Ebony used to be my dad's partner on the force, back before he was killed. Consequently, she has a soft spot for our family. And since her brother runs a rehab place up in Washington State, she worked it out so that Zach could go up there for treatment last December.

Originally Zach went in for what was supposed to be sixty days, but then he signed up for an additional thirty. Ebony assured us it was a really good sign that he was serious about recovery. And as I continue to pray for my brother tonight, I feel more hopeful than usual. I try to imagine us being a family again—sharing meals, watching a movie, laughing at old jokes... Oh, I realize it'll never be the same as when Dad was alive, but maybe it will make Mom happier. I can only hope.

The next morning I feel extra tired as Olivia drives us to school, plus I'm still ruminating over last night's dream, trying to discern whether it's from God or just a product of my imagination. As a result, I'm probably quieter than usual.

"You okay, Sam?" My best friend peers curiously at me after parking her car in the school lot.

"I guess..." Then since Olivia is my only real confidante (well, besides Ebony, but that's different), I tell her about my dream.

"That's so creepy."

"I know."

"Do you think it was from God?"

I shrug. "I don't really know. I mean, I haven't been focusing on any new cases with Ebony, not since solving the Peter Clark one a couple of weeks ago. And I haven't heard anything in the news. Plus there was no one in the dream, I mean, besides me... I just don't know for sure."

"Well, God knows," says Olivia.

"Yeah. I'm just trying to trust Him with this. I figure if it's important, He'll let me know."

She sort of laughs. "I'm sure He will, Sam."

We notice Garrett Pierson slowly coming our way. Olivia waves, and we pause on the steps by the front entrance to wait for him. "Hey, Garrett," I say.

"How's it going?" asks Olivia.

As usual, Garrett's first reaction (looking down at his shoes) reveals just how insecure this guy still is, but then he sort of recovers and actually looks directly at us.

"Okay, I guess."

"Hey, I like your shirt." Olivia points at what I'm guessing is another new item of clothing. His foster mom seems to have a pretty good sense of style and has been getting some things to update his previously pathetic wardrobe. Even his shaggy brown hair looks neater these days, and his new glasses have dark frames that actually look sort of cool.

"Yeah," I agree, "that's a good color on you, Garrett."

He thanks us, then grins at me. "Ready for the chem test today, Sam?"

I let out a groan as I remember that it's Friday, test day as always. "Yeah, right. Thanks for reminding me." Garrett's my lab partner, and I depend on him a lot, but when it comes to tests, I'm on my own.

"Don't worry," he assures me. "You'll do fine. You just need more confidence."

I nod as I consider the irony of his advice. Garrett, the academic geek, telling me that I need more confidence. Go figure. "Confidence is good, but a scientific brain wouldn't hurt much either."

"Hey, Olivia," Cameron says as he comes over to join us. Cameron is the leader of a band called Stewed Oysters that Olivia recently began singing vocals with. "You ready for tonight's gig?"

She nods, but she has a look of uncertainty in her eyes. This has to do with the fact that they're playing for Amanda Brow's sweet-sixteen party, and you can never be too sure with those things. Anyway, Olivia's worried it could turn out to be a wild drinking party, which she has no desire to be involved in. I already promised to go with her, and if it gets raunchy, we'll just leave. "I think so," she tells him.

"Cool." Cameron gives her one of those smiles that tells me he's still wishing she'd go out with him. But I happen to know it's a lost cause since Olivia refuses to date a guy who's not a Christian. Then he waves and heads over to where Jack McAllister is smoking a cigarette and waiting for him with his usual grim, bad-boy look.

"Is Jack still treating you like you've got cooties?" asks Garrett.

Olivia pushes a strand of blond hair behind her ear and sighs. "Yeah. But I've noticed he treats a lot of people like that. He's not exactly Mr. Congeniality, if you know what I mean."

"It's because he's a dooper," Garrett says in a nonchalant tone. "They're always in a bad mood."

I'm surprised at this coming from Garrett. He's usually not that judgmental. "Do you know for a fact that he uses?" I quietly ask Garrett as the three of us line up to go through security. Brighton High was one of the last schools in the Portland metro area to get a system, but it's supposed to be one of the best.

"Everyone knows that, Sam." He tosses his backpack into a scanner tray, then walks through the metal-detector gates.

I consider this as I make my way through the check station. Jack McAllister has been on my prayer list ever since Olivia auditioned with the band last month. At the time I thought he might've been a potential suicide case, but after I figured out that it was Garrett who was actually at risk for taking his own life, I sort of forgot about Jack. I pray for him at times but never with much clarity. Still, it should be obvious that Jack is the kind of guy who needs to have people praying for him. Especially if he's seriously into drugs.

I know for a fact, thanks to my brother's struggles, that drugs can unravel a life in a very short time. But I suppose it's one of those things I just don't like to think about much. Maybe it's my personal form of denial. I'm starting to wonder just how prevalent drugs are in the lives of my classmates. Maybe it's something I should be a little more concerned about.

Especially considering my latest dream. After writing down all my notes last night, I felt fairly certain that whatever was going on in that horrible place that had turned into an inferno was related to drugs. Whether it was the nasty smell of the smoke, the general filth, the boxes and

junk all over the floor, or the canvas covering nailed on the window, I concluded that something illegal was going on in there. Now I have to wonder if it's related to Jack McAllister too.