



Secrets

Prologue

February – 1986

Samantha tied the white apron around her waist. The smell of grease made her nostrils flare. Brenda nudged her. “You ready for the breakfast rush?”

“Sure am,” Samantha replied, forcing cheer into her voice. Less than two weeks at this job and already she hated it. Still, this job was better than no job at all. And anything beat what she’d left behind.

Stan pulled on his greasy apron. He leaned close to Samantha, his cigar breath cutting off her air. “All you gotta do is give the customers that pretty smile and they don’t give a damn if you feed them garbage.”

Samantha backed away from the counter. “I just want to do my job.”

“Baby, you ain’t gotta do nothing more than prance around as far as I’m concerned.”

Brenda groaned. “Leave her alone, Stan.”

Stan snorted. “You’re jealous ‘cause you don’t get the kinda tips she does.”

Samantha’s stomach lurched. Why did everyone make an issue out of her looks? Why couldn’t she blend into the woodwork, be the ugly duckling no one noticed? She took another step away from Stan and said, “Shouldn’t we get ready to open now?”

“Whatever you want, baby,” Stan said through his leering grin.

Samantha escaped to the dining area. Her skin felt hot and the desire to flee had her trembling. Brenda approached, and Samantha turned her back so her coworker wouldn’t see the tears shining in her eyes.

“Don’t let him get to you,” Brenda said. She gave Samantha’s arm a light squeeze, and added, “You just need to put him in his place, so he’ll give you a little respect. Not that Stan has much of that to offer.”

Samantha turned and smiled, despite the fact that her skin crawled beneath Brenda’s touch. She ignored the weakness in her legs. No way could she collapse here, now. In need of a distraction, she busied herself arranging the salt and pepper shakers on the counter.

Brenda popped open a metal napkin holder and began stuffing it full. “So how come you’re wasting your time working in this hellhole truck stop, anyway?”

“Same as anyone else. To make money.”

“Hell, with your looks, you could make a whole lot more money doing

any number of things in any number of better places.”

Samantha’s cheeks grew hot. “Looks don’t always matter.”

“Maybe not, but it sure does help! Besides, you’re a hell of a lot younger than me. What are you, eighteen, nineteen? Don’t you want to go to college or something?”

Samantha dodged the question about her age, saying simply, “I can’t afford college.”

“Won’t your parents help you?”

Samantha’s heart pounded wildly. She couldn’t think back. She’d gotten away. “They’re dead.” The words popped out, surprising her.

Brenda blanched. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay.”

“Do you have any family around?”

Family. To most, the word implied happiness and security. To her, it stood for everything opposite. “No.”

“That’s awful,” Brenda said. “You’re all alone?”

Samantha moved through the small dining area putting placemats on the tables. “Yeah.” More alone than Brenda could imagine.

Stan stepped out of the kitchen. He glared at Brenda, who had abandoned her task with the napkins. “I don’t pay you to stand around gossiping,” he said.

Brenda rolled her eyes. “Yes, boss.”

“Finish loading the napkins. We open in five minutes.”

“Yes, boss.”

“Don’t be a wise ass, Brenda. You can easily be replaced.”

Samantha kept her distance. Though grateful for the reprieve, she also felt a twinge of guilt. Brenda had always been nice to her. She hated having to lie. But she’d had no choice. She could never tell anyone the truth. Never.

A few minutes later, the front door swung open and the first customers of the day strolled in. Samantha welcomed the distraction. At least work kept her occupied, leaving her little time to think. She couldn’t think. She had to let it go. In this new life, none of it had ever happened.

She needed to be with people, to keep her mind off herself. Yet, sometimes the way men looked at her made her feel totally exposed. She didn’t know what she wanted anymore. Being alone was horrible. Being with people could be worse.

Samantha moved to the counter, where a burly, dark-haired man with a bushy beard sat. “What can I get for you?” she asked.

The man looked her up and down, his mouth partially open and moist. “Are you on the menu?” he asked.

Samantha's stomach twisted into a tight knot. She ignored his comment and said, "Would you like coffee to start?"

"Sure," he said. "And how about you sit here and have a cup with me?"

"I can't do that."

"Then how about dinner tonight?"

His eyes bore into her. Samantha had to force air into her lungs. "I... I'll get your coffee."

Her hands trembled as she reached for the pot. She took several deep breaths, talking to herself the entire time. She had nothing to be afraid of. This man couldn't hurt her.

She carried the coffee pot back to the man at the counter. "Here you go," she said as she filled his cup. "Would you like to order breakfast?"

"Pancakes and sausage," he said. "Now, how about tonight?"

"Thank you, but I can't. I'll get your order."

Samantha escaped to the kitchen and gave Stan the order. The knot in her stomach twisted tighter as she walked back out to the dining area. The man kept grinning at her through his bushy beard. She tried not to meet his eyes.

The morning stretched on endlessly. Samantha's thoughts kept straying back to a time not long ago. Her father's voice echoed in her head. But he wasn't here. She was alone now.

Samantha shuddered. *Don't think about it. Pretend it never happened.*

Samantha felt the woman's eyes following her. This was the third day in a row the woman had come here for lunch. She barely ate. She stared constantly.

Samantha couldn't figure it out. Why would that type of woman even come here? She always dressed impeccably. Her clothes probably had designer labels, though Samantha wouldn't know the difference. Her voice was soft and rich. She pronounced every word, every syllable, distinctly. She could surely afford to eat in a much nicer place.

The woman leaned back in her chair, now openly staring. Samantha approached, check in hand, wishing she could crawl beneath a table. "Can I get you anything else?" she asked.

"Can you sit a moment?" the woman asked. More of a statement than a question.

Samantha shifted uncomfortably. "I'm not allowed to –"

"Have you ever considered modeling?"

“Excuse me?”

The woman smiled. “My name is Candace Wynn. I’m a modeling agent.”

“Oh.” The woman’s smile seemed genuine. Disarming. Samantha relaxed a bit.

“I’m looking for a new face,” Candace said. “And I believe yours is exactly the one I’ve been searching for.”

“I’ve never modeled. I don’t know anything about it.”

“You’re a natural.”

Modeling. Using her looks to make money. The looks that her mother had so often called a curse. “I don’t think –”

“Hey, baby,” a man with one missing front tooth called. “I’m starving over here. You gonna take my order or what?”

Samantha’s cheeks flushed. “I’ll be right with you.”

Candace said, “You can’t tell me you enjoy working here.”

“No, I don’t. But I’ve never modeled and –”

“Trust me, you’ll catch on quickly.”

The toothless man whistled. “Let’s go! I don’t have all afternoon.”

Candace handed Samantha a white business card with delicate gold print. “This is my office address and phone number. What time do you get out of here?”

“Two o’clock.”

“Perfect. Be at my office at three.”

“I ...”

Candace placed a twenty dollar bill on the table and stood. “Don’t worry about what you don’t know. Let me worry about that. Come in. We’ll talk.”

Unsure what else to do, Samantha nodded. She watched Candace Wynn stride confidently out the door. She wanted that same confidence for herself. But modeling?

The toothless man whistled again. “Sweetheart, you’re great to look at, but I really need some food here.”

Samantha shook off the fear – and the hope. She forced her feet forward, apologized, and took the man’s order.

Modeling. She couldn’t escape her looks. Maybe it was time she used them for her benefit.

Chapter 1

May – 1991

Thunder crashed angrily outside Samantha's bedroom window. She sat motionless, as if the slightest rise and fall of each breath would cause the lightning to strike her. Moments passed. Maybe hours. She wasn't sure. Lately time ran together in a jumble of emptiness.

Gradually, the thunder subsided. The quiet made it too easy to think, which she didn't like to do. Thinking gave the memories she'd buried deep room to force their way into her consciousness. She pushed them back, almost physically, to the corners of her mind.

She uncurled herself from the tight ball she'd wrapped herself in. Rising from the bed, she stepped slowly toward the brass floor mirror. Her blonde hair hung in loose curls past her shoulders. Her large amber eyes glistened. Dark lashes, long and thick, fluttered above them. Delicate features gave her face a kind of china doll beauty. Stunning, she was often called. But what did it matter?

Discouraged, she walked away from her reflection. No one understood her depression. After all, she had everything a woman could want. Only twenty-two years old, she was a successful model married to an incredibly handsome and equally successful advertising agent. So what was her problem? Why did her moods change drastically from one moment to the next?

How could she explain a past that never happened was now haunting her?

The sound of the doorbell broke into her thoughts. She chose to ignore it, a habit she'd been practicing increasingly more often. She turned back to the mirror, studying herself more intensely. She saw the sparkling amber eyes looking back. But within those eyes she saw something no one else did. Emptiness. Sadness. A fear that gripped her so tightly she couldn't breathe.

She jerked away from her reflection. Memories flashed like ten-second movie blips. Images. Voices. Never anything specific. Just broken pieces of a distorted puzzle. Her past. It forever haunted her. But remember, it isn't real.

Six months had come and gone since that magical day when Samantha married Jeff Reardon. Those six months had been a rollercoaster ride. Samantha's modeling career skyrocketed, and the rumors immediately

followed. Some believed she'd made it big because she'd married an executive at the largest advertising firm in Massachusetts. Others believed Jeff's position was the only reason she'd married him at all.

Samantha knew the truth. And, thankfully, so did Jeff. She'd refused to model for any accounts he came in contact with until just recently. She hadn't wanted his favors. And now she didn't need them.

Samantha both reveled in her career and was terrified by it. Her moods had become erratic. The constant lies she told wore down her spirit.

At first, it all seemed simple. Jeff had grown up in a wealthy family. Even before meeting his mother, Samantha knew the woman was a snob. Victoria Reardon was well known for her intolerance of anyone *beneath her*. She expected Jeff to marry within his class and would tolerate no less.

From the start, Samantha knew Jeff was nothing like his mother. He didn't care about social status. Yet, when he'd asked about her family, Samantha choked. She'd buried the truth deep long ago. Little lies had emerged over the years. Jeff, though, wanted detail. She'd done the natural thing and elaborated on the familiar story she'd invented when she'd first arrived in Boston. Her parents had been smart and wonderful people. They'd loved her very much and, being an only child, the three of them had always been close. Then five years ago a tragic accident had taken their lives.

The story made sense at the time.

Now she wondered if all the lies were necessary. Was her past so bad that she had to hide it?

Samantha trembled as the thought gave her a brief glimpse into the darkness. Oh, yes, the lies were a vital part of her survival. A long time ago she'd learned to suppress most of her memories. But bits and pieces refused to stay hidden.

The memories of those years were too horrific to think about. Samantha pushed the thoughts away before they invaded her conscious mind. The one thing she remembered clearly, had never been able to forget, was her mother's betrayal.

Would Jeff still love her if he knew the truth?

Would she be able to live with herself if she allowed the memories back in?

Was it even her that Jeff had fallen in love with? Or was it the made-up dream girl she'd invented for the rest of the world? Did she even know her true self anymore?

She choked back a sob as a tear slid down her cheek. Too much about her remained hidden, even from herself.

She pulled on a pair of shorts and a t-shirt, then went out onto her back deck. The bushes and flowers were coming alive with the warmth of spring. The manicured lawn stretched out over acres, granting her and Jeff a rare kind of privacy in the Boston area.

Birds fluttered in the trees beyond the garden. Samantha sat in a lounge chair watching them, envious of their freedom. A light floral scent wafted toward her with the soft breeze. Inhaling deeply, she smelled the lilacs from the nearby trees. Suddenly, she recalled a day long ago when that same scent had been in the air.

She'd been in her parents' back yard, sitting beneath a tree with a book. The house was empty, blissfully silent. Her father was at work. Her brother was out with his friends. It was nearing dusk on a Monday, her mother's night with her bowling league.

Samantha could see the book in her hand. *The Outsiders* by S. E. Hinton. She'd spent the afternoon alone in the yard, smelling the lilacs riding on the soft breeze. She'd always loved the smell and was always happiest when she was alone.

But she'd forgotten to keep track of the time. The slam of the car door sent a jolt racing through her. She didn't have time to run before her father's voice demanded, "Where the hell is everyone?"

Samantha stood in the doorway, frozen with fear. Her father stepped close. His eyes had that crazy glaze. He wore battered work boots. Size eleven.

"You're alone?" he asked. Hopeful.

She remembered his clothes in a heap on the floor. Wrangler jeans. A plaid flannel shirt. Her own clothes stripped from her. The smell of lilacs wafting in through the open windows.

Samantha shuddered. She'd shut that memory away long ago, locked it in that dark place in her mind. But here it was, as if it had happened just yesterday. The smell of lilacs.

She pushed out of the chair and ran into the house. Racing through the rooms, she frantically slammed all the windows shut. She didn't feel the tears streaming down her face. She didn't hear herself screaming. She was unaware of everything except the smell of lilacs.