

the secret life of Samantha McGregor
BOOK FOUR

payback

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. 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)

With arms spread wide, the blonde steps back, staring down at her mint green formal gown now splattered with spots of bright red blood. When she looks up, her eyes widen in horror. She sees her date, a dark-haired young man in a neat black tux, his face twisted in pain as his fists tighten and he crumples to the floor. He curls into a pre-natal ball...and a bright, shiny pool of blood stains the clean white floor around him. Music blares in the background, the bass thumping a fast beat. It's a Pretty Ricky song, but the only sound the pretty blonde hears is coming from her boyfriend as he lets out a low growl followed by a gurgle. Then he jerks suddenly, convulsing, drawing a final gasping breath.

The girl bends down, reaches out her hand as if she wants to help him, and then as if sensing danger or perhaps seeing someone now threatening her, she stands and backs away with a horrified look, turns, and desperately dashes in the opposite direction, tripping over her spiky high heels but continuing on...as if she is running for her life.

But it's too late. More shots ring out in fast repetition and more screams of terror. All I can see is red now—blood is everywhere.

It's a massacre.

I wake up clinging to my comforter and still shaking. My heart pounds with a very real sense of fear, as if I, too, am in grave danger. It takes a long moment to realize that this was only a dream. Just a dream. But a realistic and horribly tragic dream. Without turning on the bedside lamp, I reach for the notebook I keep handy for times like this, and in the gray dawn light, I take several deep, calming breaths and begin to write.

I'm trying to capture all the still-vivid details, the style of the mint green gown (beaded with spaghetti straps, formfitting—the girl had a good figure) and those metallic-toned shoes (were they bronze or gold?). I try to recall the girl's facial features (what made her so pretty?). I do remember what appeared to be diamond earrings, three piercings in one ear, smallest on top, largest on the bottom. But was it only one ear? And if so, which ear was it? Right or left? I close my eyes and try to see her again. Left. I believe it was left.

I remember the boy's hairstyle, short and neat, as if he might be into athletics. I try to describe his tux, but other than black, I draw a blank. I can't even remember his shoes, but I think they were black as well. I write down a description of the floor as I remember it—large square tiles of white with streaks of gray throughout. Marble perhaps? I describe what the music sounded like. (I don't even know why I think it was a Pretty Ricky song since I'm not a fan, but it's what went through my head.) And then I remember strings of lights glowing blurrily in the background. Like a party going on. A wedding perhaps?

I pause, searching my memory for more, trying to figure out if I've missed an important detail. Another person? A sound? A smell? Who had the gun? Or was the guy even

killed with a gun? Perhaps it was a knife. I don't remember that part at all. Did I even see what happened? Is it possible that the girl was responsible? No, she seemed too shocked, too frightened. And yet if she'd committed a crime, perhaps in the heat of the moment, it would make sense that she'd be shocked and scared. I make note of this too. But there must have been more. Was there some little detail I missed? Did I forget something? I shut my eyes again and just sit there in bed, trying to remember. But that seems to be it.

I close my notebook and set it back on the bedside table. I will tell Ebony about this dream later today. I lie back down, breathing deeply to calm myself, but who can sleep after a dream like that? I wish I could call Olivia and run it past her. I'm sure she'd have some thoughts. But it's not even six yet. Instead, I go to the kitchen and try to be quiet as I make coffee.

It must've been a prom, I decide as I pour water into the coffee maker. And that makes sense because it's spring, and already people are starting to pair off and plan for prom at my school. Even Olivia is beginning to talk about it. She's pretty sure Alex is going to ask her. Naturally, she thinks Conrad will ask me. And I think it'd be fun to go to prom. It'd be a first for me, for sure. But what if there's going to be a murder that night? Still, I didn't recognize either of the people in my dream. And the girl, especially, had the kind of looks that a person would remember. She looked the type who would be well known. But I've never seen her before. I am certain of that. Still, I suppose she could be new at school...or possibly she hasn't started going there yet. Maybe today will be her first day. The guy was unfamiliar too. I didn't get a very good look at his face. But for some reason, he struck me as athletic. That might've

just been the hair. Although it seems he was tall, well built. I better make a note of that.

Our prom is still a month away, so that gives me time. Unless it's not our prom. What if it's another school's prom? Who knows what dates that might include? I know schools like to stagger the dates so all the local restaurants aren't overwhelmed with high school students going out to dinner before their proms. It's possible another high school could have a prom as soon as next weekend. I will have to mention this to Ebony ASAP.

I pour a cup of coffee, add some milk, and go into the living room and sit by the window to watch as the morning slowly comes. I think about Zach now. And as I often do in the morning, I pray for him. He's back in rehab again. The good thing is that he actually wanted to go this time. Even though it was not optional, he was happy to go. He knew that he needed it, that he was lucky to get this second chance. And he promised Mom and me that things are really going to be different when he comes back this time. But that won't be for six months. Still, he didn't complain. I know he was thinking it was better than doing prison time. And that was a very real possibility. If Zach hadn't fully cooperated with the DA and police like he did, I'm sure he would be in prison right now. As it was, he spent several weeks in jail. That in itself was sobering—in more than one way. And although I'm still sad—for Zach's sake—I am so thankful he is alive. Things could've gone so differently. I'm thankful for something else too. Zach is finally returning to God. He told me that right before he left for rehab. He asked me to look for his old Bible and send it to him. I promised to send him a Bible, whether or not I found his old one. But I did find his, and I sent it just last week.

"You're up early," Mom says as she comes down the stairs still wearing her bathrobe.

"Yeah..." I consider telling her about my dream, but it still bothers her that I get these dreams and visions. Despite making some baby steps of progress, she has a long way to go before she completely accepts my unusual gift. I figure it will come when she returns fully to God. In the meantime, I need to be patient and careful not to overload her. And I need to pray.

Mom gets her coffee and comes into the living room to join me. "Spring really seems to be here," she says, looking out the window. "Are you making any plans for summer yet?"

I shrug. "Not really. I mean, sure, I'd love to head to Europe with some girlfriends and have a good time, but I don't think it's likely." I laugh and try not to feel envious that my best friend might be doing just that this summer.

"No, not likely. But I really wish I could give you those things, Sam. I would if I could. But as usual, finances are tight." She sighs sadly.

"I don't expect those things," I say quickly. "In fact, the truth is I don't think I'm ready for Europe yet. I'll probably be better off sticking around here. I've heard stories about kids my age getting into serious trouble over there."

She sort of laughs. "You're not one of *those* kinds of kids, Samantha. You have a level head. I would trust you to go anywhere and not get in trouble."

"Thanks, Mom. But if that's true, you have God to thank." She nods and takes a sip of coffee.

I can tell my not-so-subtle hint hasn't hit pay dirt.

"I better get ready for work. Thanks for making coffee."

"No problem."

She pauses at the foot of the stairs. "By the way, I'm going out with Steven tonight. . . might be late."

"Don't do anything I wouldn't do," I tease her.

She makes a face. "How about you? Any plans?"

"Olivia wanted to go to a movie. I'm guessing Alex and Conrad will join us."

Mom smiles now. "That's nice."

I want to ask her why she thinks that's nice. Is it because it alleviates her guilt for spending so much time with Steven lately? Or is it because that makes me seem like a more "normal" girl and that makes her feel relieved? Or is it something else? Those questions could sound as if I'm inviting a fight. And I'm not. I'm just curious.

I'm used to the fact that Mom and I still lead fairly separate lives. I know this is partly due to the demands of her job and of being a single parent. And I can't help but wonder how different life would be if Dad were still alive. I'm sure everything would be much better if he hadn't been killed. But I suppose I could be wrong. As unlikely as it seems, it's possible that things might've gone in an even worse direction for our family. For instance, what if my parents were divorced, like so many of my friends' parents, and I were torn between the two of them? Even so, I'd still be glad to have my dad around.

Maybe it's better to simply not consider those what-if scenarios. Besides, I need to trust God with the big, impossible-to-understand situations. And He is worthy of my trust. He's proven this to me time and again.

Still, as I go upstairs to get ready for school, I feel a flicker of resentment about my lonely family life. I mean, it's not like we

can do anything about Zach being gone. Or Dad for that matter. But not long ago, I had hoped that Mom and I were starting to get closer. We'd just begun doing more things together. We were even talking more. And Mom was trying to work less. Then just as it seemed that my relationship with her was really changing, Steven Lowery stepped into the picture. As a result, I feel slightly pushed aside.

Okay, I know it seems incredibly selfish, not to mention juvenile, to be jealous of Mom's boyfriend. And it's hard to admit this, even if only to myself, but I still do resent him...just a little. Yet at the same time, I'm glad for Mom. The truth is, Steven really seems to make her happy. In some ways she seems happier than she's been in years. I'm sure it's wrong for me to have these negative feelings toward him. I mean, he's always doing things for her. He buys her things and takes her places. He compliments her on her appearance. And even though she's ten years older than he is, I know he makes her feel beautiful. She actually told me this just a few days ago.

Seriously, I scold myself as I get into the shower, *I am a selfish, selfish daughter*. I should just grow up. I should be thankful for Steven being in the picture. And I should be happy for Mom. And I should be praying for both of them. After all, it was only last night that Mom said, "Steven is so good...so good for me... He's almost too good to be real."

Okay, maybe that's what bothers me. It could be one of the consequences of working for the police department and solving some pretty hideous crimes—perhaps I've gotten a little jaded at the ripe old age of seventeen—but I do believe that when something seems too good to be real, it usually isn't real.