
DELETED PROLOGUE FROM “SWORN TO REMEMBER”

Replaying the past was generally not on Samantha Winslow’s agenda, for the present was already laden with far too many issues and traps hijacking all her brain power. Yet, the past had an uncanny way of pushing through the thicket of current problems and taking up residence. Of course, memories were bound to come prancing back, whether Sam wanted them to or not, upon receipt of an invitation to her high school reunion. Ah, high school.

Although Freshman year had started out bumpy with the general fear and angst which accompanied that new situation—would she make it from class to class in three minutes, would she be invited into the Honor Society, would she make the basketball team, would she have any friends—Sam accomplished all four; the most significant being the connection with her closest allies, Nicki, Denise and Alyssa, her Sworn Sisters. After connecting with them, high school was fun, exciting, challenging, and memorable. But one night towards the end of senior year stood out and seeped into every crevasse of her mind, eclipsing all the good.

It was the night of Alyssa’s last high school party, although she didn’t call it a party to her parents’ faces. It was a gathering of a few friends. Which turned into a few dozen. Usually these parties were a chaotic, happy get-together. But this particular night was an oddity in which their classmates seemed to be on a mission to self-destruct. Was it the fear of starting a new life and leaving the old one behind or the full moon?

Up until that night, it had been an amazing feeling being a senior – the top of the heap. She and her friends were involved in the things they loved the most. Alyssa was a cheerleader, Nicki, editor-in-chief of their school publication, Denise, President of Student Council and Sam, the center on the girls’ basketball team and ranked first in her class, thereby achieving the honor of delivering the farewell speech at their graduation ceremony.

But that night's mood was downright depressing. Instead of groups of kids hanging together talking and laughing, there was a one-on-one thing going on. Except for Sam. She supposed she contributed to the strangeness by keeping to herself most of the night, a butterfly on the wall. She scanned the basement for the one person she couldn't stop thinking about. Michael McCain. And there he was, standing casually against a pillar, tall and thin, kind of lanky, talking to one of his baseball teammates before his gaze brushed over her. Sam's heart nearly pounded through her ribs. Those amazing eyes flashed blue green like the Caribbean Sea – not that she'd ever seen the Caribbean Sea. Sam loved his look – different in a laid-back sort of way. His hair was the color of chestnuts with blond streaks from the sun, and she relished how the ceiling lights reflected depth to those strands.

She caught herself smiling and wiped that ridiculous dreamy grin from her mouth. Her huge crush on Michael was affecting the way she interacted with everyone else—or more specifically, failed to interact. She feared his glance might double back. Knowing her, she'd start a conversation with the nearest person and try to act funny or cute so he would take notice, which would just make her look silly and pathetic. She needed to come up with something to say to him, but only nonsense filled her brain and that wouldn't do anything to turn his head.

Michael would never be interested in her anyway. She was kind of conservative, studious; thoughtful she called it. Nicki was more his style, so gorgeous with that long, blond hair and those big, blue eyes. Plus, Nicki was much more animated than Sam. She and Michael were together a lot lately, although Nicki swore they were just friends.

Zeroing in on his handsome face, Sam noticed a black eye. Most likely from his father who was always beating up on him. Mr. McCain recently lost his job - again - and unfortunately, Michael was the only one there for his father to pick on since his mother left, taking his sister with her. Poor Michael. He really did have to move out of that house. Which he'd threatened to do. He said he was leaving the day he turned eighteen. That was a few weeks ago. But of course, he'd wait to graduate. And maybe he was just saying that, because where would he go? At least he'd be off to college in September.

Besides, if he left, who would Sam crush on? Even with his black eye, he was too handsome for words. Most girls didn't go for the angular, shaggy-haired, sulky type, but there was something about him that Sam found so sexy. Maybe it was the intensity of his aquamarine eyes, or maybe his moody disposition. But while that might send her over the moon, for his own sake, he needed to pick up some macho-ness, or his father was going to kill him.

“Hey Sam. What are you doing over here by the wall?” Denise sidled up next to her.

“Just watching.”

“Who are you watching?”

“No one in particular. Everyone, I guess.”

Despite Sam's declaration, her eyes never strayed from Michael.

“Why don't you let me tell him you like him.”

Sam turned and grabbed Denise's arm. “Noooo. Please don't do that. He doesn't like me. Not like that.”

“How do you know? Maybe he's just waiting to hear that you're interested.”

Sam sighed. “I wish. It doesn't really matter. We're graduating soon and he's going to Fordham next year and I'm going to Rutgers. We'll never see each other again.”

“Maybe you'll see him over the summer. I heard he's going to be working down the shore – waitering at some seafood restaurant at night and surfing during the day.”

“That sounds so romantic.” Her heart swelled. “He'll probably meet a gazillion girls who fawn over his prowess on the waves – begging for lessons just so they could stare into his gorgeous eyes while he checks out their tiny bikinis and bronzed skin”

“You have some imagination, Sam. But you should stop the fantasy. It's not helpful to your self-esteem. Who cares what's going to happen over the summer. He's here now and he doesn't have a girlfriend – at least that's the word in the corridors.”

“He doesn't appear to be as enamored with me as I am with him. He's nice enough, of course, but our encounters are just friendly. Not anything more.” She pressed further against the wall.

“It didn't help that I sounded like an idiot in class today when Senor Bennedetto asked me to

translate a passage and I had been daydreaming so I wasn't able to respond in my *perfect* Spanish in order to impress Michael. Instead, I stuttered my apology and asked Senor to repeat the question. He skipped over me and chose someone else."

"You should have stuck with Dan. He's really nice and very cute, in a preppy sort of way. You have something in common with him at least, since you both play basketball. I don't understand why you only went out with him a few times."

No use telling Denise that Michael was the gold standard by which all others were compared. And of course, no one else came close.

Besides, Sam wasn't sure she should get into a relationship. Ever. She might just end up like her parents. They were in love at one point. They met in high school and were supposedly inseparable. And now they were divorced and hated each other.

"If I ever do have a boyfriend, I'm going to make sure the guy cares about me a lot more than I care about him. That way, he'll always be on his toes, doing nice things, saying nice things, trying to win my affections and never being sure if he's succeeded. That would keep him off balance and always trying. I, on the other hand, would keep him guessing by my aloofness and reserve. If I don't give too much, maybe I can't be hurt too much." Sam turned toward Denise to see what she thought.

"Normally, I would think that was crazy, but maybe I'll buy into your craziness. My relationship with Ben is certainly not working when I act normally."

"Why? What's going on? You and Ben have been together for two years."

"He got on my last nerve yesterday after school, so I broke up with him."

"That's the third time this year."

"Things have been tense between us with graduation looming. He'll be working at a camp in the Poconos most of the summer before going off to Drexel and I'll be attending Wellesley in the fall. Maybe we should just break up now for good since we won't be seeing each other much over the next four years."

"But you love him." Sam's voice escalated with her passionate declaration.

Tears shone in Denise's eyes. "I do. I wish I didn't. Being apart for college is going to be so hard."

Sam scanned the crowd looking for Ben. He was over in the corner talking to Carly, the flirt. Just because he and Denise had a disagreement, didn't mean he should be chatting it up with another girl. She hoped Denise didn't notice.

Just then, Rich came over to talk. "What are you two doing over here holding up the wall?"

Denise turned on her smile. "What would you have us do?"

Rich leaned down and whispered in her ear. This was not good. Sam thought about jumping in between the two of them, but she was too late. Denise looked up at him and he swooped in for a kiss. And Denise didn't push him away.

Easing away from Rich, Denise smiled up at him. "That was unexpected."

"Come in the back room with me and I'll surprise you more."

The back room of Alyssa's basement was unfinished except for a few old couches and chairs, and that's where couples went to make-out big time.

"Thanks for the offer, but no. I just want to stay out here." She held onto his arm, preventing him from leaving.

Sam glanced over to Ben, hoping he was still occupied with Carly, but his eyes shot daggers in Denise's direction.

Elbowing Denise, Sam whispered, "What are you doing?" There could be no mistaking Sam's annoyance.

Denise turned toward Sam, so only she could hear. "Making Ben jealous. Maybe he won't be such an ass in the future—when we get back together."

"I think you're making him more than jealous. He looks like he's about to kill Rich."

Denise peeked over to see if Ben was barreling in their direction, but instead he went storming up the stairs and out the door.

"I guess we won't be getting back together tonight." Denise's initial buoyant mood slumped.

"How about going outside?" Rich interjected.

“No, thanks. I’m just going to stay here and talk to Sam for a while.”

He shrugged. “Suit yourself. I’ll be out there with some of the guys if you change your mind.”

Denise leaned back against the wall, inhaling a lungful. “I could just die!!! Whatever possessed me to kiss Rich? Right in front of Ben. I know I wanted to make him jealous. But that was so stupid. Why couldn’t I have just flirted with him? Why did I have to go any further?”

Not having an answer for Denise’s rash behavior, Sam kept her eyes trained on the crowd.

Denise filled the conversation void. “I really love Ben and now I upset him. Every time we broke up in the past, we got back together by the next day. Now, I don’t know. He looked really hurt. And mad. And I’m so sorry.”

“You should be saying those words to him.”

“It was so unlike me to do something like that. Maybe I can blame it on my mother. She keeps telling me I shouldn’t get serious with Ben. As if that hasn’t already happened and I can just turn it off. She’s being so practical, reminding me that I’m going away to college next year and that I should be going as a free woman. I just love when she calls me a woman, even though I still feel like a girl. Do you think I kissed Rich because I’m subconsciously trying to please my mother by ruining what Ben and I have?”

Sam turned to her friend. “Maybe. I think we’re all acting out of character. Graduation is around the corner. Although we’ve been looking forward to it, we’ll all be going in different directions in September. We’re going to miss the safety of high school, the security of our friends. We’ll be starting all over in a new world. It’s a scary thought.”

“I’m going to miss my Sworn Sisters. And I’m really going to miss Ben. But instead of being nicer to one another, we seem to be pushing each other away.”

“Maybe you’re trying to protect yourself now from later heartbreak.” That was one possibility Denise could consider with all her other excuses.

“Where is Alyssa anyway?” asked Denise, stretching her neck to find their other friend.

“She went for a ride with Mark.”

“Mark? I thought she hated him.” Confusion furrowed her brow.

“She does. Or did.” Ever since fourth grade when he stole her favorite scarf and cut it to pieces, she held a grudge against him. “But when Mark showed up tonight, according to Alyssa, he looked older, hotter, which had apparently gone unnoticed in her haze of hatred until now. So she went off with him.”

“She shouldn’t have left her own party. Besides, it’s a violation of the Sworn Sisters’ Rule. If we’re out together, we stay together, looking after each other, protecting each other.”

“Alyssa didn’t give me a chance to interfere with her plan. She dashed out when I wasn’t looking. I think she was feeling warm and fuzzy, thanks to the bottle of vodka the boys snuck in. I guess she feels this is her last hurrah. She has one more chance to pull up her physics grade or she’ll be heading to summer school and prevented from walking with us in the graduation ceremony. Once her parents hear about that, they’ll ground her and force her to study every free hour of every day so she passes the final.”

“You or Nicki could help her pass. You’re both brainiacs in physics.”

“I told her I would. I know Nicki will too.” A ruckus caused Sam to turn back to her sentry duties. “Oh, no.” Sam grabbed Denise’s hand, but her eyes were on Michael and that thug. Carl Nixon.

Bad boy Carl was in Michael’s face and the two of them were pushing at each other. One of the boys stepped in, keeping them apart, but Carl must have decided he wanted blood since he shouted at Michael to meet him at McKinley Park at ten so they could finish this. Not good. Sam’s eyes followed Nicki, who came out of nowhere. She moved in and pulled Michael toward the corner of the basement.

“I hope Nicki can talk some sense into him.” Sam wrung her hands. “Carl’s a bad guy and hangs out with even worse. If Michael fights him and wins, Carl and his gang friends will change the outcome. If Michael loses...I don’t even want to think about that.”

Hopefully, Michael wouldn’t be stupid enough to show up later.

Sam couldn’t look away from the scene that played out. Nicki moved in, close to Michael, sharing the same space, the same air. She gingerly touched his cheek, consoling, soothing. Sam

wanted to be sharing that intimate space with him. Her heart ached with unrequited love and tears stung the back of her eyes. But it wasn't long before Nicki took a step back, hands on hips, an indignant, angry scowl marring her beautiful face.

Michael's mouth moved, saying words Sam couldn't hear, his eyes at first flashing then pleading. Something was going down between them, and it frustrated Sam to distraction to not know what was happening. Their discussion was clearly over more than Michael's intent to fight Carl.

Nicki turned to walk away, her complexion ashen. She almost looked nauseous. Michael caught her hand to stop her, but she yanked it away and stormed off.

Despite their tiff, Sam envied their relationship. They had become good friends over the year, helping each other get through difficult times. Nicki's father had died last year and her mother was suffering from depression. Michael's mother walked out on his father, taking his little sister with her, and his father now used Michael as his punching bag. It wasn't easy for either of them, but they seemed to find solace and friendship with one another.

Sam mentally kicked herself. She should have jumped in to help him deal with his problems.

Nicki wasn't the only one who could understand. After her parents divorced, Sam's father spent all of his time with his new wife's kids, totally ignoring her. Of course, Sam wanted nothing to do with him, but he could have at least tried. Given this, she and Michael had a lot more in common than Michael and Nicki.

But she'd never get the chance to try.

Michael left the party at nine forty-five and never came back. She heard that Michael won the fight, but everyone knew Carl had a lot of friends at Trenton High. And the threat was now out there that Michael better watch his back.

By Monday, the murmurings escalated. Michael had disappeared. The police were interviewing everyone who had been at Alyssa's house on Saturday night. They wanted to know about the fight with Carl, Michael's relationship with his father, with his mother – and anything else anyone was willing to offer. It was scary and unsettling and oh, so sad. When Sam got together

with her Sworn Sisters after school to talk about what was going on, Nicki started to cry. Then they all did.

Nothing productive came from the in-depth investigation. Because there had been no evidence of foul play and since Michael had already reached the age of majority, it was eventually assumed he was just a missing person and the matter was dropped.

But not before graduation. Instead of a joyous occasion, it took on a sense of depression and confusion. The answers were missing; security gone. It seemed as if the student body as a whole had wanted to put as much distance as possible between their once beloved school and their optimistic future.

As Sam re-read the reunion invitation, the bittersweet memories of those final days of high school skipped and twirled through her brain, sometimes fuzzy, sometimes sharp as a knife, threatening to bring back to life those adolescent growing pains. Sam pushed them away.

Over the past fifteen years, she had become a cool, confident attorney rising up the ladder towards partnership at her firm. She and her husband of three years were living the good life in New York City and she had everything she wanted. Denise was now happily married to Ben and they had two children. Nicki, an executive at a music company, and Alyssa, an emergency room nurse, were single by choice, but exploring their options on their own terms.

The handsome face of her old crush wavered before her. Michael McCain.

She might never find out what happened to her old crush, but his memory still elicited strong emotions. He remained a mystery and a reminder of the chance she never took.

NOTE: The Sworn Sisters Series is published by The Wild Rose Press. The first novel, "Sworn to Forget" (Nicki's story) was released in August, 2018. The second novel, "Sworn to Remember" (Sam's story) was released in May, 2019. Two more books are part of the series.

*Find out more about the
"Sworn Sisters" Series*