

HONEYBEE

by

Allyson Elizabeth Mead

A Thesis

Submitted to the

Graduate Faculty

of

George Mason University

in Partial Fulfillment of

The Requirements for the Degree

of

Master of Fine Arts

Creative Writing

Committee:

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Date: _____ Summer Semester 2015
George Mason University
Fairfax, VA

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A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at George Mason University

by

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Bachelor of Arts
University of Central Arkansas, 2012

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DEDICATION

This is dedicated to my ever encouraging writer friends Kathryn and Sarah, my mother who encouraged me even when I got a liberal arts degree, and my Buzz Café writing group.

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I would like to thank the many friends, relatives, and supporters who have made this happen. A special thanks to Kathryn for always being available to act as a sounding board. My family always supported me even when I was at the end of my rope. Professor Susan Shreve was always encouraging, and I never would have seen the end of this without her help.

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ABSTRACT

HONEYBEE

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George Mason University, 2015

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This thesis is a fictional piece meant to explore the mentality of a seventeen-year-old girl in a relationship with a twenty-four-year-old male in modern day Mississippi. Through describing a trip taken to the beach in Biloxi, Mississippi, the location is explored in terms of tourist attractions as well as atmosphere while the story remains focused on a plot involving the seventeen-year-old starting to recognize flaws in her previously idolized partner, which are only exacerbated when he proposes to her on the last night of their trip. This thesis is a character-driven novella meant for new adult readers.

PART ONE

I like similes. Want to read one? July in Mississippi is like the sweaty, hairy armpit of an overweight guy who just spent two hours running laps outside in July in Mississippi. It's that hot, humid, and sticky.

Or maybe instead of running laps, he should be riding a bike. Riding mine home from Shirley's leaves me soaked in a thin layer of sweat. But it's even worse when I have to walk my bike.

I don't know who just leaves a broken beer bottle on the sidewalk, but they should be taken out back and shot. My wheel has a nice hole in it and it's still a mile and a half to my house, which I have absolutely no intention of walking in the blistering heat.

But I must have done something good at some point – I can't begin to imagine what – because the auto shop is right across the street.

The inside is nice and cool and the soda machine is actually stocked and drops a can of soda when I put a dollar in.

A grease-monkey looking guy in a blue work shirt with a black smear in his stubble comes out from the back wiping his hands. "Hi. Can I help you?"

"Yes. Some amoeba left broken glass on the sidewalk and my bike tire is flat. I don't suppose you'd have any way to patch it for me?"

"Yeah. Sure, got just the thing. Wheel it around back and I'll get set up."

I take my bike to the garage behind the office and he picks it up with one hand to put it on its side on a worktable.

“By the way,” he says as he starts fiddling with a can of something. “My name’s Sawyer.”

“Jen,” I tell him.

He nods and sets to work on the tire without saying much else. It’s something I appreciate. Too many people feel the need to talk all the time. Like my classmates always going on about school clubs or celebrities or gossiping about this or that person.

He pumps air into my patched tire then sets the bike back on the ground, pressing down on it. “Tire looks like it’ll hold,” he says. “Is it still hotter than Satan’s griddle out there?”

“He’s making pancakes as we speak.”

Sawyer nods and picks my bike back up in one hand. “Come on. I’ll drive you home.”

“Seriously? Isn’t this how most stories about girls getting kidnapped start? Besides, you’re working right now, aren’t you?”

“If it’s a slow enough day for me to patch a bike tire, it’s a slow enough day for me to drop you off. Or are you in that much of a hurry to melt into a puddle?”

I’m not in any kind of hurry to do so, actually. When I don’t respond, he puts the bike in the truck bed of a POS. One of those Chevys that’s older than I am with a dented passenger door. The paint is peeling off of the hood, and I’m going to be surprised if this thing has working AC.

But as he starts driving down Main Street, he lets me control the radio. The volume has exactly two settings – whisper and jet take-off – but I find my favorite rock station and start singing along to Def Leopard.

“You like the oldies?” he asks.

“Always have,” I tell him. “I can’t stand that pop garbage.”

“Yeah, I’m with you.”

We pull up in front of my house. Sawyer gets out with me to pull my bike down from the back of the truck.

“Thanks for the ride,” I tell him. “Next time I have a flat, I’ll know who to go to.”

“Sure,” Sawyer agrees. “Stop by the shop anytime.” He pauses and adds, “Anytime. I mean it. Really.”

I’m not dense. I can get what he’s hinting at. “Yeah?”

“Yeah. And by the way?” He points at the large yellow sticker on my bike.

“Cute honeybee.”

Even at sixteen, I knew Sawyer and I could be something.

My name is Jennifer Marie Brenner. I don’t like to be called Jennifer. I can’t stand to be called Jenny. “Jen” is what I prefer everyone to call me. Jen is who I would prefer to be as an adult, and since I’m seventeen I don’t see any harm in getting a head start.

Jen will go to a good college. Berkley or Brown or somewhere prestigious where people will ask where she went and they'll recognize the name as soon as she tells them. She'll live in a big city where there are museums and art galleries and plays that she'll go to, collecting pamphlets and playbills into a collage on one of the walls of her white-painted steel and glass filled apartment with a view. She'll talk intelligently at cocktail parties about promising artists and foreign affairs. Everyone will be just a little bit jealous of her, but she'll be so cultured and charming that they'll have to like her.

It's a fantasy, one which I hold particular fondness for because it is so different from the life I live now. There is nothing exciting in the backwoods of Mississippi. Nothing but kudzu and mosquitoes, anyway. And while I may already be interested in music and photography and Greek history, it hasn't been enough to make any of my classmates want to spend time with me. So I buckle down, push myself into my schoolwork with the belief that being a straight A student will open the door to all those things I want for my future.

My father always seems to approve of my choice to dedicate to myself to my studies. He's one of those guys who is never satisfied unless everything is perfect American pie. A big house with a lush green lawn and a wife who wanders around the kitchen in an apron baking pies and who vacuums in pearls. He is some big important man in the company that he works for. I do not know the details of it except that he makes a goodly amount of money and that his work keeps him often away from the house until all hours of the night and even frequently on the weekends.

Mom is always complaining about him being gone. She hasn't been the same since we moved here from New Hampshire because Dad got his big promotion. She had to quit her job – which Dad always says was more of a hobby than actual work – of dressing up storefront windows. But she says that she liked it, liked making friends with all the boutique owners and having brunch with them in the cafes downtown, even when she had to take me along in a stroller. There's not so much for her to do now, a stay-at-home wife and mother with a husband always working and a daughter just shy of senior year.

That's probably why she smothers me. I'm going to be starting my senior year at the end of summer, but according to her I'm "still her little honeybee." She's less like a helicopter and more like an ankle monitor. Always wanting to know where I am, who I'm with, when I'll be home. If I were nine years old, I would have more patience, but at seventeen and having never been in any more significant trouble than breaking curfew that she's aware of I should be given some leash. She even still tries to have opinions on the friends I hang out with like I'm still a kid needing her to arrange my play dates.

Shirley Billings is my best and really only friend my age. She's a rose-colored glasses kind of girl with pretty blonde hair and breasts that would get her all the male attention she wanted if she wasn't a lesbian involved with Michelle Johnson, a mousy little bookworm who favors the most awful sweaters. Shirley and I don't have much in common except that we both know what it's like to be in a relationship with someone everyone around us says we shouldn't be. For her, it's Michelle.

For me, it's Sawyer.

I usually have no patience for boys. Boys mature slower than girls, and all the girls I know are plenty immature so the boys can only be worse. But Sawyer isn't a boy; he's a man. He doesn't think it's weird that I don't want to spend time with my classmates or judge me because I don't hang out with people my own age. He's exactly the same way.

He gets it. Sawyer didn't bother with his classmates in school, or at least not to a point that he maintained any relationships with them now. He focuses all of his energy on more important things. When we reached for the same John Locke book in the library and our hands touched, we looked up, our eyes met, and I swear we both thought, "You get me."

He works at the garage in town Tuesday through Saturday, so four days a week I go and spend time with him in the back room after school then most of the day on Saturday. Sawyer's second cousin, Grayson, owns the garage, and he pretty much lets Sawyer and me get away with everything. He does make Sawyer do all the actual hard work in the garage, though; he doesn't even go back there much. He prefers to run the front desk, kicking his boots up onto the counter and looking through his underwear catalogues. He's gross and slimy, but I have to be nice to him because he lets me hang around the shop and he keeps the fact that Sawyer and I are together a secret.

"Hi, Gray," I greet him as I walk into Grayson's Garage on Thursday before final exams. "Is Sawyer in the back?"

"Oh, as always. Working hard." He grins, showing his crooked teeth, and flips through the page of his catalogue.

“Busy today?”

“Not particularly. Just Mr. Nate’s truck again.”

“That thing is a rust-bucket.”

“Agreed, but as long as he keeps paying to keep it fixed I’m more than happy to assure him we can keep it running for a while longer.”

“Businessman to the end.” I hike my backpack up higher on my shoulder. “So can I go back?”

“Sure, sure. Got a new case of pop in the fridge.”

“Thanks.”

I can feel his eyes on my backside as I walk away, but I’m pretty used to him staring at me. He and Sawyer live together in a small Antebellum-era house with peeling paint around the windows. Even though we can get some privacy when I visit by going back to Sawyer’s room, we still have to deal with Grayson whenever we’re in the common areas. Sawyer can’t cook himself anything that isn’t in the microwave, so I will cook for him when I go over and Grayson will always stare at me as I move around the kitchen.

I’m not a supermodel or anything, but I’m small-framed and enjoy spoiling myself with painted nails and highlights in my hair. I am not obsessed with appearances; I hardly know anything about fashion designers and labels and what is or isn’t in style for a particular “season.” I just know that people always judge on appearances. If you look good, people are going to respect you. If you look sloppy, everyone will think there’s something wrong with you.

Sawyer always looks dirty when he's been working at the garage all day, though. He smiles as I walk into the back, a smear of grease along his right cheek. "Hey, Jen."

"Hey, handsome." I cross the room, avoiding the wrenches and screws and whatever else detritus on the floor, to give him a kiss. He grabs a rag and quickly cleans off his hands, which are even more covered than his cheek.

"Sorry, I'm a mess," he says.

"Imagine that." I lean up on my toes – Sawyer is tall and broad across the shoulders so that I look even smaller in comparison – and give him a kiss on the mouth, lingering to feel his stubble against my cheeks for a few seconds before pulling back.

He takes my bag and hangs it up on one of the coat hooks. "How was school?"

"Boring." I grab a plastic chair in the most awful shade of pea green and pull it over to watch Sawyer work. I'm considered to be incredibly book-smart, but I can't handle anything mechanical to save my life. It's really impressive how he can just know what part to pull or twist or tweak to get something as powerful as a car to do exactly what he wants.

"Did you at least learn anything?"

"Of course not. Well, no, I take that back. Chastity was panicking in the locker room before P.E. because she's worried she might have gotten an STD from Joe."

"There is nothing more ironic than a girl named Chastity with an STD."

"Right?"

I have little in the way of fond feelings for most my classmates. I have always been considered different just because I prefer to do something with my time rather than stand around talking about the hottest guys and the latest pop songs.

When we were all little kids, it didn't matter so much because some of us were readers and some of us spent our time playing Red Rover but there weren't really bullies in elementary school because everyone was all knobby knees and fear of having to "pull the yellow card" in class.

I even had a best friend. Cassie. We both had dolphin notebooks, and we were still at that point when that meant we were going to be best friends forever. 'Forever' apparently means a year. Like when she invited me to her birthday party and next thing you know my mom has humiliated me and all of the girls that Cassie eventually replaced me with are laughing at me.

It's like I missed some critical formative years in social conditioning being cast out by all the girls in my age group in elementary school. I'm just not like them. I'm sure a lot of people would be concerned about the amount of time I spend with a guy eight years older than I am, but I understand Sawyer, and he understands me. He's grown out of the age where everything is about peer pressure, so it doesn't matter to him if I tell a joke at an inappropriate moment or obsess over a topic and research it for three days before I stop caring.

He doesn't mind that I've set my mind on getting a tattoo, looked up everything from where locally there is to get tattoos done, read reviews of the different parlors, calculated the expected cost, could recite an aftercare list from memory, and that I can

give a well-thought-out and organized five minute speech on why I even want a tattoo. Never mind that I've done all this work and won't even be able to get a tattoo until I turn eighteen. There's nothing wrong with being prepared.

I don't even pay attention to the things I'm jabbering at Sawyer, just filling the quiet in the back room of the garage. He listens attentively like whatever I'm saying is the most important thing he's heard all day. Sometimes when I run out of things to talk about, he'll pick up the slack and talk and talk and talk. I guess it's a side-effect of spending all of his time with machines. At least with me spending most of my time reading I'm interacting with words and characters. Sawyer is mostly a loner just like me, but spending all day working by himself probably makes him lonely.

"Let's go for a drive," Sawyer says as he pulls a sparkplug out of the truck and starts wiping it off with a stained rag.

"Well, you know, I'd love to, but right now you're kind of busy with this little thing called a job. Pretty sure even Gray won't let you just take off."

Sawyer laughs and starts banging around under the hood of Nate's truck. "I don't mean right now. I mean after I'm done. Let's go to the dairyyette and get an ice cream. It's too hot and humid today."

"We can do that."

He grins wider. "Or you can call your mom and come up with something and we can actually get dinner instead of just ice cream."

It's a hard deal to turn down. I mean, I'm not itching to go home and have dinner with my mom. Dinner with Sawyer is so much better. He gets food to go then we drive

somewhere out of the way and have a picnic in the back of his truck. Sometimes we turn the radio on and he badgers me until we dance like idiots, but even that I don't mind. We don't just sit there in an uncomfortable silence broken up by "pass the salt."

"Sure, that sounds good." I pull out my cell phone and dial Shirley's number. It takes her a few rings to pick up.

"Hello?"

"Hey, it's me."

"Oh. Hi, Jen. What's up?"

"Can I quote-unquote 'have dinner at your place tonight?' Sawyer and I want to get something to eat together."

"Um. Sure, I can do that. You know, one of these days I want to meet this guy you spend so much time with. Fair is fair. I mean, you know Michelle."

"Well, yeah, of course I do. I've had half of my classes all through school with her. I knew her since before you two were a couple. Since before anyone knew you two were a couple."

Shirley never actually says how it is they got outed to her parents (and then her parents called Michelle's parents who called the school who told the teachers who... you get the idea. Total mess that ended with everyone knowing who the school "Lesbos" are). But whatever the case.

"That's what I mean. You need to introduce me to him."

"Yeah, maybe. So, anyway, yes, dinner? You'll cover for me?"

"Cross my heart."

“Cool, thanks.”

Sawyer chuckles. “I only caught your side, but can I make a guess?”

“Yeah, sorry, but we’re not doing double dates with Shirley and Michelle. Can you even imagine the four of us at the movie theatre lined up like ducks to see whatever the newest stupid comedy is?”

“But we love our mad adventures, right?”

Sawyer and I do love our mad adventures. Which is really just what we call it when we decide to do something completely random like go mini-golfing or grab huge cardboard boxes from behind the grocery store and go grass sledding – which is both phenomenally fun and life threateningly dangerous and I recommend it wholeheartedly – or just going out into the woods, pulling onto an overgrown path, and driving as far as we can to see where it leads.

Doing homework in the garage while Sawyer is working is surprisingly not distracting. Normally I can’t stand to have anybody around when I’m trying to focus on anything from reading a book to brushing my teeth. But Sawyer lets me think out loud, making my little comments on my reading for English like, “Seriously, he’s dead. Let it go,” and, “Stupid girl did what?” I know he doesn’t remember any of the work he did before he left school -- and who can blame him; not a bit of it is important to get by in the real world -- but he listens to me talk and jokes back and keeps me from giving up on the whole process of homework.

I finish my last assignment about the time he does whatever with the doohickey and gets it back in the engine.

“Now can we go for a drive and get dinner? I’m starving.”

“Sure that Shirley can cover for you if you’re gone that long? Your mom won’t send out the national guard?”

Sawyer thinks my mom is as ridiculous as I do. I may not be eighteen, but that doesn’t mean I need someone watching over me all the time. I know he sympathizes with being annoyed with parents since he doesn’t have a close relationship with his own. The only member of his family Sawyer has any relationship with at all is Grayson, and that’s just because he relies on Gray so much. If it weren’t for the fact that Sawyer works for Gray and lives with him and relies on him for money, I think Sawyer would even be done with Grayson.

So, yeah, he avoids his family. He doesn’t blame me for not wanting to be smothered by my mom.

“Of course.”

“Then let’s go.”

Sawyer’s truck is awesome. Even if it is a rolling junk heap. It’s our freedom. We can go anywhere, even towns over where no one knows us, and go to dinner or the movies or wherever we want to just because we have a way to get there. I can’t wait until I get my own car. I’ll go where and when I want without having to justify why I want to see a Johnny Depp movie or what I’m going to get when I go to the mall.

But until then I have to rely on Sawyer to be my knight in a dirty white eight-cylinder steed with mismatched hubcaps.

My bag has its own little spot in the back seat where he never puts any rags or tools or anything messy. I like it; it's a permanent spot for mine in his, and every time he doesn't put something in that place is a moment that he's thinking about me even when I'm not there. I like to know that Sawyer is thinking about me. I know realistically I can't be on his mind twenty-four seven, but I want him to think of me as often as he can.

And of course he is always a gentleman, doing things like opening doors for me. Chivalry is not dead; it's the unwanted red-headed step-child of the manners world. Everyone wants to ignore it. Women can do anything men can do -- and I am of the belief that many things we can do better. I am perfectly capable of opening my own doors. But if we're dating, at least try and be polite. If I'm offended at your insinuation that I need your help, I'll tell you so. Otherwise, be a gentleman. It's a dying art that is underappreciated, but Sawyer takes to it like a duck to water.

I always get to pick what we listen to on the radio because Sawyer can listen to anything but that twanging 'my dog left me' music is like forks stabbing in my ears. I'm a rock and roll girl all the way, from Boston to ACDC and back again. Sawyer lets me use one of the shortcuts on his radio for my favorite station, and by the time he's pulled onto the two-lane stretch of nothing that passes for a highway around here I've got Kansas blasting through the speakers. Sawyer sometimes sings along, sometimes not. He can't carry a tune in a bucket, but I couldn't hit a note with a baseball bat, so I don't care that much.

We drive along for a ways, just listening to the radio because sometimes being together is just about *being* together. A million trees pass by as the odometer racks up the

miles. By the time we've reached the little dairyette, I'm glad we decided to get dinner instead of ice cream because I'd kill for actual food.

It's one of those tiny little places with ten tables, checker patterned tablecloths, and waitresses in canvas cloth aprons. There's hardly anyone here even though it's dinnertime, which is exactly the way we like it. We're seated right away. Sawyer gets sweet tea and I get a soda.

I'm thinking catfish. With hush puppies and a side of fries and coleslaw. I refuse to be one of those women who feel like they have to order a salad when they eat in public. I'm a human, not a rabbit; I can't live on lettuce. And who doesn't love hush puppies? I can fill up on hush puppies.

"At least they have the hush puppies already on the table," Sawyer says, pushing the basket toward me.

And at least they taste good, especially with a little tartar sauce.

"These are good," Sawyer says, the two of us apparently sharing a single thought.

The waitress brings our drinks and Sawyer adds sugar to his sweet tea. The way he likes it you'd think he might as well just order a tall cold glass of pancake syrup.

"Thanks," Sawyer says.

"You both ready to order?"

"Sure are. I'm going to have the catfish sandwich with sweet potato fries and a small lake of ranch dressing."

I'll be stealing some of those. Sawyer grins across the table at me like he knows exactly what I intend to do. By now he should; it will hardly be the first time.

The waitress writes it down then turns to me with that service industry smile.

“And what is your little sister going to have?”

“I’m not his little sister.”

The waitress pauses and blinks at me owlishly. Like she doesn’t understand.

It’s not like I look anything like Sawyer. He’s blonde, I’m natural mahogany, he’s tanned, I’m creamy pale with freckles. He’s tall and broad, and I’m short and slim. The only way we could look more different is if we weren’t both southern cornbread-fed white kids.

“I’ll have the three-piece with fries and coleslaw, thanks.”

“Um, yes, of course.”

Sawyer shakes his head after her as she hurries away. “Well, that just happened.”

“Honestly. Do I seem like your little sister?” I don’t have siblings, don’t know much about siblings and don’t much care to, but from what little I do know about siblings it would be more usual than not for a big brother to not take his little sister out for dinner.

“I’m sure she didn’t mean anything by it.”

“Well. At least she knows better now.”

Sawyer grins and prods at my hand across the table with his rough fingers. “You know, maybe the reason she wanted you to be my little sister was so she could leave her number on the receipt for me. Maybe she thinks I’m sexy.”

I’ve never been the aggressive type. But even knowing that Sawyer is as much mine as I’m his, a bit of green-eyed monster is rearing its ugly head. “I’ll be right back. I’m going to go show her why you don’t mess with what’s mine.”

“Sit down, Jen. She can bat her eyelashes all she wants. You know you’re my favorite girl.”

“I had better be your only girl.”

When the food comes back, the waitress roves her eyes over Sawyer and is about to find out how a hush puppy is capable of putting someone in the hospital. Lucky for her, she catches my eye and figures out quick to mosey her butt on to someone else’s guy.

And the food is good for a run of the mill mom and pop catfish restaurant. The fries are thick cut wedges and come in a small mountain. The bun for Sawyer’s sandwich looks like homemade bread, which means someone has too much time on their hands.

He eats like a slob, getting mayonnaise from his sandwich and ranch from his sweet potato fries all over his mouth and fingers. “You’re like a child,” I tell him, grabbing a napkin and helping him clean up.

And like a child he taps his finger in the ranch and then pokes the tip of my nose.

I cross my eyes and he starts laughing at me. “Really, Sawyer? You want to play it that way?”

“Now, Jen, behave yourself. Don’t start food fights in public; it’s very immature.”

“You’re the one dating me.”

He leans over and licks my nose clean because of course normal people do things like that. We’re actually turning into one of those couples who do things like this in public? Then again, back home we can’t do things like this because we run the risk of

someone who knows one of us or who knows my parents seeing us. If this is our only chance to be one of those schmoopy couples, at least until I turn eighteen, then we might as well take it.

On another pass-through the waitress drops the check on the table. Sawyer picks up the pen, some obnoxious purple thing with a fish-shaped eraser on the end. “Grab us some peppermints? I’ll get this.”

“Sure, sure.” Sawyer finishes scribbling on the ticket and I make my way up front to where the bowl of mints is sitting by the register. They only have the red ones, none of the green spearmint that I prefer.

Sawyer comes up behind me and I hand him a mint.

“Here,” he says, handing the check and his card to our waitress, who punches everything in. She swipes his card through and the little screen reads “Authorizing. Authorizing. Authorizing.” I grab a few more peppermints and put them in my pocket.

Finally, the waitress says, “I’m sorry, sir. Your card isn’t going through.”

Sawyer looks like a kicked dog as he pulls out his wallet and starts going through the bills. His lips pull back, and I can tell he doesn’t have the cash.

I reach into my bag and pull out my own money pouch out. I get a pretty generous allowance, so I have the bills to cover dinner. I hand them over with a quick, “I’ve got it. You can call the bank in the morning and find out what’s going on with that screwed up card.”

Sawyer grins a sheepish little smile. “Yeah, I’ll have to do that.”

The only day worse than the Thursday before final exams is the Friday before. Everyone is in some kind of a panic, either to buckle down and actually do all the studying they put off until now or to live it up and throw huge parties before the tests destroyed them.

I have ambition. I don't want to be in the majority of people here who don't even finish high school, let alone the majority on top of that that don't so much as start college. I love Sawyer, but I'm not going to make his mistake and just give up because the system is a total joke.

And it is. I wouldn't mind being homeschooled if it wouldn't just be another way for Mom to make her life about mine twenty-four hours a day. We could cut through all the busy work and get right to the meat and potatoes, so to speak, focus on actually learning things besides which celebrities are in which magazines and what of my classmates are dating whom. Everyone will argue that school is critical for socialization and that's why it's important to actually attend high school. I think the people who say things like that have forgotten what it was like to actually be in high school.

If you need proof that high school socialization isn't all good, just take a look at Shirley. She's a rose-colored glasses kind of girl. It's stupid. And god knows it would be flat-out tragic if anyone ever took that from her. But the world of high school in the Bible belt is not kind to teenage girls who don't like teenage boys.

But she still manages to keep a spring in her step as she walks up to me and leans against the lockers. "Good morning, Jen."

"Yeah, good morning."

“It’s finally Friday.”

“Took long enough.” I always look forward to the weekends. Even though I never actually do anything with my ‘down time;’ Mom wants me to get involved in some kind of activity or club so that I will spend more time with people my own age. But that is something I don’t want to do. I much prefer to spend the time I have with Sawyer.

“Think there’s any chance you can cover for me a bit this weekend?”

“Again?” Shirley’s lips purse into a frown.

“Come on. What does it hurt you? And you know I would have your back if you needed me to cover for you and Michelle.”

“I’m serious that sometime I want to meet this guy, Jen. If you’re this serious about him, I should know him. I mean, I am your best friend, right?”

History book, math book, math homework, and done. I’m done with this conversation. I’m going to class.

But apparently Shirley can’t pick up the blatant social cue of someone walking away from her. “I’m just saying, if something with this guy ever does go wrong, you can, like, always just call Meesh to come pick you up. But I’m just making sure that you know what you’re doing.”

Take a breath. I turn to her outside of the classroom, ignoring Aaron when he pushes past us, shoulder slamming into mine like he doesn’t even see me. Remember Cassie, the girl that used to be my friend but turned out to be just another stuck-up bitch? Yeah, Aaron is her brother. At Cassie’s birthday party all the girls were trying to get Aaron to kiss them because they had just gotten over that “boys have cooties” stage and

suddenly boys were great. I didn't want Aaron to kiss me. He was a jerk. He used to pull the arms off of our Barbie dolls and put snails in the cups for our pretend tea parties.

But Aaron apparently wanted to kiss me. While all of the girls were bothering him, he was the one who wouldn't leave me alone. He eventually got in trouble for harassing me the way he did, but by that time my mom had already made such a huge fuss about it that she wouldn't let me go over to Cassie's house anymore and had embarrassed me so bad that none of the girls would be friends with me.

None of the girls except Shirley and Michelle. I wouldn't be surprised if Aaron thought I was a lesbian by association.

That's what I'm so excited to spend time with Sawyer, a guy who isn't so immature that can't stand the thought of a girl not falling all over him. "Of course I know what I'm doing," I tell Shirley. "I always know what I'm doing." The history room has a picture of George Washington on the door because no one ever said our school wasn't dripping in clichés. "Now are you done badgering me? Can I go to class, please?"

"Actually I was wondering, since I'm here and all, could I maybe copy your math homework real quick? I'll give it back to you; I just need to copy it during English. Please? Pretty please?"

Sometimes she can be a little exasperating. Not like much of what we learn in school is useful, but knowing something is better than knowing nothing. But she would rather just copy my homework. She just puts on a smile and says "Oh well; it will all work itself out eventually." No matter how many times I try to point out that the world is

not a bright place designed for happiness. You would think she would have learned her lesson, but she insists on looking on the bright side and believing that people are mostly good.

Michelle is kind of like that too, but it's more like she's devoted all of her smarts into figuring out how to make other people act the way she wants towards her. Which is a skill I can admire actually. She keeps high grades in school so that all of the teachers will have to like or at least respect her. And she's on a few different committees and in groups because she's figured out that people have a harder time looking the other way when they know you. But even then, she doesn't excel, is never the leader or president of anything.

The real reason they don't bother to stand out, I'm sure, is because they get enough attention as it is. Especially Shirley. Michelle isn't anything too spectacular with her oversized wardrobe of all blue and white and her mousy brown hair and glasses. But objectively Shirley is pretty in that Wonder Bread America way: blond hair, blue eyes, big breasts. I think a lot of the guys who are the most upset about "the girls" are probably the guys who had ambitions of getting a little taste of that. Because no one can actually think it's their business who anyone else is sleeping with, can they?

But they do. Like me and Sawyer. What's between me and Sawyer is between me and Sawyer, but if people started finding out you can bet no one would take that stance on it. My parents would freak out. Police would be called. It's stupid. In a year I'll be eighteen and can do whatever or whoever I want, but for now I'm not mature enough to make my own decisions apparently. Because eighteen is the magic number,

the magic age where like a switch has been flipped you're all responsible and ready to take on the cold, hard world -- except for the booze. It's just stupid. Maturity is mental, not a result of how many times your skin cells have regenerated. I may be young, but I'm not a child. Everyone else my age is so focused on stupid things, but I have my eyes on the future.

That's what I love about Sawyer. He doesn't talk down to me. There may be an age difference between us, but he doesn't treat me like a child. He's thoughtful and considerate but doesn't act like I'm not equal to him.

Sawyer is the reason why it doesn't bother me when I enter my history classroom and sit by myself in the seat closest to the window. The rest of my classmates are talking about some television show that aired last night and the end of the year party at the quarterback's house this weekend and whatever else is important to them. I don't want to hear Shirley asking questions all through class, but it would be nice to have her in more of my classes than just math. But that doesn't mean I'm going to dumb myself down to make so-called friends. My classmates are the reason people think teenagers are so immature.

The teacher walks into the room with one of those "I had two cups of coffee for lunch. Not with. For," smiles pasted on her face. The school year is so close to being over that she's just given up. I don't even care what she's going to talk about in class today. She's going to spend half of her time trying to keep control. So I start going through my history book on my own, and at least she doesn't bother me as she goes down the roll then starts trying in vain to get people interested in Rutherford Hayes.

Mom doesn't even turn away from the stove to greet me when I get home from school. She's apparently concerned about burning dinner, which she ends up doing half the time anyway. She always jokes that the smoke alarm in our house is like the dinner bell on ranches. Whatever. Dinner is going to be meatloaf, mashed potatoes, and pea salad. Which, you know. She occasionally does something right. Most kids dread the thought of meatloaf, but my mom makes it just right, all squishy with tons of Worcester and ketchup and breadcrumbs.

It would be better if she actually seemed to enjoy cooking, though. Maybe if it were more than just the two of us around to eat it, she might not mind it nearly so much. She says that it is something to keep her busy, like her book club that she attends so irregularly that I'm not sure she's ever actually finished one of the books meant for discussion. She keeps her evenings free in case Dad ever is home, like she's hoping that he'll figure out that he's supposed to stop working at five o'clock so he can be here for dinner and discussions. But she never tells him that it ticks her off like he's supposed to develop psychic powers and figure out that it ticks she's bored and lonely.

Whenever we're together as a family, it's like we're this weird shape that can't figure out how to be a well-balanced triangle. Dad's so checked out, always checking his phone and replying to emails, and Mom hovers over both of us and asks us "how was your day?" "Did you do anything interesting?" "Are you going to be around this weekend?" The only time they get into long, boring conversations is when a relative calls and passes on some bit of so-called important news that they can drone on about.

I will never have a relationship like theirs. I will never have a life like theirs.

Dad is actually home tonight, though to call him “present” would be to give him too much credit.

“Only a few days left of school for you this year, honeybee” Mom says as she scoops another mound of meatloaf onto Dad’s plate like he can’t take care of himself. “I can’t believe you’re going to be a senior. I still think you should get involved in more activities next year.” Mom turns to me with the dish and I pull my plate closer so she can’t try and load my plate down. She frowns as she puts it down on the heat pad. “You have great grades but you just don’t participate. There are so many options. Yearbook, school newspaper. Or maybe you could do something like cheerleading or dance team. You always loved dance classes.”

I did. Back when I was eight and thought that doing a jazz routine in a sequined unitard was the coolest thing ever.

“I’d rather just focus on my classes.”

‘My classes,’ of course, being a euphemism for Sawyer.

But I do make good grades, mostly A’s with a few B’s because whoever decided biology and geometry should be required classes needs to have a special level of hell designed for them where they do nothing but write million-page essays. I don’t understand the educational system at all. Obviously they don’t want to churn out generation after generation of incurable idiots, but that’s exactly what ends up happening. The children who can’t are pushed up, the children who can are squashed down. My mother always tells the story about how I was in the fourth grade helping the other

children with their reading because the teacher wouldn't let us move on until everyone was 'up to standard.'

Mom keeps trying to keep the conversation going, talking about how Dad should try his best to take a day off tomorrow so that the three of us can spend some time together. Maybe this weekend we could all do something on Saturday for once? She sounds so hopeful and even offers to make Tourtière, something she very rarely makes since we left New Hampshire.

Dad makes a noncommittal sound as he pours a small Mississippi river overflow of gravy over his mashed potatoes.

"Actually," I tell her, "I wanted to ask, but I might have plans for this weekend."

"Oh?" And now she looks devastated. "What plans?" she asks.

I had wanted to tell her my alibi when Dad wasn't around, but I can't just let her start making plans or the next thing I know she'll have my weekend booked. It's like it drives her crazy not to have somebody in the house with her. If she had her way, I would be spending all of Saturday doing some kind of mother/daughter bonding and my weekend with Sawyer would be taken away.

"Shirley asked me if I could stay the weekend with her. I was hoping I could go over tomorrow and stay through, like, dinner on Sunday."

My dad looks up from drowning his potatoes and his lips go white when he pushes them together. "I'm not sure that it's such a good idea for you to be spending so much time hanging out with that girl."

Because, oh my gosh, being a lesbian means Shirley wants to get with every girl. I'm not, which means I want to jump every guy on the planet, right?

"Dad, it's nothing. She's just a friend." I turn to Mom, who is the one who actually has the final say about things going on in my life. "So can I?"

Mom parts her mouth and I can't really read the expression on her face. Her top lip pushes a little forward into a frown. "You're going to go to your friend's for the weekend?"

"Yes, please."

"You'll have a lot more time to spend with your friends over summer."

"Yeah, and I will, but I want to spend the weekend with her now. We're going to study for exams."

Her mouth works a bit but she doesn't say anything.

I throw out a bribe. "And then maybe the next weekend we can do something together. Spend a whole Saturday together."

Dad still looks reluctant, but Mom says, "I guess that's fine, honeybee."

I really want mom to stop calling me by that little baby nickname. I'm not a kid anymore, but it's like she can't let go of the years when I was drawing pictures of fields full of flowers and a dog and a large green sun with long green rays poking out of the corner.

"You know, if you want to, you can have Shirley stay over here a few nights over the summer. You're always going over to her house, and I'm sure her parents could use a night or two off."

“Yeah, maybe.” Since I’m not spending much of my time at all actually with Shirley, I’m sure it would be strange for both of us to actually have her over, but I’ll just say I forgot if Mom brings it up again. “But I can go?”

“All right.”

Dad gives Mom that look, that “we’ll be talking about this later” look, but I have permission now and I’m not going to let them rescind it.

“Cool. Thanks, Mom.”

“Just make sure you’re on your best behavior and don’t cause any trouble for Mr. and Mrs. Billings.”

“You know I’m never any trouble.” Because I’m not dumb enough to get caught. But this time there’s absolutely no chance of me making any trouble for the Stepford parents since I won’t be in their house.

I might be a little trouble for Sawyer, but I think he kind of likes it that way.

After dinner, I go up to my room to pretend to study. I actually should be reading over the notes from history – the Third Servile War. But I don’t feel like studying, and I can’t imagine the test being particularly difficult since the teacher is one of those “more work for you is more work for me” types. Multiple choice and true/false are pretty easy for him to grade, I’m sure.

Downstairs, Mom and Dad have started arguing. I don’t want to listen, but I also kind of do. I’m curious what could actually get them talking to one another, even if it’s not cordially.

“You just give her blanket permission to go off and spend all that time with a girl like that Shirley Williams? Do you have any idea what kind of trouble that could be?”

“Jen isn’t interested in girls like that. I don’t understand why it should be a problem. Jen could stand with having a few more friends that she spends time with. I try and try and can’t get her interested in doing anything with her classmates.”

I haven’t told Mom that none of them really like me. I definitely haven’t told her that she is at least partially responsible for why.

“Mr. Thomlin” – Dad’s curmudgeon of a boss who probably only finds joy at the closing of local Mom-n-Pop Shops – “has gone on rants about how those girls, whatever their names, Shirley and Miranda –.”

“Michelle.”

“Whatever the case. He says that those girls are causing all kinds of problems in school, getting all the boys stirred up.”

Because Mr. Thomlin would blame Shirley for all the guys who try to convince her they could “make” her straight or call her and Michelle “dykes.” Mr. Thomlin’s son, Roger, is obviously the one talking to his dad, and as one of the boys who still fantasizes about seeing Shirley’s breasts he doesn’t have much of a podium to preach from.

“Well, Mr. Thomlin isn’t part of this family so he doesn’t get a say in what Jen does.”

“I *am* a part of this family, and I don’t want Jen going to that girl’s house.”

“She’s going,” Mom says. I’m kind of surprised. This is hardly the first time she and Dad have argued. It’s hardly the first time they’ve argued this week, even. But Mom

usually backs down whenever Dad raises his voice. This time she's actually standing her ground. I'm sure that this isn't actually about me. But it certainly will affect me if Dad puts his foot down and she relents.

"I said no, Lisa. Now, I don't want to talk about it anymore."

"Well, we're going to talk about it. I don't care what your boss thinks. Shirley is the only friend Jen spends time with outside of school. What am I supposed to do, tell Jen that because your boss might care who his employee's daughter hangs out with that she can't be friends with someone anymore?"

"Sometimes we have to do things that are for the best of everyone, even if they're hard."

"You mean the best for you. What Jen and I want never comes into consideration. It's all about what you want and what makes you happy."

"And what in the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"That you think you're a big success because you have an office job and people who answer to you and a big house but your wife and daughter aren't happy and you don't even care."

"Of course you're not happy right now when we're arguing."

"I'm not happy ever, Scott." Their voices move further away like they're walking towards the kitchen. I put my pens down and tiptoe out into the hallway to linger by the stairs so I can hear. I have never heard them like this, and it's kind of frightening. I don't know what my parents would be like in a real fight. I don't want to find out, but I'm also not sure how much say I would have in that if they exploded right now.

Mom continues: "I hate it here. Because you decided that your job was the most important thing, I had to leave everything in my life behind. I had to quit my job --."

"A part-time job."

"But one I liked, Scott. A job I really liked, and there's nothing like it I can do here when your job is to shut down all the businesses that would hire me for a storefront dressing position around here. I had to leave everyone I knew behind, all of my friends and family, because you wanted to be the big shot. I spend every day cooped up in the house with no one to talk to and nothing to do because you wanted a homemaker."

"So why is this the first I'm hearing of this?"

"How am I ever supposed to tell you anything when you aren't home?" Mom actually sounds like she's about to cry, which isn't something I see her do. She's the clench her jaw, purse her lips type, not prone to tears unless she's watching a tragic movie. It takes a lot to get her to cry. I know because I'm the same way. "You're gone all the time. You leave before Jen and I are even awake in the morning and as often as not don't make it back in time for dinner. You always have 'something to finish up' at the office. What are you doing for those twelve-hour days if not taking care of all the work that keeps you away from your own family?"

"Maybe I would be more prone to wanting to come home if you didn't raise your hackles every time the two of us try to talk anymore."

"Do you know what happened to me today, Scott? Some women were outside the grocery store handing out fliers for some big meeting at the church to discuss the town's anniversary celebration. No one even tried to pass one to me. So I asked them about it,

and Kelly Harper said that she didn't think I would be interested since I'm not from here. We've lived here how many years now, Scott? How many?"

"Well, coming up on nine now."

"Almost nine years. I've raised my child here, and yet to everyone else whose ancestors probably personally placed the bricks for the town hall I'm never going to belong here. And they're right."

"Something that small got you this upset? Christ, Lisa."

"It's not that. I wouldn't even care about that except that this isn't the first time I've been made to feel like an outsider. I want to leave, Scott. I want to go back to New Hampshire or Massachusetts or, damn, even Montana would be better than this."

"I can't just up and leave my job or the house or take Jen out of school right before her senior year."

And all of a sudden I'm a lot more invested. I want to get out of this place. More than Mom, even.

Mississippi is a whole lot of nothing. Nothing but kudzu, anyway. And, seriously, that stuff is terrifying. I've seen it eat a school bus, and any plant that can eat a school bus is too intense for me. But anyway.

I dream of living in a big city with coffee shops on every corner and taxis and theaters and galleries and restaurants that aren't a 24-hour grease pit of a diner (with surprisingly good milkshakes and unsurprisingly bad everything else). I want to be able to ride my bike down sidewalks, not dirt roads.

I can't wait to see it all. The skyscrapers and taxis and museums. I already know that I'm going to apply to schools in every big city from Seattle to Chicago to New York and New Orleans. There's a reason why, despite my utter disdain for all things public school, I put in the effort of getting good grades. I want to get out of here. I want to be away from my parents and this whole deadbeat environment.

My thoughts are interrupted by the sound of something shattering downstairs. I run down and into the kitchen. Dad is staring at Mom with a shocked expression on his face. Her hand is still in the air, and the dish that held the meatloaf is on the floor against the wall broken into pieces. The meatloaf lays on top of it, no longer looking heavy and delicious. The ketchup looks like blood on the wall.

"Honeybee," Mom says through her teeth. "Why don't you go ahead to Shirley's? Go pack a bag. I'll drive you."

I turn and run back upstairs. I throw a few changes of clothes, pajamas, toothbrush, hairbrush, notebook, and a few other things into my backpack. I don't know what happened or what is going to happen, but I don't want to be here for it.

I go down and toward the front door.

"I'll drive you," Mom calls.

"No. I'm walking."

I get out on the street and go straight for Sawyer's. It's about a fifteen minute walk normally, but I make it there in ten. I don't go over often so his neighbors won't get nosy and ask questions, but I still know you have to wiggle the toilet handle to make the

water stop running and that the kitchen window tends to stick closed since someone was sloppy in painting the sill.

I bang on the door with my fist and it only takes Sawyer a few minutes to come to the door. As soon as he does, I step in without waiting for him to even say hello.

“Jen?” He closes the door then hugs me. I drop my backpack onto the floor and let him wrap me up. “What’s wrong?”

“Is Grayson here right now?”

“No, he’s out drinking with his buddies. We’re on our own for the evening. So you can tell me without worrying about him overhearing. Come on, Jen. Can’t make it better if you don’t tell me what’s wrong.”

I shake my head but start telling him anyway. “My parents are arguing. Bad arguing.”

We move to the couch. Sawyer says “tell me about it,” and I do, telling him how it had started as this little thing about me spending the weekend with “Shirley” and how it quickly escalated into thrown meatloaf. “Mom told me to go ahead to Shirley’s house, so. Is it okay if I just stay here the whole weekend?”

“Of course it is,” he says like it didn’t even need to be asked. But then he pauses and says, “I have a better idea.”

“Oh yeah?”

He nods. “If we stay here, we’ll be stuck inside so people don’t see us together going in and out of the house. But if we went away for the weekend?”

“Away.”

He smiles and says, “Yeah.” He’s lit up like a kid, visibly excited. “I was thinking maybe we could take a trip this summer, but if your parents already know you’re going to be gone this whole weekend then why shouldn’t we take advantage?”

“Where were you thinking?”

“Well, it’s summer. Maybe the beach? I think you’d like Biloxi.”

It’s not a good idea. There are so many things that could go wrong. Going away together is a huge deal. At the same time, I don’t want to be here anymore. I don’t want to be stuck in this horrible place that Mom hates where I have to worry about someone sticking their nose where it doesn’t belong and making a fuss about me being seen with a man who loves me and protects me and makes me happy but had the unfortunate luck to be born some years before I was.

“You want to go now?” I ask, and he grins from ear to ear before he’s up and moving.

He gets up and starts packing his own bag. He opens the kitchen drawer next to the refrigerator and pulls out the “emergency card” he and Grayson never actually use for emergencies. He throws a few snacks into a grocery bag, pulls a plastic cooler down from the closet, stuffs sandals down in his suitcase. I text Shirley to tell her to cover for me if my parents call her house. Then we’re in Sawyer’s truck, driving straight out of town with “Carry On Our Wayward Son” pouring through the speakers.

PART TWO

Driving along the hotels and casinos that line the beachfront at night is incredible, like our own version of Vegas. There's bright flashing lights in every color of the rainbow as signs and electronic billboards announce shows with singers from Martina McBride to Rick Springfield and dancing girls and magician acts. Music spills out the open front doors of the buildings, each place trying to be louder than its neighbor with upbeat music undercut by the sounds of slot machines chiming off and seagulls. The air smells like firework smoke and raw shrimp through the open windows.

It's the most amazing place I've ever seen.

"We have to take in a show," I tell Sawyer as I try to read all of the billboards before they change. "And eat at a really nice restaurant, one of those places where you'll have to wear a tie."

"Ugh, you're going to make me wear a tie?" You'd think I was asking him to take a fork and pop out his own liver. "Well, all right. As long as the place serves real food. Like steak. And can we go out on one of the shrimp boats? They show you how they catch them and everything."

Fishing. Exciting. But if Sawyer is this excited then -- tit for tat -- we'll go watch them dredge up poo-covered shellfish as long as at least one headliner makes it onto the itinerary.

We drive past all the fancy hotels on the main strip by the beach. There's a smaller place, one of the motel chains rather than a huge hotel/casino/theatre combo, a bit further down Beach Boulevard that has the vacancy sign lit up. We pull up in front of the office and go inside. The woman's smile is tight but she gets us checked in without much fuss.

Sawyer keeps hold of my hand as we check in. While the woman looks up the room number on her computer, Sawyer brings my hand up to kiss it. His scruff tickles and scratches in turns.

We're not on one of the upper floors, which I don't mind because it gives us more reason to go out and drive around rather than see everything cloistered behind our hotel room window. Sawyer unlocks the door with a keycard, and I shove past him to get in.

It's a nice room in shades of sand and darker tan with a full-sized bed, curtains pulled back away from the window, a little table with two chairs, and a writing desk with a television that probably gets a good selection of crime drama channels. A peek in the bathroom reveals a stack of towels on the rack above the toilet and a seashell printed curtain hanging closed over the shower/bathtub.

Sawyer watches me flit around the room, a smile pulling at his mouth. "Are you satisfied, then? Up to your high standards?"

"Obviously."

"Very good."

I jump up on the bed, bouncing on my knees. "Ooh, it's comfy."

"We'll appreciate that when we get around to sleeping."

It's already late, but I'm full of energy and want to do something. I take a quick shower then let Sawyer help himself to whatever hot water I left behind for him. Even though I left my own shampoo and soap in the shower, I'm sure he'll use the cheap hotel brand because he would rather have oily hair than smell like "a damn lavender fruit basket."

Or at least that's what he claims. I think it's because he used my lotion one time and the glitter made his hands sparkle so I couldn't help but make fun of him for the rest of the day.

He didn't laugh. It didn't stop me.

I pull my hair back in a scrunchie then reach for my bag to get my pajamas, a set of pink and black top and shorts.

He comes out of the bathroom rubbing a towel over his hair. "Cute jammies."

"They're pretty, right?"

"Sure. They look nice and silky."

"They are."

"Shame, then, that I don't plan on you staying in them for long." He reaches up and starts running his fingers through my hair. It's an incredibly gentle and loving gesture he only does when he wants sex.

I'm not one of those girls who tries to pretend like there aren't times when I want sex too, and the first night of our vacation together is absolutely one of them. We're alone in a beautiful hotel room and the heat from the shower left my head feeling a little fuzzy and I'm so phenomenally in love with Sawyer right now, so I lean in and start

kissing at his cheeks until his beard makes my lips sensitive then I move to kiss his mouth as his hands ghost my sides and we part for long enough for him to pull my top off of me. We lay out on top of the bed, him over me like a blanket, and between my own grabbing hands and his own enthusiasm to get his clothes off so we can spend some quality time together his pajama pants hit the floor and then our hands and mouths are everywhere and he tastes like cheap soap and skin then he grabs at me hard enough to leave the kind of bruises I like and the hotel bed is so much more comfortable than the back of his truck and he starts kissing me and kissing me and kissing me until everything feels too hot and then I'm resting my head on his chest, feeling his panting move it up and down as he curls my hair between his fingers.

The air conditioning kicks on and we both shiver, bare skin being punished by the cold air. He pulls the comforter off the foot of the bed -- I feel sorry for the maid that has to deal with that in the morning but it's their job and it's not my problem -- and we get under the fuzzy blanket and the top sheet.

I curl into him and rest my left arm across his chest. He strokes my side like I'm a cat until I fall asleep.

In the morning I wake up to the sound of seagulls squawking outside the window. I sit up and look down at Sawyer whose head is laying heavily on the pillows. His mouth is open and he's drooling a little bit. His arms are still slightly wrapped around me, dropped down to my waist. I can't keep a smile from pulling across my face and I lean down to kiss his cheek before biting in just enough to pinch.

“What the hell?” he mumbles.

“Good morning.”

He blinks his eyes open then yawns. “Morning, Jen.” He kisses my cheek back.

“Did you sleep well?”

“Very well. But now I’m awake and it’s morning and we’re on vacation. Get up. I want to go to the beach.”

“Ugh. You’re a morning person.”

I don’t think of myself as a morning person; I just don’t like wasting time. “Up.” In the bathroom, I throw my hair into a ponytail then go to my bag to pull on shorts and a T-shirt.

Sawyer comes out of the bathroom and goes into his bag, pulling on a red shirt.

“All right, let’s go,” he says, holding his hand out for me.

I rest my hand in his. He grabs his wallet then we leave the room.

There’s a father and his daughter in the hallway. He’s got a basket full of beach toys as she’s squirming as she waits for the elevator to come.

“Going down?” the dad asks us.

I nod and smile.

The daughter stares at us in that utterly fascinated way only people under ten can. You know, like they can’t imagine who you are or how you got to where you are. Like they don’t believe they can ever grow to be your age. Kids are weird. You might as well be an alien to them.

The elevator comes and we all pile in. The girl pushes the lobby button once, twice, three times, then her father pulls her away. There's nothing to see inside the elevator except the mirrored insides and it's uncomfortable with no one talking.

Then the girl turns to Sawyer and me. She looks at our hands then up at me with those massive eyes that her face hasn't grown into yet. "What's your name?"

"I'm Jen," I tell her. Then I tap Sawyer's shoulder with my knuckles. "This is Sawyer."

"Is he your boyfriend?"

Sawyer crouches down so that he's at eye-level with her. "That's right. I'm her boyfriend and she's my girlfriend."

"She's really pretty."

Okay, so I might like this little girl some.

Sawyer laughs and leans in a bit closer, but her father puts a hand on her shoulder and pulls her close in so that she's pressed up against his knee. I look at his face and he's got this wary look on his face.

"I think so too," Sawyer tells her.

I pull at Sawyer until he stands back up. Over-protective parents are the worst things. Poor girl might end up as messed up as I am. I wonder if I would be any different if it was my father instead of my mother who was the helicopter parent.

The elevator gets to the bottom floor and we spill out, the father still keeping a tight grip on his daughter as he pulls her away.

"Weirdo," I say.

Sawyer drives us down the multi-lane street that runs parallel to the beach, lined on one side with hotels and casinos and on the other side by “surf” shops with tie-dye T-shirts and beach blankets with cartoon characters on them hanging in the windows. We pull into the parking lot of one that’s a full two stories with glass windows all along the front on both levels.

I grab hold of Sawyer’s hand and pull him in behind me. The store looks like every beach cliché exploded inside. The walls are painted like pale blue waves and the light shines in through the windows. There are bathing suits in a rainbow of bright colors, solids and patterns and one-pieces and bikini tops. Paste white mannequins model halter-top sundresses and board shorts. There are aisles of metal assembled shelves with “sand” globes -- a beachier alternative to snow globes -- and huge glossy painted conch shells and metal water bottles with big-lipped fish and wooden lighthouses. There’s a huge basket of stuffed animals and a section with Velcro sandals and flipflops and a back counter where you can custom order T-shirts and towels and, of all things, license plates.

“Look at all this stuff. I can’t believe people would pay money for some of this crap.”

Sawyer laughs. “So I won’t be trying to cart the whole store home in the back of my truck?”

“Not a chance. But maybe one souvenir.”

“Go get a swimsuit,” Sawyer says. “Go on.”

I pick up a few suits before finding a simple purple and black suit with the sides cut out. It fits just fine and isn’t too expensive, which is good since I wouldn’t want to

have to explain to my mother why or where I had gotten a second swimsuit with my perfectly good yellow suit that is still in the drawer of my dresser.

I come out of the dressing room in the suit with my jean shorts over top and go to find Sawyer. I find him leaning against one of the glass cases around the floor.

Sawyer points toward a corner of the store and says, “Look, a woman over there is doing henna tattoos. Didn’t you say you wanted one?”

“Yes, absolutely.”

“Well then?”

We get to the woman who gives me a wide smile. She’s got glass beads in her hair and a real tattoo of birds flying over the sun on her shoulder. Her hair is black and long and she’s wearing a black and red plaid halter-top shirt and black jean shorts. She looks like someone dropped a beach cliché in a Chiaroscuro painting. “Hey there, honey. You want one?”

“Of course I do.”

She cocks her head then taps a black-painted fingernail against a stack of binders. “These are all the templates I’ve got on hand. You can get anything you want in here. Go crazy and find what you want.”

Sawyer and I both start flipping through the binders of templates. There are lots of the typical dragons and fairies and Princess with a sparkle over the i. There are kittens and birds and of course turtles, fish, dolphins, sharks, and shells. But none of them are what I want. I’m not going to just take whatever she has on hand.

“Jen.” Sawyer taps my wrist then points into the binder he’s flipping through.

He holds up a picture of a bee and hands it over. “Try this.”

I don’t want anything to remind me of my mother or how she would be horrified to know where her “honeybee” was.

“Why this one?” I ask him.

“Because. You’re the hardest worker I’ve ever known and you definitely are my queen. And plus, sometimes bees sting.”

Even though I’m not sure, Sawyer seems so earnest that I decide to go with it. I hand the picture to the woman and then to my ribs.

She rolls her eyes and says, “Fine. Don’t squirm around too much.”

“I’m not a child,” I tell her. “Just do your thing.”

She takes her time with the tattoo. Sawyer hangs around, peering over her shoulder and asking questions about where she got all of the designs in the book from and how long she’s been doing henna and how long I can reasonably expect it to last.

It tickles while she works. The ink is cold and it’s weird having someone pay that much attention to my sides since they’re hardly a physical highlight in day-to-day life. I try to watch her work, but it’s hard to keep my neck craned and relax and breathe normally while maintaining a good line of sight.

Finally, the woman says, “Okay. All done.” She steps back and eyes the ink. “Let the air get it for a bit. It needs to dry before it will stay. The top layer of ink will peel away and you’ll be good to go.”

I want to see it now, obviously. I'm part of that whole instant gratification generation that doesn't want to wait for anything, but I guess in this instance I have no choice.

"Thanks," I tell her. "I appreciate it."

Before he can, I get out my wallet and pay. This is something completely for me that just I desperately want. Sawyer knows how much I want my tattoo. I've spoken to him about it many times, and even though he doesn't have any ink he seems as drawn to the idea as I do. He's even spoken – in vague, non-committal terms – of getting a tattoo of his own when I get mine. I'm not sure what he wants. I'm not sure what I want. But something about a tattoo just calls to me because somehow, right now, even with just henna that will wear off before I know it, it feels right.

With a new swimsuit, it's time to head to the beach. While most of the beach seems to be owned by the various hotels running along Beach Boulevard, there are a couple of places that are open to the public where you can get out onto the sand and make your way in either direction to look for an open spot. Before going onto the beach, there's a shower area where you can wash off the sand on your way back through. There's a guy in baggy swim shorts rinsing under one of them and as we pass by the mist of water sprays us. It's cold. I'm willing to bet those showers never get warm.

I know we should have expected it since we're not getting onto the beach until late in the morning, but there are people all over the place, the edges of one family's blanket pushed right up against the edge of a sunbather's towel. It smells like seaweed

and salt and sunscreen. There's an awful layer of sweat under it, but overall the smell is exactly what you'd think the beach would be like.

"Let's walk until we find somewhere with less people."

"Do you think we'll have any luck?" It's an absolutely gorgeous weekend; I don't know why we didn't think that everyone else would want to bring their kids down to the beach. But there's a lot of beach, so surely we'll find a place.

"Fine, but if we can't find a place you're going to have to chase some frat boys off so we have room."

"I'll totally do it."

I would kind of like to see that; Sawyer is incredibly sweet. To me. But I think he has the potential to be a total badass. Unfortunately, we find a less crowded area without any drama. Sawyer lays out the blanket and towels while I dig sunglasses, sunscreen, my floppy sun hat, and a book out of our beach bag. I strip off my over clothes so I'm just in my bathing suit then settle down and reach for the sunscreen. Sawyer and I share the bottle and get our arms, legs, faces, ears, necks. He coats his chest while I rub sunscreen into my tummy and my shoulders.

"Here. Do my back for me?" I ask, turning around and pulling my hair out of the way.

He starts rubbing the sunscreen into my back. His hands feel good and his touch is steady and eventually I'm all protected from the sun so I won't fry like a piece of bacon.

Sawyer hands the bottle to me and I take care of his back in return.

“All right,” Sawyer says. “I think first order of business is to pick you up, take you into the ocean, and throw you into the water.”

“Oh, you do and you die.”

He grins and every instinct says run, but before I can take more than two steps his arms are around my waist and he throws me over his shoulder like I don't weigh anything.

“Sawyer! Sawyer, you ass! Put me down! I swear to god, if you actually throw me it will be the last thing you ever do! Sawyer!”

He walks into the water, dancing a little. “Cold, cold.”

“Sawyer!”

Once he's in to his waist, he picks me up and throws me. Mid-air, I have just enough time to close my eyes and pinch my nose shut before I'm completely under the cold water. My butt scrapes the sand and I push myself up, gasping and wiping water out of my eyes.

Sawyer is laughing and I glare at him, wringing my hair out. “Jackass.”

“Aww, don't be mad. It was fun, right?”

It was maybe a little bit fun flying through the air like that, but I'm not going to tell him that or he'll do it all throughout the day. “I'll get you back for that, you just wait.”

“Looking forward to it.”

I let him talk me into playing in the water for a bit. We try to jump over the waves and splash each other and swim out until our feet don't touch the bottom. Then we

go back and Sawyer drops to the wet sand and starts building a sandcastle. I help him at first, putting tall walls around an inner square while he shapes towers with his hands. By the time he's using a small piece of wood to cut out windows, I'm bored and return to the blanket to sun myself and read a bit of my book. Occasionally I glance up and watch as Sawyer digs a thick moat.

By the time I'm at a chapter break, Sawyer is content with his castle, taking pictures on his cell phone.

"Fit for my queen," Sawyer says as he comes and sits next to me.

"It's a little small but I suppose the view is quite lovely."

He laughs. "I'm going to walk up and down the beach and get some seashells. Do you want to come?"

I put my book down. "Sure, sounds like fun." Plus it's one of those have to do beachy things. He gets a plastic bag from our stuff then we start walking in the wet sand. The sand is firm from being soaked with water and the waves occasionally roll up to splash on our feet. We find mostly little black and brown bivalve shells, some just broken halves while a few are whole and the top and bottom still connected. A few shells are different, though, little bitty white ones as small as my pinky nail and swirly mollusk shells.

As we get near a wooden pier poking out over the water, Sawyer takes off on his own to search under it. I don't like shaded places that might have spiders, so I stay in the shallow surf and continue to pick up the bivalve shells, scraping the sand out of them with my fingernails.

I jump and almost fall over backwards when a bright red Frisbee comes sailing at me, landing on the sand right in front of my feet. I pick the Frisbee up and look to where it came from only to see a boy running up to me.

He looks about my age with dark brown hair that comes a bit down his forehead in a peak. His eyebrows are a bit thin and his grin is uneven, one side pulling up higher than the other. He's not wearing a shirt, just dark emerald green swim trunks, and he has a few moles on his skin.

"Hey," he says. "Sorry about that. My buddy sucks at Frisbee."

"You're lucky that didn't actually hit me."

He grins a little wider. "Aw, one of us would have yelled 'watch out' before that happened." He holds his hand out and I give the Frisbee back to him. He flips it around his fingers with surprising dexterity. "Oh, sorry. I forgot my manners. I'm Ty."

"Jen."

"Jen," he repeats. "Well, Jen, do you want to come hang out with us? We have barbeque and potato salad and a tub of sodas. And my friend Jordan brought a volleyball."

"And a Frisbee."

"No, I brought the Frisbee."

Smartass.

I don't spend much time talking to guys my own age. I'm not sure what the reason is that all of the guys at school avoid having anything to do with me, though I have two predominant theories. Either the guys saw all of the girls not wanting anything

to do with me after I was shunned by Cassie and her group of friends and then they decided to avoid me so they could get along with the girls, or Aaron told the other boys our age what happened at Cassie's birthday party and now all of them think I'm a freak with a psycho mother.

But I'm not a freak just because I didn't like it when Aaron pushed me down on the grass and tried to kiss me. Maybe all the other girls wanted to kiss him, but I didn't like him and I didn't want his mouth on mine. I screamed at him and smacked at his shoulders and head until he got off of me. When he had pushed me down, he ripped my dress. I scraped the base of my hand against the dirt and rocks, too.

Cassie's mother tried to laugh it off that it was the same behavior as pulling pigtailed. He had gotten a little rough but that it wasn't like he'd meant to hurt me. Boys just play rough. But my mom went flat-out ballistic. Even though I'd handled it -- gotten Aaron to go away and stood back up on my own two feet -- she started yelling at Cassie's mom about how she was raising him to be a wild child and how he obviously couldn't control himself and that she wasn't going to let me spend time at Cassie's house anymore if her mother wasn't going to make sure that I was safe when I was there. I just stood there like a gleaming beacon of awkward while all the girls laughed and pointed and whispered behind their hands while my mom apparently lost her mind.

It's kind of new, relieving -- surprising -- to actually encounter someone my own age who doesn't treat me like a pariah.

"Come on," Ty urges. "It'll be fun."

I don't like sweating or sports, but I agree and follow him over to his friends.

“Guys, this is Jen. Jen, these are Brad, Colt, Mark, and Ethan.”

“Hi,” I say, raising my hand in a small gesture of greeting. I don’t know which of the other boys is which -- Ethan could be Colt for all I know -- but I don’t really care. Ty whips the Frisbee at one of his friends and they start tossing it around.

I’m not good at it. I can’t catch the Frisbee that well, it always ends up passing through my fingers, and I can’t really throw it in a straight line. But none of the guys seem to mind. They chase it down when my throws run wild and Ty just laughs patiently when I have to pick the Frisbee up off the sand. They start talking about people I don’t know and places I haven’t been, but their talk is friendly and easy, full of jokes.

“So what are you doing here, Jen?” Ty asks me.

I throw the Frisbee toward him and he manages to catch it with a little jump. “I’m just visiting. I’ve never been to the beach before and since it’s the first weekend of summer vacation it seemed like the perfect time.”

“Are you staying close to the beach?”

“Not really. This wasn’t exactly a planned trip. I didn’t even bring a bathing suit with me. I had to get this one just this morning.”

“And that?” he asked, pointing to the honeybee tattoo on my side.

I smile. “Yes, that too. It’s just henna.”

“Still, that’s pretty cool. The honeybee. State bug of Mississippi, right?”

I had completely forgotten about that. With how much I want out of here, now I really don’t want to be associated with a bee. With how much my mom wants out of here, I wonder if she knew when she started calling me that.

“Hey, I get it. Check this out.” He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a black stone earring connected by a chain to an ear cuff with a big, fat rat on it.

“A rat?” I ask him.

“I remember reading the story of the Chinese zodiac and admiring how clever the rat was. I know the Hindus use rats as symbols of foresight, and Egyptians use the rats as symbols of wisdom. I mean, I’m not exactly wise yet, but you know what I mean.”

“I do. The rat is driven and shrewd and can protect itself.”

He whistles and throws the Frisbee to one of his friends. “Nice.” His grin stretches from ear to ear. I guess I can see where some people would laugh at someone having a rat for his totem, especially since rats always make people think of being sneaky and mean.

“So,” Ty asks, “you’re only here for the weekend?”

“Yeah.”

“Are you a native Mississippi-ite?”

“That’s not a real word.”

“I’m pretty sure it is.”

It’s totally not. “Yeah, I am.”

“Cool. My friends and I are Alabama boys.”

“Don’t you have beaches in Alabama?”

He laughs. “Well yeah, but then it’s not much of a vacation, right?”

“It’s enough for me.”

“Jen!” I turn and see Sawyer running up to me with something cupped in his hands. “You have to see what I found.”

If whatever it is is alive and jumps at me, I’m going to punch him in the nose.

“Check this out,” Sawyer says, holding his hand out. A round white sand dollar is sitting in his palm, the edge of one side rough and slightly chipped.

I reach out and take the sand dollar from him. Its surface feels rough like hardened sand when I run my fingers over it. “It’s beautiful.”

“It’s for you.”

“That’s cool,” Ty says, coming over and leaning in to take a look.

“Who are your friends, Jen?” Sawyer asks.

“This is Ty. And his friends. He almost attacked me with a plastic Frisbee.”

Ty grins. “It doesn’t have teeth. It wouldn’t have bit you or anything.” He extends his hand out.

Sawyer blinks at it for a second then takes it. “I’m Sawyer.”

“Nice to meet you. You want to play with us too?”

Sawyer looks at me, like he’s letting me decide, but I can tell he really doesn’t want to. It’s in the pinch of his eyebrows and the way his nose pulls up just a bit in distaste.

“Nah, let’s not. You promised we could go to all those cheesy tourist shops, right?”

He nods. “Absolutely. Make fun of all the things people spend money on.”

“You really have to go?” Ty asks. “Well, maybe later on today or tomorrow or something you can meet up with us again.”

Sawyer puts his hand on the small of my back, pushing just a little. “We’re only here for a short time. Lots to see, so.”

Ty frowns, tilts his head, then frowns harder. “Oh, right. All right, well. It was nice to meet you, Jen.”

What is his problem? I kind of want to stay and keep playing too, but Sawyer’s right. We have a lot to cram into a weekend. I could try to trade phone numbers or emails with Ty – he seems like he might actually be one of the rare really nice teenage guys – but he’s from Alabama so it’s not like we can get together to hang out like I can with Shirley.

“Bye.”

Sawyer and I go back to our blankets. We sunbathe on the towels, play a bit more in the water, then eat our lunches while watching the waves roll in. Children run past in blown-up floaties, and a few guys ride across the shallow waters on board.

“That looks fun,” Sawyer says. “Maybe I should get a board and try that.”

“If we were going to stay longer, maybe. But I bet they’re not cheap and we’re only here for the rest of today and tomorrow. You wouldn’t have enough time to really get any use out of it.”

“That’s true.” He reaches around me, putting his arm over my shoulder. “Maybe we’ll come back here sometime when we have more time.”

His arm is sticky with sunscreen and he smells like salt. It's too hot to have his arm over me, but I deal with it and lean against his shoulder. "Maybe."

"So I thought of something we should do while it's still light out," Sawyer says.

"Oh yeah?"

"Alligator tour."

Oh lord. He has lost his damn mind. "I'm not losing a foot to an alligator. You want to defy death, do it on your own."

"We're on vacation. Where's your sense of adventure?"

Safely where alligators aren't, obviously. But he looks so hopeful. Am I really becoming the kind of softy that can't tell him no? That doesn't bode well for our future together at all. But, you know. I like it when he's happy. So I sigh and say, "Yes, we can go on an alligator tour. Fair warning, if an alligator gets hold of me and chomps me in half, I'm going to haunt you. You'll be in the garage and heavy metal things will suddenly fall right on your toes. It'll be lifelong and brutal."

The ride out to the alligator place isn't so bad, even though it's a fair amount out of town compared to everything being right there on the beach, which kind of makes sense. As much as we're pretty much snack-sized, we're also loud and tend to shoot things that we don't want in what we've claimed as our space. If I were an alligator, I wouldn't want to be anywhere near that many humans.

It's amazing what guns do to the battle for species dominance though, isn't it? A bit of gunpowder and we're suddenly top of the food-chain. Imagine squirrels running

around with AK47s. Go on, imagine it. It's a terrifying thought, isn't it? But I bet the squirrels would think it was the greatest idea ever. We certainly wouldn't be cutting down as many trees.

At the office, some boy about between my age and Sawyer's with a rather impressive smattering of pimples on one cheek is trying too hard to be Steve Irwin. Or at least to channel the man's fashion sense. If he pulls out the accent, I'm going to have to hurt him. But he talks without all the affectation, though his every word is about staying on the path and sticking close to him and not wandering from the path and keeping their voices down and following the path and not making any sudden quick movements and did he mention the path?

I'm not a huge fan of the outdoors. It's hot and sweaty or windy and messes up my hair or cold and causes my nose to run. It's just not my thing unless I'm laying out on a blanket with a book and a cold glass of something. Beach bum, sure, but hiking? Forget about it. And if there's one thing to say about Mississippi in the summer it's that it's hotter than the lowest levels of hell outside. Our guide -- whose name is Billy because god bless the south -- has a little battery-powered fan that he keeps blowing right in his face. And it looks amazing. But he doesn't offer it to us. Manners are just one of those things that has fallen by the wayside since people are far too busy to think about them between their obsessions with YouTube and reality television.

Sawyer looks excited though, eyes scanning everywhere. Like he really can't wait to see some oversized water-lizard. But finally Billy points to something out in the water.

“There you go. First alligator sighting.”

“That’s a log,” I tell him. It’s a big brown round thing floating in the water.

Honestly, this guy does this for a job and he can’t even tell the difference between a log and an alligator?

“Nope, alligator sure enough. Look. You can see the eyes -- kind of beady -- and just beyond them is his nose sticking out. Alligators can hold their breath underwater for a long time but their best trick is that their nostrils are up almost on top of their noses so they can be just poking out over the water.”

I still don’t see it. At all. But Sawyer couldn’t look happier, like a little kid bouncing around, so if he wants to say it’s an alligator then every log on the planet can be an alligator.

But I do see something in the water. A long, curved shape moving just enough to let off ripples. I shudder and step back, glad the sacred path is raised up and keeps us high above the water it’s gliding through.

“That is a horrifyingly large snake,” I say, pointing a fingernail towards it.

“Seriously, that looks like the kind of snake that could unhinge its jaw, have me for an appetizer, then finish off with you for dinner. Shoes and all.”

He laughs and puts his hand on my waist, fingers curling around my hipbone in that way he does. “It’s all right. I’ll protect you from the evil snake.”

I almost laugh in his face. Yes, okay, so I’m afraid of snakes, spiders, and the like. (I read somewhere that’s a sign of intelligence. Like our Cro-Magnon ancestors or whatever should have been afraid of snakes and spiders since they could die if they got

bitten, so the ones who actually were afraid lived longer and therefore had more time to procreate. Anthropology: explaining ophidio/arachnophobia since whenever.) But the fact remains that I have never needed him to protect me. That's not what he's for.

I'm not the kind of girl who needs a knight in shining armor. I mean, it's absolutely sweet that he'd offer. I'm touched. It's one of those shows he cares things. But I don't need it.

That's one of my big things. Never get to where you need anyone to be your protector. Because there's always the chance they'll let you down.

Still, I smile at him, curl around his arm, and say "My hero."

"It's not going to come up on the path, Miss," the tour guide says like he's worried that I'm really scared out of my mind. I see it, and it's far enough away that if it comes toward me I can run in the opposite direction. I think I can outrun a snake.

"Obviously," I say. "Would be bad for the company, wouldn't it? Having customers get swallowed alive."

He frowns and hems like he's not sure how to response to my acerbic tone.

"Continue on, then."

We walk the whole path, a miserable trek through muggy weather that has me about ready to shave my hair off if it would make it even the slightest bit cooler. But we do see alligators; these ones actually out of the water so you can tell what they are. They're terrifyingly big, longer from nose to tail than I am tall and apparently weigh upwards of 800 pounds (thank you so much, Billy the bouncing tour guide. All I wanted to think about is 800 pounds of teeth and bad attitude down in the water).

By the time the alligator tour is over, I'm exhausted and Sawyer has never looked so much like an overexcited child. He's usually so calm and cool. The rock, you know? It's weird seeing him so hyped up over some scaly things.

"I'm hungry," I tell him. "Let's get something to eat, all right?"

"Sure, absolutely. Anything you want since you were so good to go on the tour with me." He grins knowingly.

I'm a little embarrassed. "You could tell, huh?"

"That you were bored out of your mind and would have liked nothing better than to be anywhere else? Figured that part out pretty quickly." He prods me gently as we load ourselves into the truck. "I guess alligators aren't your cup of tea."

"I hope you're not too obsessed with them yourself. Once we move to the city there won't be any alligators running around, I can assure you of that. The most we'll see is pigeons and maybe a few mice and, I don't know, stray dogs or something. And our cat."

"Our cat?" he repeats.

"Of course. I'm not going to move out on my own to the big city and not get the cat I've been wanting since I was a kid. And you wouldn't turn me down, would you? Big guy like you coming in and absolutely ruining my hopes and dreams."

"Jesus, fine, we'll get a damn cat."

Can't hate a man who wants to give you everything, can you?

It's too late for lunch, but too early for dinner, so that random 4:30 in the afternoon meal is what I've always called 'linner.' It's never caught on far as I can tell,

but it makes plenty of sense to me. We stop at a place that looks like a shack but boasts a huge array of seafood. Especially shrimp. You've seen that scene from "Forrest Gump?" Yeah, Bubba was just reading these people's menu.

Sawyer gets shrimp gumbo with sausage and chicken and the whole thing just looks like a mess of red sauce and rice to me, but he takes a bite and assures me it's delicious. How he can even pick apart distinct tastes in that is a mystery to me, but all right then. I get a shrimp po-boy with black beans and rice and it's pretty good even though it all tastes like it came from vats instead of the homemade promise on the bottom of the menu plaque.

There's a group of girls sitting at the picnic table by ours on the little outdoor porch over the edge of the water. They look about college age. A blonde, a brunet, and a redhead -- I know; some people must pick friends because they're in on the cosmic joke, right -- and each of them is showing more skin than swimsuit.

They're also talking too loud. Obnoxiously loud, and then every now and then they just burst into laughter like whatever they're talking about is the funniest thing on the planet. It's annoying. It's like they're saying 'Look at us and be jealous of us because we're so sexy and obviously are such fun and interesting people.'

But the blonde and the redhead are both eyeing up Sawyer like he's the catch of the day. The blonde one gets up and walks over to us, sitting down even though neither of us invited her to do so.

“Hi there,” she says in that syrupy southern drawl. “What’s your name, cutie?” Her eyes are glued to Sawyer. “I’m Melissa, and these are my friends Tammy and Janna.”

Sawyer blinks at her then smirks like he’s amused by her. “Hi, Melissa. I’m Sawyer and this is Jen.”

I wave but don’t say hi. She doesn’t even pretend to be interested in me.

“You come here often?” she asks before bursting into giggles like she thinks she’s being clever using a cliché pickup line.

Sawyer laughs along with her. “Well, no. I’m just here on vacation.”

“Oh? Looking to have a good time?”

She leans forward, boobs practically spilling out of her swimsuit. It’s obvious she wants Sawyer bad. He eyes her up and I move and give him a kick in the shin under the table.

I know he’s just looking. It’s not like he’s having sex with her over the table. But he’s mine and we’re here together and I don’t want him looking at someone else. Jealousy is an ugly thing, isn’t it? Turns even the best of us into monsters. Green eyed monsters.

“Well, you know. Biloxi has a lot to offer,” Sawyer says, sounding pinched. Guess I might have actually hurt him a bit when I kicked him. I can’t say I feel bad about it. I can’t say it because it isn’t true.

“I’m a native,” she tells him. “And you’re right. We do have a lot to offer here.”

“I think we have it under control,” I cut in with my most syrupy smile. “But thanks.”

She looks back and forth between me and Sawyer -- apparently that was what it took to get her to even acknowledge that I'm sitting here -- before she wrinkles her nose.

“Well, if you'd like my number, you know, someone to call if you have any questions, bit of local knowledge --.”

“He doesn't.”

She huffs and walks back over to her friends who, in the ultimate cliché, all lean together and start whispering.

I wonder what Sawyer looks like to other people, people who aren't me, who don't know him the way I do. He's an extremely attractive man to be sure, but anyone with a sense of aesthetics could figure that much out. He's confident, obviously. He didn't shy away from that hussy moseying right on up and trying to flirt with him. And nice, since he was polite without making any kind of lewd remark or telling her to get lost (the latter of which I might have appreciated).

Away from our small town, Sawyer might meet people. More people his own age who aren't already single moms or lifers at WalMart. People his own age who are more like me with ambition and attitude. I wonder what he'll think of them.

I guess I'm just lucky that I'm a bit vicious. I can scare them away if I need to.

“So what now?” I ask as we throw our trash in the bin.

“Well, I kind of want to check out the casino at the hotel.”

“Seriously?”

“Biloxi has all these casinos and you’re telling me I can’t try even one of them? Come on, Jen. What if I hit the jackpot? Win us tons and tons of money. Our next trip could be to Hawaii. Or a Mediterranean cruise.”

“All right,” I agree, letting Sawyer herd us into the truck and toward one of the hotel casinos that will let us in off the street. “We can go to the casino. But you’re giving me the gambling money.”

“This is going to be awesome,” Sawyer says as we walk up to the entrance of the casino. He tips his head to the guard then steps through the flashing-light covered archway.

I go to follow him, but the guy puts his arm in the way to stop me like he thinks some hairy physical barrier is needed.

“Sorry, but she’s not coming in.”

“What do you mean I can’t come in?” I demand.

The guy puffs up and looks at me, his moustache doing a little wag of disapproval. “No one under twenty-one can gamble.”

“So she won’t gamble. She doesn’t have to be twenty-one to come in and watch me gamble, does she? Come on, it’s not like she’s going to break the place.”

“If she’s not twenty-one, she’s not getting in here.”

Well obviously the Cerberus isn’t going to move away from the gates to gambling addiction.

Sawyer sighs and puts his hand on my shoulder. “Come on, let’s go.”

I don't want to go. I want to be let into the casino. But that's not going to happen. I don't want to ruin Sawyer's time, though, especially after he just spoiled me with such a fantastic dinner.

"Don't worry about me," I tell him. "I'll find something to do with myself if you want to go in."

"No way. I'm not just going to leave you out here."

"I'm not six, Sawyer. I don't need you to babysit me."

"It's not babysitting. I just don't feel right leaving my girl on her own so that I can go to the casino."

There are too many horrible cheating abusive assholes in the world for Sawyer not to seem like a god in comparison.

"Just go for an hour. You'll have fun. I'll entertain myself."

"You can always go to the arcade," the door guard says, moustache twitching again.

Asshole.

Sawyer apparently chooses to ignore him too. I imagine it's because we would get thrown out of Sawyer hauled off and punched him in the face. "I guess just an hour, as long as you won't feel abandoned."

"I might a bit, but I'm sure some therapy will work it out."

He leans down and gives me a kiss, his beard scratching against my cheeks. "One hour." He goes past Mustacio into the casino.

I turn and leave and decide to explore the hotel. It's kind of like a little miniature mall. Along with the dining room and the little convenience store, there are fancy restaurants with waiters in suits and tablecloths, boutiques with jewelry and fancy dresses, and a slightly classier beach shop than the bric-a-brac explosion I got my henna tattoo at.

I go into one of the boutiques. The first thing that catches my eye is a dark grey strapless dress with silver at the bottom. It's kind of a mix of formal and casual. I pick one up in my size then go into the dressing room in back, ignoring the gaze of the cashier who apparently has decided I don't have money and therefore shouldn't be touching or breathing on anything. Which really tempts me to misbehave, but that's my little inner devil rearing its head.

In the side room I pull on the dress. It clings at the chest then hangs looser below, and at first it feels odd but when I look in the mirror it fits me well. I take a hairband from inside my purse and slowly roll my hair up into a twist, the end coming down over my shoulder.

I look older. It's just a dark dress in a fancy shop and an up-do, but suddenly I look like I could be nineteen, maybe a young-looking twenty or twenty-one. I look much closer to Sawyer's age, like someone that he could date openly and not have to worry about someone realizing that by some accident of birth or fate a more than socially acceptable number of years separate us.

I feel like I've found a part of my life that is liminal, in between, not quite one thing and not yet another. In August I'm starting my senior year of college. I'll be filling

out college applications, telling people what I plan to study and where I plan to live. And I have no idea. In a year so many things will have changed from the way they are right now. And anything can happen. I could get into a private university or end up at community college, and there's no way to know until it happens.

I reach up and touch the glass of the mirror. Someday I will always look like this, not just when I pull my hair up in a certain way or wear a particular dress. By that time, what will Sawyer look like? Will he have started to get pudgy or maybe the first hints of wrinkles appear? He'll be closer to thirty than twenty by that time.

There's a knock at the door to the dressing room and a woman's voice asks, "Miss? Is everything all right in there?"

I pull my fingers from the glass. "Yes, of course. I was just admiring the reflection. I'll be out in a minute and you can have your dressing room again."

But I don't right away. I make sure the image of me like this is stuck in my mind before I let my hair down, remove the dress, and change once again into my own clothes.

I come out with the dress on the hanger and put it back in place as the shopkeeper watches me.

"It's a lovely dress," I tell her. "I looked a lot older when I was wearing it. Maybe I'll have to come back and get it."

"Don't be in a hurry to grow up. You're young and it's summer. This is supposed to be the best time of your life. You shouldn't have anything to worry about."

I laugh and it sounds bitter to my own ears as I turn and leave the little boutique. "If only that were the case."

I do end up at the arcade, putting quarters into skeeball and crane game machines. It's boring. I'm not that good at games; my hand/eye coordination is subpar to say the least. Let's just say gym has never been my favorite class. But at least it passes the time. It's almost time for Sawyer's hour to be up, and then we can do something more fun. I put the last of my quarters in the skeeball machine and roll the wooden balls up the carpet. 10. 10. 10. 20. 10. 30. I roll the last ball with a bit of extra force to make this last one count. It rolls up the carpet, bounces over the curved lip, and flies into the hole marked 100.

I *never* hit 100. But the machine lets out a high bell ringing and a receipt pops out with a barcode. That's how this arcade does it, and I like it a lot better than having to keep track of those horrible ribbons of tickets.

With my handful of receipts, I go up to the counter where a guy probably about Sawyer's age is reading a comic book.

"Hi," I say, "I've got all of these."

"Sure." He scans the receipts into the machine as I look through the glass case of smaller prizes as well as the larger ones behind the counter. They have the arcade staples from Chinese finger traps and tiny jelly rings to disco balls and oversized stuffed animals. When the final "points" count comes up on the screen, it's not a lot but it's still more than I expected it would be.

I'm going to get one of the bigger prizes instead of a lot of the little ones. What use would I have for six plastic tops and a rubber band bracelet? One of the prizes just

inside my range is a Domo-kun plush toy on a keychain. Sawyer likes quirky things like that. I point at it and say, “The keychain, please.”

The guy gets one of them from the bin and puts it on top of the glass. “You have a few left over.”

There are a few different kinds of candy in with the cheap prizes, so I get a small handful of taffy. I thank the guy behind the counter then go and wait in the chairs outside the casino and eat my candy. The same mustached guy is there frowning at me with that superior look on his face.

I pull out my phone and text Shirley. I’m not going to sit here and look like I’m waiting for Sawyer even if that’s what I’m actually having to do.

‘Enjoying myself. Still alive and well. No calls from my mother, I presume?’

‘No callz. Glad 2 hear from u. Spend all day @ beach?’

‘Some. Not all. And for hell’s sake, Shirley, text in full words and sentences.’

‘Sorry, forgot u h8 it.’

‘You. Hate.’

‘;-P’

At least no news is good news as far as Shirley is concerned in this case. Part of me is surprised that my mother hasn’t at least called to check on me. The other part isn’t that surprised. I wonder how she and Dad are getting along after their fight, or if he just went back to the office and has avoided being home since she chucked a meatloaf at his head. Even I know that it’s better to address conflict than to just pretend there’s nothing

wrong, but that hasn't been my parents' style or they wouldn't have gotten to a point where Mom bottled things up until she exploded.

PART THREE

Sawyer finally comes out of the casino a whole 20 minutes after we were supposed to meet up. He looks like he's been through hell and back. His cheeks are ruddy and his grin is going from ear to ear.

"Looks like you enjoyed yourself."

"God, Jen, I'm sorry. I lost track of the time. Didn't mean to leave you sitting out here all by yourself. That was so much fun, though. It's a rush with all those bells and whistles."

"Bells and whistles. Nice to know how easily distracted you are. You didn't go broke and then hock the truck to pay back the casino, did you?"

"I have a little more self control than that."

"I wonder." I grab the little plush keychain and hand it to him. "For you. The arcade doesn't exactly let me win my money back, but I did manage to recoup a bit."

"Domo-kun. Awesome. Thanks, Jen." He pulls me in close and gives me a kiss on the cheek. I'm not feeling cuddly and sweet -- he left me sitting out there for almost half an hour so he could work on early onset gambling addiction -- but being mad at him is useless so I let him hug on me.

"You're welcome, geez. It's just a little keychain."

"You were thinking about me. It's nice."

“I always think about you.” Why does my mouth say things sometimes?

“Anyway, come on. You’ve played enough poker for one night. Let’s do something that I can actually do too.”

“Yeah, I’m sorry about that. I just wasn’t thinking. I mean, okay, so you’re too young to gamble yourself but I wouldn’t think it would be such a huge issue for you to ‘help’ me or whatever.”

But of course it would because once again some adult somewhere had decided that quote-unquote kids need adults poking their noses into our business because we’re so helpless and stupid that we can’t make even the most mundane choices for ourselves.

“I don’t care, I guess. You deserve to have some fun. Even though, you know, you totally abandoned me.”

“I said I was sorry. I’ll make it up to you, though.”

I really want to see a show of some sort. Biloxi is like the Mississippi version of, I don’t know, Las Vegas or something. Famous people come here and do concerts and there are musicals and shows and things other than the once a week two year old parent approved feel good film shown in the basement of the church. Okay, I’m exaggerating, but my life hasn’t been full of razzle-dazzle entertainment. But now it’s too late and we just spent money on arcades and casinos. How much this whole trip costs Sawyer is entirely Sawyer’s business and if he chooses not to tell me all the better, but it might be pushing it to ask right now.

So instead I say, “I think we should get a bottle of something and go back to the beach so we can see it at night. I bet it’s a lot prettier when the worlds’ grossest tourists

haven't decided to take over. You said you owe me, and that's what I want to do, so come on. Please."

"Since you said 'please.'" He smiles and we walk past the door guard, who looks down his nose at me once more.

We go back to our hotel and change out of our wet swimsuits since they're starting to stick to our skin and I'm sure neither of us will actually get in the water past our knees and only if that. I don't know much about the nocturnal habits of marine life, but we're surely more likely to come across something with sharp pincers or stinging tentacles at night. And neither of those things sounds fun.

Sawyer is rooting around in his bag even though there's a T-shirt right on top. I don't know what he's doing unless there's a specific shirt that he wants. But it shouldn't matter just for going walking so close to evening.

"What are you doing?"

"Nothing. Just getting something. Don't worry about it."

People always say don't worry about it when you should be worried the most, but Sawyer wouldn't say that if he didn't have whatever it was handled, so I resolve to actually not worry about it. One thing I can trust about him is that he won't keep me out of things if I need to be involved. He doesn't treat me like a child and keep things close to his chest.

"Fine, whatever. Weirdo."

"You're a weirdo too."

"Excuse me?"

He shoves his wallet into the pocket of his swim-shorts. It creates a lump on his hip that looks absolutely silly, but there's no other way to take it with us since someone decided men shouldn't carry purses.

"You know, we could just stay in," Sawyer says. "We've got room service. Air conditioning. A shower."

"When we get back tonight, maybe. If you're good. I don't make any promises until we've gone down to the beach."

He laughs. "Blackmail. How appropriate." He throws me one of his T-shirts to put on and I add jean shorts and sandals.

Before we get back to the beach, he stops into a little liquor store. I have to wait out in the truck, so I roll down the windows and let the radio play. There aren't that many people inside the store. Saturday must be one of the bigger nights where everyone who is in town for the weekend goes out to enjoy themselves.

Sawyer comes back out with a paper bag -- because obviously no one would guess that there might be alcohol in a paper bag -- and we drive toward the waves, parking in an asphalt lot that goes right to the sand. Once we step out onto the beach, I instantly wish I had brought something more than Sawyer's oversized T-shirt. It's southern Mississippi in the summer so I'm not saying that it's cold, but it's cooled off to a point that at least something with elbow-length sleeves wouldn't have been the worst idea I'd ever had.

Sawyer reaches into the bag and pulls out a bottle of screw-top wine. He throws the bag in a recycling bin then sets to opening the bottle with his teeth like some damn redneck.

“Give me that.” I snatch it out of his hands and open it, being careful of my fingernails. “My god, we’re not hillbillies. We can work a screw-top.” I clench the cap in my fist and pull the bottle up to take a swallow. The first taste is too strong, unbelievably bitter, and with as strong of a smell as it has a taste. I cough and hand Sawyer the bottle, who takes a sip like a champ.

“Here, give me the cap,” he says. I hand it to him and he puts it in his pocket before passing the wine back to me.

It’s not fruity and delicious like the wine coolers and ciders that Sawyer gives me at his apartment. Wine is stronger and thicker. But even though the wine itself isn’t particularly enjoyable, sharing a bottle of it with Sawyer like this -- casually, with him trusting me enough to not question whether letting me partake is something he should do, walking on a beach that’s mostly free of people -- is incredible. It’s not like that fake grown-up feeling I got in the boutique, putting on a flattering dress and pulling my long hair up. This feels like maturity. So I take a slower sip of wine and actually accept the taste of it on my tongue before I swallow it down.

Even though there are a couple of people, they’re mostly spread out enough that with a bit of weaving in and out of the surf we can avoid them so it’s almost like being out here by ourselves. And we just talk. We talk all the time, at the garage most days

sitting around halfheartedly doing homework and watching Sawyer tinker around with engine parts, but somehow this feels like something more important.

We make the long way back to the wooden pier jutting out into the water where I'd run into Tyler and his friend's earlier in the day. We climb up instead of going under it and sit on the end, legs dangling over the water. I finish off the last of the wine in the bottle then tuck the bottle against one of the wooden posts. There were a ton of people around here during the day so someone is sure to pick it up and toss it in a bin tomorrow. I don't want to get up and interrupt our conversation just to find one.

Sawyer reaches over and grabs my hand. His palm is a little sweaty and he laughs softly like he realizes it.

“Sorry.”

“It's all right.” I don't let him take his hand away to wipe it off because to heck with it, it's not like I have zero experience with his body fluids -- sweat among them -- so it's not the biggest concern for me.

“I have something that I need to talk to you about,” he says. “If you, you know, don't care.”

“Since when has my caring ever stopped you?” He squeezes my hand. His fingers are a little stronger than mine and he kind of grinds the bones together without meaning to. “Say what you want to say, then.”

He takes a deep breath, holds it for a long second, then lets it out. “So at the end of summer you're going to be starting your senior year of high school. That's a huge

deal, right? I mean, you're coming up on time to start applying to schools and picking majors and stuff. Do you have any idea what you want to do?"

"No, not really. I know I want to go to college somewhere away from home, though. I couldn't stand to live with my parents another year. And aren't I always talking about the cities? You know, apply to schools in New York and Chicago and, I don't know, Seattle or wherever. It's the most legit excuse to have to get away from here. Actually start living the life that I want to be living."

"Absolutely. And you're really smart so you're going to get all kinds of scholarships and stuff from the schools begging you to go there."

"God, I hope so."

He squeezes my hand again. He knows it annoys me when people dance around something and don't just go ahead and get to the point.

"So what? You just wanted to make sure that I was aware I'll be a senior like I haven't waited eleven plus kindergarten years? A long time to get to this point. Only one year left of that intellectual black hole before I'm free."

"I know what you mean. I couldn't wait to get out. All the stupid classmates and boring assignments. Like, working at the garage sure isn't my dream job, but I couldn't have handled another four years of making nice getting through college just to have a piece of paper at the end of it."

"Well, do you ever think about going? If the garage isn't your dream job, what is? Okay, so I'm not excited about sitting around in classrooms anymore, but it's the

system. They've managed to convince everyone else that you're not smart without college, so it's just one more unpleasant thing you've got to suck it up and do."

"I guess I could always take classes wherever you go," Sawyer says.

"Exactly." I lean against his shoulder and stare out at the ocean. The buoys bobbing on the waves have lights on top that shift up and down as the water rolls. "I can't wait, once we get to the city. It'll be great. It's the perfect chance to completely start over. No one will know us, so we won't have to worry about anyone we know seeing us when we go out to get dinner or see a movie. And I'll be in college, so it won't matter even if they do. Everything will be completely different."

"Not everything," Sawyer says. "I've got your back and you've got mine, right?"

"Obviously."

He laughs. "Hey, stand up for a minute?"

"Ugh, why? That sounds like effort."

"Jesus, Jen. Just do it, will you?"

I groan and put up a fuss but I stand up and lean against the railing of the dock. It's rough wood, a little rickety, and groans when I push against it. Sawyer gets up to kneeling then reaches out and takes my hand.

"What's wrong? Can't get up, old man?" I pull at his hand to try and get him standing, stepping back against the railing. It creaks loudly in protest, then there's a loud crack. Suddenly there's nothing behind me and I'm falling backwards, screaming in a girly way I will never admit to later.

My fingers tighten around Sawyer's wrist and I tug him after me as I fall backwards off the pier into the water with a loud splash. My butt lands hard against the wet packed sand and Sawyer lands half on top of me. When I try to breathe in, I get a lungful of nasty saltwater. Suddenly Sawyer grabs me and hauls me up. I grip onto his arm so he can help me stay standing as I cough and cough until my chest and throat ache. A single breath of water shouldn't leave me feeling like I tried to inhale the entire ocean, but perhaps unsurprisingly it does. Sawyer pats my back until I wave him off.

"Well. That was unpleasant," I tell him between little hacks and gags. "Ugh, I think I can actually taste the fish pee."

"Nasty. Are you all right, Jen?"

"I'll be fine. Tempted to sue whoever is responsible for the upkeep of that pier, but fine." I gag a bit on the salty taste in my mouth. "Can we go back to the hotel now? I think I need a warm shower and about a thousand aspirin."

"Yeah, of course. Need me to carry you?"

"I'm banged up, not dead."

Sawyer nods, letting it go, then suddenly a look of panic flashes across his face. I start touching along my face and forehead, back into my hairline, wondering if he's seen some kind of horrific gash on my head. But he quickly starts doing what I call the "self-molest," patting down his hips and then his butt as he checks his pockets. He sighs in relief and says, "Okay, we're good."

"Seriously, jerk? You looked so startled that I thought I was bleeding to death or something and you were just worried about your wallet?"

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to scare you.”

“Hmph. Come on. I’m freezing. It doesn’t seem that cold out here until you’re wet and there’s no sun to dry you.”

“Yeah, tell me about it,” Sawyer says, wringing out his shirt.

We hurry back to the truck, sand sticking to our feet and calves. Even though I’m freezing cold and my teeth are chattering, we wash off with the hose before going driving to the hotel and jabbing the elevator button over and over until it arrives to take us upstairs.

“I want the first shower,” I tell Sawyer, wringing my hair out. The water gets all over the hotel carpet, but it’s just water and they have people who clean up around here anyway.

“I’m gentleman enough to offer, even if you aren’t lady enough to wait for me to.”

“I’m a goddamn lady, now move your ass,” I tell him, staying as deadpan as I can manage as I slap at his side, making him move. He laughs and lets me into the bathroom so I can get all the rough scratchy sand off my skin and warm up from my sudden swim.

The warm water feels good, so even though I’m still not thrilled to have had a near-death experience via wood and water I’m in a much better mood. I come out of the bathroom in just my underwear, still toweling off my hair. “Your turn, big guy.”

He moves up to me and helps me dry off. “All warmed up?”

“Uh-huh. I feel much better even though I still feel like I salted my lungs.” I prod his shoulder with one fingertip. “Go on. Go get warmed up. I’m sure there’s a

movie or something on TV that we can watch, have a quiet night in since obviously we can't go anywhere without getting in trouble.”

He laughs and moves his hand down, rubbing over the honeybee on my ribs. Even though I'm not a big fan of the bee anymore, the overall idea of a tattoo I'm still sold on. I like it. On my eighteenth birthday, I'm going to get one. Henna might be a nice trial, but it's just going to fade away and then it will just be a memory. That's not good enough for me.

“Sawyer, go.”

“All right, all right. Find us a movie, then. Joanna Angel is always a favorite of mine.”

“You seriously think I'm going to find a porno for you? Screw you. You want to see something sexy, you should be bribing me into being sweet.”

“You, sweet?” I take a swipe at his arm and he ducks out of the way, darting into the bathroom and closing the door behind him.

Even though he was being a jerk, we're on vacation. Making love last night without having to worry about getting up almost as soon as we're done so that I can get back home in time for my mom to not realize I went missing. Actually getting to cuddle with Sawyer for longer than a quick nap.

I don't have any sexy lingerie or anything, so I steal one of Sawyer's shirts. I can never do this at home where my parents might see and ask questions about where the shirt came from. But aren't panties and the boyfriend's t-shirt supposed to be their own kind of sexy?

I go into his bag and start digging through his clothes. There's a clean navy shirt and a clean white shirt for me to pick between. I pick up the blue shirt and pull it out of Sawyer's bag.

There's a little box under it, a shade of teal that is just a bit too green. It's octagonal instead of square and slightly cushioned on the sides. It's small enough to fit in my hand, and curiosity may have killed the cat but I'm not a cat.

I open the box -- the top of which swings up on the hinge -- and feel my jaw drop down to my chest.

A ring.

The box contains a ring.

It's a silver band with a square-cut diamond sitting on the top with teeny crystals going down the sides of the band to either side. It shines within its faceting and there is only one thing it can be.

But it can't be. Of course it can't be. Sawyer doesn't always think things through all the way. It must be my birthday present. It's absolutely beautiful, exactly something I would pick out for myself. And everyone wears rings as fashion pieces. It will look beautiful on my right hand, sparkling like a fuck you to all those girls at school who throw tantrums until their parents shell out the bucks to keep them in the latest trends. I'll have to come up with some story for my mom and dad about where it came from, but for a gorgeous and obviously expensive present from Sawyer I'll figure something out.

But at the same time I still have some doubts. No, Sawyer doesn't think things through but what guy buys a diamond ring for his girlfriend and doesn't have a mental spark of "oh, duh?"

The bathroom door rattles and I shove the box and shirt back into Sawyer's bag. I pull on his white shirt instead and flop onto the bed right as he opens the door and comes out.

He's rubbing a towel over his head and grins when he sees me. "Either your shirt stretched out or someone went through my stuff." There's a quirk at the edge of his grin. Is he wondering if I accidentally found the ring?

"Um, yeah, I went into your bag. Obviously."

"You going to end up one of those crazy girlfriends? Invasion of privacy and all that?"

"Do you have something to hide?"

His eyebrows both shoot up toward his hairline. "Like what? What would I have to hide?"

I don't know whether to bring it up or not. I mean, there's a ring in his bag. What am I supposed to say to that? But it's not like I can reasonably ignore it. I reach into his bag and pull out the box. It's slightly damp. It must have been in his pocket when we fell into the water. Oh, it must have been what he was patting himself down for, to make sure he hadn't lost it. Did we go to the pier so he could ask?

He reaches out and takes the box from my hand. "Well. Yeah. This." He shrugs then reaches up and scratches the back of his head. "So yeah, here's what I'm going to

do.” He drops down on one knee, reaches out, and takes my left hand in his. “Jen, you’re different than any other girl I’ve ever met. You’re ambitious and smart and beautiful and funny and independent. You’re everything I’ve ever looked for in a woman. So before you start looking at colleges and deciding where we -- the two of us, together -- are going to go, I wanted to ask. Jennifer Marie Brennan, will you marry me?”

He’s joking. It’s April Fools in June. Or he’s gone irrevocably mad. But he looks so earnest even as I can’t make words work. He just proposed to me. He just got down on one knee with a ring and proposed to me.

“I...” I gulp down the basketball-sized lump in my throat. “Can I have a minute to think?”

“What’s there to think about?” Sawyer asks. Then he pauses. “I can’t believe I just said that. Hey, take all the time you need, all right? I just want you to know that I want this, more than anything, and that I’ll wait.”

There’s a hell of a lot to think about. I never expected this. Sawyer and I are good couple, but it just never occurred to me that he might actually propose, get down on one knee and give me a ring and ask me to marry him in some nice little wedding.

Sawyer and I are a good couple. A damn good couple. We’re committed to each other and don’t run around on each other. We laugh at the same jokes, like the same music and movies, and yet we have enough different interests that we stay interesting to one another. Most people my age haven’t even figured that much out.

But could we actually get married? Be husband and wife? Of course I want him to come to the city with me and live with me and the two of us be together while I do college. I want to go out to dinners and see theatre and explore museums and actually see more than just my little corner of the world.

But do I want all that domestic fluffy stuff that comes along with marriage? Obviously part of it is just the individuals involved. But there's still things like someone cooking dinners and wives who vacuum and the husbands outside trimming the hedges and figuring out whether to spend Thanksgiving or Christmas with whose parents and adopting a cat together -- obviously a cat; never a dog -- and eventually joining bank accounts and buying a house and talking about kids and getting old and mixing up false teeth.

Christ. I can't breathe.

"Jen, calm down," Sawyer says. He puts a hand on my upper back and lightly rubs. "I didn't mean to upset you or whatever this is."

I'm not upset. I don't think I am. But I don't know what I am.

"Calm down," Sawyer repeats. "Wow, this isn't exactly the reaction I was hoping for."

What the hell was he hoping for? That I would say yes right away without even a single thought? If he wanted that kind of girl, they're a dime a dozen around here. Every girl wants to get married and start a family except me, so why would he ask me when I'm about to start picking colleges and choosing what city to live in and declaring a major and

making all these huge life choices that don't involve settling-down into so-called domestic bliss?

He steps over to the sink and gets a glass of water and hands it to me. I don't even really want it, but I take sips anyway, slow and measured, and it does feel surprisingly good on my throat. I didn't realize how dry it had gotten until it was wet again. I finish the glass then shove it back into his hands. "Another."

After a second glass of water, I set it down on the table and sit heavily down on the bed.

"Well. That just happened," Sawyer mumbles.

"God, Sawyer, what were you expecting to happen?" I ask him. "You almost gave me a panic attack."

"So the idea of us being married makes you panic?"

"No!" The last thing I want for him to get is the completely wrong idea. But Sawyer is almost as stubborn as I am, and that's saying something, so I have to pick my words carefully here. "You know that's not what I meant, Sawyer. But you startled me. I mean, marriage? I didn't even know you were thinking about it?"

"Why wouldn't I be? Can you really tell me you're not?"

"Not right now." I sigh and run my hands over my face. "It hadn't even crossed my mind."

"Well, it's not like we would drive straight from here to a drive-thru chapel in Vegas, Jen. You're not even old enough to get married right now. I just mean, you know, someday. In the future. But not far in the future. Sooner rather than later."

“And where would I tell my Mother that I got a nice shiny skating rink for a very particular finger?” I can’t imagine ‘Oh, I thought it was pretty. It’s totally cheap; I got it from Wal-Mart’ will fly very long, even if my parents are distracted by their own marital problems right now.

Sawyer shrugs, looking far more put out than he already was. “It’s not like you haven’t lied to your parents before.”

That’s true. That’s more than true. I lie to them all the time. Heck, they think I’m at Shirley’s instead of in a hotel room with some older guy. That’s a pretty big lie. I could conceivably convince my parents of anything, probably. But do I really want an engagement ring I have to hide or lie about?

“Like I said, you can take as much time as you want to think about it,” Sawyer says. He closes the box carefully and puts it back in his bag. “The second you say yes, that you want it, it’s yours.”

“Sure,” I agree. “But no rush.”

He smiles, lips thin and tight like he’s really gotten his heart broken. By a seventeen year old girl. I mean, come on. What is he thinking?

In the morning, we tiptoe around each other getting quick showers and pulling on clothes. I don’t like things being awkward between us, not since we’ve always been so laid back and comfortable together. I wonder if this is ever what my mom feels like, not sure if anything she has to say or what she wants to do is appropriate for the situation. It’s incredible how such a tiny ring can become a massive elephant in the room.

“We have a bit of time before we need to start back,” Sawyer says. “So what do you want to do today?”

“I don’t know. Big breakfast, that’s got to come first. I’m craving pancakes.” I always get sugar cravings on vacations, like I can’t get enough sweets -- a break from the usual boring diet -- to go along with the break in routine. “Then maybe another quick walk on the beach so we can get our feet wet one last time. Um, a run through some tacky tourist shop to get a bag of salt water taffy to split for the road. I guess that’ll do. That way we can be on the road by lunch so we’ll get back at a semi-reasonable time. So Shirley doesn’t have an aneurism worrying that we drove to Vegas.”

I stop myself before I say “for a quickie wedding.” Probably not the best thing to bring up right now.

Sawyer laughs tightly. “Sure, sounds good to me. As long as we get peanut butter taffy.”

“Which in no way actually tastes like peanut butter and is overall an entirely inferior candy when compared to the deliciousness of chocolate taffy.”

“Which in no way tastes like chocolate.”

What’s that saying? Everyone is entitled to their own wrong opinion? “Well, we’ll get both and you won’t eat my delicious chocolate taffy and I won’t deign to touch the nastiness that is your peanut butter taffy and we’ll both be the happier for it, right?”

“Oh lord, is this that whole compromising thing people are supposed to do?” he asks me with a grin. “Be careful. While you’re sitting there ‘thinking about it,’ we’re going ahead and already sounding like a married couple.”

Ugh. No. Even if we get married, we won't sound like that. I throw a balled up pair of socks at him before trying to shove all of my stuff back into my suitcase.

My phone starts ringing, but I just let it go since I need to finish packing so Sawyer and I can get on the road. It's a cheerful little ringtone that sounds like someone whacking -- but whatever the musical form of 'whacking' is -- at a xylophone. It's obnoxious. I picked it so I normally wouldn't be able to ignore it.

The ringing stops and I hold my hand out to Sawyer. "Pass me my brush?"

As the handle touches my palm, my phone starts ringing again. I stuff my brush in the front pocket of my bag and pick up my phone. But the screen doesn't say "Home." It says "Shirley."

I swipe my phone over the screen and put the phone between my shoulder and my ear. "Holy cow, Shirley. What do you want? I'm already packing and we'll be back by dinnertime, so you don't have to worry that I've run off never to return or something."

"Well, you might want to add a 'hurry' onto that 'back,'" Shirley says. She sounds like she's breathing fast. "Seriously, something has happened and... you're going to be really, really mad at me, aren't you?"

"Only if I have to drag it out of you word for word, so you might as well go ahead and tell me what's going on."

Sawyer's forehead wrinkles and he stops packing to lean in close so he can get his ear in as well, but I wave him off. He doesn't need to listen to Shirley's panicked rambling.

But then she blurts out, "Your mother know you're not at my house with me."

What in the hell did she just say? “Now how would my parents know that, Shirley?”

“Okay, it’s like this. So your mom called last night and, oh, yeah, Jen’s in the shower right now but we’re having a great time watching parent-approved movies and not staying up too late. Except this morning Meesh called me and said that she wanted us to get coffee really quick so the two of us went to that little place down on --.”

“Get to the point before I lose my temper.”

“Your mom called again while I was out and talked to my mom who told her you haven’t been by here in weeks.”

Shit. Damn. Shit again.

“Have you ever heard the phrase ‘too stupid to die?’ You’re lucky you’re one brain cell short of ‘too stupid to kill.’”

“I’m really sorry, Jen. My mom just called yelling at me so I thought I would try to reach you before your mom gets a hold of you.”

“God. Fine, I’ll go ahead and call her, bite the bullet so to speak.”

I hang up on Shirley. Part of me already feels bad about yelling at someone who doesn’t have enough malice in her to hurt a fly, but this might ruin everything. I need to find out what’s happening with my parents, whether or not they’ve already called the police. Depending on the outcome, I may apologize to Shirley someday. Eventually.

“What’s going on?” Sawyer asks.

“Shirley screwed up and now my mom knows I’m not at her house. Now I get to call mother dearest and try to convince her not to put out an Amber Alert or call the National Guard.”

I speed-dial home and the other end only rings one time before the phone picks up. “Jen? Jen, dear, is that you?”

Mom sounds wrecked. Like all stuffy-nosed and raw-throated. It’s kind of gross.

“Yeah, it’s me.”

“Where in the hell are you?”

Since when does Mom say ‘hell?’ “I’m fine. Safe, happy, well-fed. Brushed my teeth and everything.”

“Right now is not the time for your sarcasm, Jennifer Marie. I want to know where you are and who you’re with.”

‘In a hotel room with a 24-year-old guy.’ Yeah. Let me just hop right on telling her that. “I was already on my way back. I’ll be home in a couple of hours.”

“That’s not what I asked you. Do you have any idea how much trouble you’re in? I was just about to call you, and if you hadn’t picked up I was going to call the police. I still might.”

Mom sounds nothing like herself. Usually she lets everyone from me to the teller at the bank walk all over her, but right now I would think she’s a completely different person. She sounds somewhere caught between bursting into tears and screaming at me.

“You don’t have to do that. I already told you I’m on my way back. We can deal with this when I get home.”

“You’d better believe we’re going to deal with this. You are grounded. You’re not going anywhere but school until you go off to college. You’re not getting any allowance, and I’m a hair’s breadth away from taking your cell phone. I don’t even want to think about what your father is going to say when I tell him about this.”

“So where is Dad?”

“He is at the Magnolia Inn.”

The inn is about 20 minutes away, a house owned by a doughy couple and their daughter with four bedrooms that they rent out. “Why is Dad there?”

She sighs and static bursts across the phone line. “He’s there because he’s living there now and until he can find a house of his own.”

“What?” Mom actually kicked Dad out of the house? “Are you two, like, separating or getting a divorce or is this just a fight or – what’s going on?”

“Oh, Jen, I don’t know. But you’re not supposed to be miserable in a marriage. And I am, baby. I haven’t been happy in such a long time. I never wanted to leave New Hampshire, and I never wanted to be fully stay-at-home, and I never wanted to be married to someone who would hardly ever be home. You’re about to be a senior, and next summer you’ll be getting ready to go to college. You’ll be out of the house starting your own life, and your father will still be selfish and self-centered, and I’m not doing this anymore. Something has to change, and if that’s not the people in the marriage then it’s going to have to be the marriage itself.”

I knew even before the flying meatloaf that Mom wasn't happy, but I never actually thought that she and Dad would ever talk about let alone take steps toward a divorce.

"Anyway," Mom snaps, "we can talk about this when you get home! You had better be at our front door as soon as possible and be prepared not to leave this house for the entire summer. You're lucky that it's illegal to chain you to your bed frame. And you're going to tell me exactly where you went, what you did, and who you were with."

I'm not going to tell her the truth about any of that, but I say "Yes, Mom" and hang up the phone. With a sigh, I start tossing things less neatly into my suitcase. We need to get going right away, apparently. Before Mom blows a gasket.

"How much trouble are we in?" Sawyer asks as he sits down and puts his hand on my knee. "Do I need to flee the state before I'm registered as a sex offender?"

"She still doesn't know about you. As far as she's ever going to hear, I ran off for a weekend getaway all on my own, and whose car I took and who footed the bill for my little trip will forever remain a mystery."

"Shirley won't rat me out, will she?"

"Her? No. That's why I always end up using her for my alibis. Out of anyone else in that shithole of a town, she knows what it's like to be with someone in a relationship that no one else would support or understand. She's not going to say anything as long as I let her know that I'm utterly safe and happy in your care."

Sawyer laughs softly. "Doubt your parents will see it that way."

"I sincerely doubt it as well. Which is why it's in our best interests to hurry up."

We finish packing the bags then go down to the elevator. The father and small daughter we saw yesterday morning are both in there again. The girl beams up at Sawyer and says, “Hi.”

Sawyer starts to lean down to talk to her, but her father puts a hand on her shoulder and pulls her against the side of his leg. “Don’t talk to strangers, honey.” He gives Sawyer a look, kind of a knowing look, but not a conspiratorial knowing. More like a ‘I know something you don’t want me to know’ look. I don’t know what he thinks is wrong with Sawyer.

Then he glances at me.

He has seen us together in a hotel at the beach. He must be drawing his own -- admittedly correct -- assumptions about our intentions and our reasons for being here. And he thinks he needs to protect his little girl from Sawyer like he’s some kind of creepy predator who would swoop in and take her?

I want to get in this guy’s face and yell at him. He’s some random older guy, older than Sawyer, in a hotel with a little girl younger than I am and I don’t go around making assumptions about him.

But apparently Sawyer can see my ire, which admittedly is not particularly hard to do, and he grabs my hand. Why doesn’t he want to say something to this judgmental jerk? If it were me people were making assumptions about, I would want to say something to them. Maybe that’s why Sawyer is a better person than I am.

In a way, it seems weak to let this guy think what he wants, though. Like Sawyer can’t protect himself. I know that one war strategy is picking your battles. Sawyer must

not think this guy is important enough for him to deal with. And I get it. I mean, who is this guy for Sawyer to even care what his opinion is?

Unfortunately, I'm an intelligent, mature woman in a teenage girl's body. So I'm sure he's not the only person who would make assumptions about Sawyer just because I was born a certain number of years after he was. But that's why we need to get the lead out. If my mom actually does call the police, even if I don't tell them a thing about Sawyer, who's to say that his boss, Mr. Gray-hair, won't suddenly grow a conscience and decide to rat us out? Or maybe someone I don't even know will remember seeing us driving through town together and start to ask questions?

When we get to the lobby, I tell Sawyer, "I'll check out while you load the truck."

Sawyer shakes his head but goes into to take my bag in his free hand. "Try to play nice."

"I'm always nice." I go up to the little clerk desk booth near the door. "Hello. My friend is out loading the truck, and we're hoping that it's okay if I do the checkout for us. Room 307."

"In a hurry to leave, then?" the guy asks like he couldn't care less.

"We are, in fact, if it's all the same to you."

He shrugs. "Sure, all right. It'll be a minute." He starts typing away at his keyboard. "Enjoyed your stay then, did you?"

"I did, actually," I tell him. "I wish we could stay longer, but sometimes things just don't work out the way we planned."

"Story of everyone's life these days, doll."

I've never wanted to stab someone for calling me doll less than I do right now, just because he might have just spouted some of the most perceptive in the moment life philosophy that I've ever encountered. I didn't think moments like this happened outside of cliché coming of age novels. I shouldn't be getting random moments of philosophy from the guy who mans the hotel desk for a living.

And it's kind of a grim thought anyway. Sometimes things just don't work out the way we planned? Well, I guess it doesn't have to be a grim thought. What is that, happy accidents? Those instances where the thing you didn't plan turned out better than the thing you did? But I like having plans. I like having control. The problem is that I don't have enough of it in my life. Or is that just me agreeing with exactly what he said?

If things worked the way we planned, I wouldn't be rushing home to a mother who has any reason to suspect even the existence of Sawyer.

Speak of the devil, he walks back into the office and crosses the room to lean against the counter next to me. "Are we ready to go?"

"Any minute now."

He puts his hand on my waist, fingers curling around my hipbone. "I'm sorry that the end of our trip had to be ruined."

"I'm sorry it was my alibi that ruined it for both of us."

"Not your fault."

The guy hands Sawyer a receipt to sign. Sawyer fills out all the checkout paperwork and signs the receipt. We go outside and load into the truck. "Can we take

the long way? Down the beach?" I ask Sawyer. I want one more look before I have to leave all of this behind.

He nods and turns left out of the hotel parking lot. We drive past all of it, the stretch of pale sand barely visible between the tall steel hotels, the pools with big potted plants, big souvenir shops painted bright obnoxious colors. And still I can hear those damn seagulls cawing overhead. It's a place designed entirely to take the money out of you and make you not care that it did.

I love everything about it. I don't want to leave.

Sawyer flexes his fingers on the wheel every few seconds, making a little creaking sound with the leather cover. I can hear his stomach growling -- I can hear my stomach growling -- but neither of us talks about stopping and getting a bite of breakfast before we go. It's not that we're both in a hurry to get home. I think we would put it off longer if we could, so our weekend wouldn't end so abruptly. And so I don't have to go home to all the yelling that I'm sure is coming my way. But it's like we've both admitted that our weekend is over. Eating breakfast here along the stretch of beach would feel too much like we're trying to fake it.

But the silence is annoying. I can hear each of us breathing. That obnoxious, heavy breathing, like we think something is pressing on our chests so we have to breathe harder and louder to compensate for the weight. It's the kind of sound that will drive me crazy, so I have to do something to drown it out.

"Can I turn on the radio?"

"Huh? Yeah, sure. Jesus, Jen, since when do you ask?"

“I was trying to be polite,” I tell him, poking at the buttons until my favorite rock station comes on. “As foreign as it sounds you might want to try it sometime.”

“Oh, ha ha.”

We turn onto the highway and start the long drive toward home. Or maybe it will be a short drive. It seemed like a long trip when we came down, but that’s probably just because I was so excited to get to Biloxi. Looking forward to the destination made it hard to enjoy the journey. But now that I’m dreading arriving back home, I’m sure the trip will fly by. It’s kind of strange how anticipation makes time drag on so slow but wanting to avoid what’s coming makes time zip past. It’s like kids and Christmas. I would have thought I’d have grown out of it by now.

But maybe there are some things you don’t grow out of. Things like being excited. Things like wanting companionship. Even as much as I don’t like the majority of people, I’ll never completely cut off the entire rest of the human population. And not only because there are other people who are special cases, who stand out from the mundane rest, but because even I would get lonely if I didn’t have someone to spend time with and talk to. Even though Shirley annoys me, even though Sawyer wants to move too fast, I cling to them.

Like with moving away for school. I can’t wait until it happens, until I’m in the city and able to do the things I want to do, see theatre, explore museums, eat at restaurants that aren’t diners. But I want to take Sawyer with me so that I have someone familiar so that I won’t be starting over from zero with no friends to spend time with, no one who can help me if I get into trouble and need someone there.

It kind of makes me see why Sawyer would be thinking about marriage. It's the idea of always having someone. Underneath all that fuss about actually being married and starting a family and all of that. I guess no matter who they are no one wants to be alone.

And Sawyer is the one I want to not be alone with. Having his hand wrapped around mine is like a security blanket, telling me that I'm all right. That he'll make things all right.

Maybe that's not why people should get married, but I think that's probably why a lot of people do. They don't want to be alone and they want to know that someone has their back when push comes to shove. The warm fuzzies and fantastic sex marathons can't last forever, but having companionship that you can stand for to be lifelong can.

It's enough to convince me that I'm willing to give this whole thing a shot. I'd rather do something that terrifies me by accepting Sawyer's proposal than do something that terrifies me by turning him down and running the risk of losing him. Sawyer is too important to me for me to risk ever losing him.

I look over at him. His fingers are curled tight around the steering wheel and he's working his jaw like he's tense. I wonder if he's just as worried about getting home as I am. Now that my mother knows I've been lying about where I am, if someone sees him dropping me off at the school it could lead to a lot of questions he doesn't want to answer.

But I'm going to protect him, so he has no reason to worry.

I trail my fingers up the inside of his wrist then curl my hand into his.

We're going to protect each other. "Sawyer?"

"Yeah, Jen?" he asks, stroking his thumb over my knuckles.

"I want it."

He glances over, eyebrows going up his forehead. "You want what, beautiful?"

I swallow and try to tell him exactly what I want. But there's no way I can articulate it. Simpler is better. Simple will work until I find the right words to say. "I want the ring."

Thank goodness we're alone on the road. He jerks the wheel a little, making the tires squeal, until he puts his attention back on the road. "You really do? You want the ring I got you?"

"I do want it. I think I wanted it right away. I just got scared."

He smiles and reaches into his pocket, pulling out the little box. He hands it across the seat to me. "If you want me to pull over so I can get down on one knee again, I can do that too."

"We'd have to actually pull off the highway so you wouldn't just be down in gravel, and it's not worth it since we're in a hurry and you've already done the gentleman thing anyway." I open the box and pull out the little ring. It seems delicate in my fingers, small and warm from being pressed against Sawyer in his pocket. I push it down my ring finger on my left hand. It's a perfect fit, just scraping over the knuckle and hugging tight when I get it in place. "It's exactly the right size."

"I pay attention," Sawyer says. "I remember the two of us went to that little diner, the one that had the deep fried alligator."

“I still can’t believe you ate that. That stuff just looked disgusting. I don’t even want to think about how it might have tasted.”

He chuckles. “It wasn’t so bad once I covered it with ketchup. Anyway, remember, we used quarters to pretty much empty out the machines in there of press-on tattoos and glittery stickers and little plastic rings. Whatever was in those stupid capsules. And you got one of those rainbow colored rings and tried it on, but it would only fit on your ring finger.”

I do vaguely remember that. It was just one machine with the most random dirt-cheap prizes and we had a blast laughing as we opened up the little capsules of pony stickers and sticky slap hands. One of them had contained a cheap plastic ring of rainbow colors all melted together. I tried it on every finger, but it only fit well on that one. “Well,” I had said, “that makes it pretty useless. I’m hardly going to accept a proposal from a glorified vending machine.”

“You actually kept that?”

“Absolutely. Popped it in my pocket and made sure that whatever ring I chose for you was the same size. I guess it worked out perfectly since it fits.”

“It does fit.” I stroke my thumb over the smooth inside of the metal band. It looks incredible on me. Sawyer did a wonderful job picking out a ring that is something I would have picked for myself, something elegant and classic and shiny.

“I’m so glad you decided to go ahead and take it,” Sawyer says, taking my hand in his again. But now the ring presses between our hands where they grab.

I'm going to have to hide it when I get home. Put it in my pocket while my mom yells and makes impotent threats and takes away my privileges for a month. Even though she certainly seemed determined to stand her ground when I talked to her on the phone, voice all steely like she actually means it this time.

I think I'll get a chain, something nice. Not something cheap. My engagement ring is better than something cheap. But a nice chain to hang around my neck and hang my ring on. Keep it under my shirt where it will be safe.

The thing is, I'm not stupid. I know that accepting this ring is a gamble, one that isn't going to pay off. There's no way I can hide a diamond ring for a year. There's no way I can hide a fiancé for a year. Someone is going to find out, someone who will get all incensed on my apparently innocent behalf.

The best I can hope for is that I can keep Sawyer's identity out of it. The last thing I want is for him to be arrested or to go to jail or have to register as some kind of sex offender just because I'm young. I will never tell anyone -- not my parents nor any kind of counselor or police officer, if this thing really comes to a head -- who Sawyer is. He's my secret, something just for me that I got for myself. He loves me, and for that alone I'm willing to do anything for him.

I will even be engaged to him, wear his ring on a chain.

I know that he and I will never get married. Something will happen to part us. I will have college applications and ACT exams to study for. I'll have a beautiful engagement ring that I won't have any way to explain the appearance of if it's discovered. No matter how careful Sawyer and I are when we go out together, there's

always a chance that we'll be seen by someone who knows my parents and will go to them and tell them I'm running around on dates with the fully-adult grease monkey from the local garage.

Or Sawyer could decide he's ready for more than I can give in terms of being together as an actual couple with a house and pets and shared bank accounts and god forbid someday even children. When he realizes that none of that appeals to me right now -- and why should it? I'm seventeen years old, on the cusp of my first real taste of freedom where I can go and do wherever and whatever I want and don't want to be tied down to all that domesticity before I get a chance to really enjoy my life -- he might just leave.

Or, almost unimaginable but entirely possible, I could meet someone new. Someone who's smart and sarcastic and ambitious and right for me in all the same way Sawyer is. I can't imagine caring for anyone as much as I care for Sawyer, but I know it's possible. Feelings wax and wane and people fall in love more than once. By next summer, I could be in a relationship with someone else entirely.

But there's still a chance for us, for me and Sawyer, no matter how small. Even when no logic I can come up with assures me that we'll work out for another three months, let alone longer, I'm going to wear his ring and be his fiancé. I'll tell Shirley, who will be my maid of honor if this actually works out. I'll actually start to plan a wedding and a life that I've chosen for myself and head for freedom, not just for a weekend away but for the rest of my life.

I squeeze Sawyer's hand and turn up The Eagles on the radio. I have no idea what's going to happen, but right now I'm seventeen and in love and that's all that really matters. Right?

BIOGRAPHY

Allyson Elizabeth Mead graduated from Arkansas School of Mathematics, Sciences, and the Arts, Hot Springs, Arkansas, in 2008. She received her Bachelor of Arts from the University of Central Arkansas in 2012. She has worked as a transcriber and editor in Arlington, Virginia, and has published various short stories under a penname since 2008.