

the secret life of Samantha McGregor
BOOK ONE

bad
connection

a novel

melody carlson

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BAD CONNECTION

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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.

The wipers slap furiously, whipping back and forth like wild things, but the windshield remains a murky puddle before my eyes. I lean forward and push my chest against the steering wheel as I try to see what's ahead. The curving road is pitch-black—dark and shiny—and the blindingly bright headlights of the vehicle tailgating me don't help.

Why did I take this road? And why am I driving so late at night? I adjust my rearview mirror to subdue the lights, and then I step on the gas in an attempt to outrun the impatient jerk. Or maybe I should just pull over. But where?

Just when I think I've lost my tailgater, a truck barrels down the road toward me, its lights glaring straight into my already compromised vision. The wimpy wipers don't help at all, and I can barely see as I start to brake because it looks like the truck has crossed the centerline into my lane. It feels like he's hurtling straight toward me—a head-on about to happen!

I jerk the steering wheel to the right and swerve off the road, hitting the gravel shoulder at about fifty miles an hour and totally out of control. Then in the same split second, certain that my car is about to dive into the steep ditch and roll, I crank my steering wheel back to the left and careen

across both lanes of the highway, crashing straight through the end of the guardrail, almost as if it's not even there.

There's this moment of eerie silence as my car, free of gravity, plunges into thin air and total darkness. But when it lands, it's like an explosion. And the jolt to my body is shocking then numbing. I can't breathe. It feels as if someone has a pillow over my face, and my chest and head ache from the impact. Something cold and wet creeps up my legs like the fingers of death. I try to kick whatever it is away, but my legs are pinned to the seat, unable to move.

I free my arms in an attempt to fight off this thing that's suffocating me, but it seems to deflate just as quickly as it came—the airbag. I peer through my shattered windshield. My left headlight illuminates what appears to be water running swiftly all around me. And I remember, yes, the Willamette River runs along this stretch of country road.

My car's not fully submerged in the river yet, although the front end is partially in the water. But I feel the car shift, as if the wheels aren't on solid ground. I force the gear into reverse, hoping that I can back up, but the movement makes the car lurch forward. I prepare myself to be swallowed by the river. Stuck in this car, my death trap. How long does it take a vehicle to sink? How long does it take to drown?

A new rush of adrenaline hits me. I'm not ready to give up. I push the button for the electric windows, but they don't budge. I attempt to force open the door, but it's stuck tight. Even if I got it open, I can't free my legs from whatever pins them down.

The water's up to my waist now and numbingly cold. Or have I lost all feeling in the lower half of my body? I'm not sure if it's the dashboard pressed down against my thighs. Or maybe it's the engine. I don't know. But I know that I'm trapped.

It seems almost silly, but it's as if time stands still, and I begin to analyze how I got to this place. I made a bad decision tonight. I didn't have to take this road. But don't we all make bad decisions sometimes? Why this? Why me? Why now?

I look up and catch my reflection in the cockeyed rearview mirror. But it's not my face I see. I blink then stare back into the mirror. *Who is this woman staring back at me?* At first she seems old, maybe fortysomething, and then she seems young, like my age.

Finally I realize that it's not me at all—it's my friend Kayla Henderson. Her blond hair is pulled back in a ponytail, and her dark brown eyes are full of fear with tears streaming down her cheeks. An image of pure terror and desperation.

And that's when I wake up.

My heart still pounds frantically as I sit up in my bed and look around, making sure that I'm still in my own room, safe and warm and dry. I wiggle my toes. Just fine. Nothing to be afraid of. It was only a dream...just a dream. But an *unusual* dream. What does it mean?

I glance at the clock. It's 5:31 and too early to get up. But going back to sleep seems unlikely too. So I turn on the light by my bed and, out of habit, reach for my Bible, opening it to a very familiar section marked with a red ribbon.

Oh, I know these words already. My dad was the first one to read this portion of Scripture to me, back when I had my first *unusual* dream. And it was Dad who encouraged me to memorize this Scripture as well as others. "Write them in your heart," he'd said. My dad seemed to be the one person who really got me back then, back when this whole thing seemed to start up. But it comforted me to know that he seemed to understand and even respect what he called my "gift."

So I read this Scripture now, hearing the words almost as if Dad were here right beside me, quietly whispering them to me.

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, KJV)

"That's exactly what God is doing in you, Samantha," Dad told me the first time I proudly recited this Scripture.

"What do you mean?" I asked, although I felt fairly sure that I knew.

“God’s pouring out His Spirit on you. Giving you visions and dreams.”

“But why? Why did God pick *me*?”

Dad just smiled. “He must’ve known that you have the right kind of heart, honey. And He designed you in such a way that you could handle something of this magnitude. Just trust Him.”

I close my Bible as well as my eyes, trying to remember the details of the dream that just interrupted my sleep. Why does it seem unusual? Was it supposed to mean something? Some kind of message? Was it really from God?

I get out of bed and walk back and forth in my room, running over the events of the dream, trying to sort it out, to discern whether it’s something to be dismissed or something I should pay attention to. I mean, sometimes I have dreams that are simply dreams. Other times...well, those are different.

Obviously my dream involved a car wreck. It was nighttime, and the car went into the Willamette River. And it seemed like Kayla Henderson was involved. Is it possible that Kayla was driving? That she’s been involved in a real accident? That could explain why she’s been missing these past few days. Maybe her car is sitting on the bottom of the river right now. Or maybe I’m just blowing this all out of proportion. Sometimes I wonder why God can’t just get a loudspeaker or a TV series or a big billboard that would grab everyone’s attention and just make Himself perfectly clear.

Yet even as I try to make light of this, the chilling thought of poor Kayla being the victim of a horrible accident, sitting

pinned in a car at the bottom of a river, sends a serious shiver down my spine. I pull on my sweatshirt, stick my feet into my UGGs, and go out to the kitchen, where I turn on the lights and start to make a pot of coffee.

My mom always appreciates it when I do this, not that I do it too often, but I nearly drop the glass coffee carafe when I hear the deep sound of a man's voice talking behind me. I almost think that it's God. But I turn to see that it's only the TV.

Sometimes when my mom's feeling extra stressed, she'll set it to turn on at six in the morning. She calls it her "gentle" alarm clock. Although the tone of this dude's voice feels anything but gentle. Still, he's got my attention, and I stand there holding the half-filled coffee carafe as I listen.

"Breaking news near Fremont early this morning," he says in an urgent voice. "Forty-six-year-old Cindy James lost control of her Nissan on wet roads, crashing through the guardrail and plummeting thirty feet into the Willamette River shortly before midnight last night. The accident occurred just five miles south of Fremont. Fortunately for Ms. James, two other drivers witnessed the wreck and immediately called 911. Gary Forsythe of Gresham and Hank Burns of eastern Washington scaled the steep riverbank to see the car partially submerged in the turbulent waters. Swift-thinking Burns then managed to return to his truck to get a chain and a rope, which the two men were able to secure to a nearby tree and her bumper, preventing the small car from being completely submerged and swept away by the current."

As he describes the wreck, some footage is being shown, and it seems very similar to how it was in my dream. Although the perspective is different. And there's another thing. Instead of Kayla Henderson in the driver's seat, it seems it was this Cindy James person. They show a photo of someone I've never seen before. Or maybe it's the person I got a glimpse of just before I saw Kayla.

But now I question whether I really did see Kayla. Maybe I just imagined it was her because I've felt so concerned about her these past couple of days. Or maybe I just got a bad connection. I'm not sure. But I guess I'm relieved that it's not my friend in the wreck. And I'm relieved that Cindy James seems to be doing okay too.

"Ms. James suffered a broken collar bone and several fractured ribs, but after emergency crews used the Jaws of Life to extract her from the crushed car, she was transported to Fremont General Hospital and is said to be in good condition."

I stand there for a few more minutes as they hit other news highlights that don't mean much to me, and they finally move on to the weather outlook for the rest of the week. But as I continue making coffee, I have to wonder why I had that dream. I mean, it seems that Cindy James's situation was under control. It's not like she needed my help. And it obviously had nothing to do with Kayla. So I gotta wonder, why would God use my "gift" to disrupt a perfectly good night's sleep with something that really has nothing to do with me? I don't get it.

I suppose I'm sort of distracted by all this as I plod through my morning routines—getting dressed, eating some breakfast, riding to school with my best friend, Olivia. But it's not until we're on our way to PE, which is fourth period and right before lunch, that Olivia confronts me.

"You seem kinda moody today. Everything okay, Sam?"

"Yeah." I shrug, trying to brush it off. No reason to burden her with my little problem, which isn't really a problem. It's more like an irritation.

But then after PE, as we're all getting dressed in the locker room, the conversation, once again, becomes focused on Kayla Henderson. She's been the hot topic among the girls for the past few days—everyone seems to be speculating on where she is right now. And naturally, especially after this morning's dream, I am easily pulled in.

"Everyone *knows* that Kayla is a tramp," says Emma Piscolli in a very superior-sounding voice.

"That's a little harsh," I say as I button my jeans.

"She's slept with half the guys in school," continues Emma.

In moments like this, it's hard to believe that Emma actually used to be one of Kayla's best friends. But then there was that big fight over Parker Davis last spring. I guess love triangles leave everyone wounded.

"You know this for a fact, Emma?" demands Olivia. "Do you have a tracking device or a monitor on her or something?"

I try to laugh, hoping it might lighten things up. "Yeah, and if you do, can you tell us where she's at right now?"

"Or who she's with?" adds Brittany Fallows.

Emma pulls her T-shirt over her head then puts both hands on her hips. "I can make a pretty good guess."

"What?" asks Brittany.

"I think Kayla has run off to get married."

Naturally, this makes us all laugh.

"I'm *not* kidding."

"Yeah, right." Olivia rolls her eyes. "Like who gets married while they're still in high school? Tell us another one, Emma."

"I'm serious." Emma looks at me now. "Don't you remember that guy Kayla told us about not that long ago? The one she met last summer?"

"Oh yeah," I say as I recall about a month back when Kayla and Emma and I worked to set up the photo exhibit for the Fall Art Fair. "She did tell us about this really cool guy she met while she was visiting her aunt in San Diego. Saying how great looking he was and how he was really into her." Okay, I don't admit that I hadn't totally believed Kayla at the time, how I thought maybe she was making the whole thing up for Emma's benefit since I suspected she was still hurting over the breakup with Parker Davis.

Emma nods. "And I happen to know she'd been e-mailing this guy regularly."

"An online romance?" asks Brittany.

"Yeah." Emma picks up her bag and slings a strap over her shoulder. "And I think that's where Kayla is right now."

"Okay, even if Kayla was having an online romance, what makes you think she'd want to get married?" I ask in a slightly cynical tone. "That's so totally ridiculous."

"Yeah," says Olivia. "It's crazy, Emma."

"How many girls do you know who get married at our age?" I point out as I zip my boot.

"Not unless they're insane or rednecks..." says Brittany.

"Or pregnant." Emma's brows arch with suspicion.

"An online pregnancy," says Olivia. "Now that's a new one for the medical journals."

"I didn't say she was pregnant," retorts Emma.

"No," I toss back at her. "Just that she's getting married."

"Hey, it's just a guess."

"A *stupid* guess." Olivia looks at me. "Ready to go to lunch, Sam?"

We tell the others good-bye and head out of the stuffy locker room.

"Can you believe Emma?" Olivia says as we head down the hall toward the cafeteria. "I know Kayla has her problems..." Olivia sighs. "And I guess it's true that she's gotten a little wild this past year. But running away to get married? It seems pretty far-fetched to me."

"Yeah, it's hard to believe." But as we get in the lunch line, I'm thinking that it's also hard to believe how much Kayla has changed since middle school, back when we were still good friends and Kayla was more into soccer than guys. But we all grow up and change. Even so, it makes me sad. And I'm still trying to figure out why she made that sudden appearance in my dream. Is God trying to tell me something?

"Do you think anything really happened to her?" Olivia glances at me as she fills her cup with ice.

I shrug as I pick up a drink cup. I tell Olivia a lot of things, but I'm just not ready to tell her about this. Not that I have anything to tell. Not really.

"I mean, have you gotten any feelings about her?" she asks in a hushed tone, I'm sure so that no one will hear.

Olivia knows about the few "unusual experiences" I've had in the past. Although, up until this morning, I haven't had anything happen to me for almost a year now. I actually hoped that it was all over. That God had moved on, picked someone else... I guess I was wrong.

"Not really," I say lightly. "Not anything that means anything. Of course, I'm worried about her, and I've been praying for her. But that's pretty much where it ends." Okay, I'd probably say more, but there are too many listening ears right now.

"It's just so weird. I really thought she'd be back by now."

"How long has she been gone?" I ask.

"Well, I heard her mom on the news last night. She hadn't seen Kayla since Saturday. And it's Wednesday today."

"It really doesn't sound good." I pick up a tuna sandwich and set it on my tray. "And I know things aren't too cool at her house—they haven't been for the past couple of years, ever since her parents split up. I guess I just figured maybe Kayla ran away to stay at a friend's house, you know, to just lay low for a while. Maybe she thought it would get her mom's attention."

"What friend though?"

"I know..."

“Well, it has gotten her mom’s attention. Did you see the news last night? She was really crying and falling apart.”

I shake my head. “I missed that.”

“It’s just so weird.”

“Yeah. Pretty weird.” Okay, that’s an understatement. The truth is, I can’t think of Kayla today without feeling seriously worried.

Where is she?