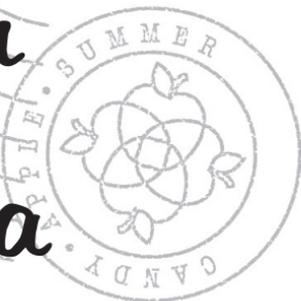


See You Soon, Samantha



by Lara Bergen



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Chapter One

*Ride, ride, ride.
Ridin' in the car, car, car.
Drive, drive, drive.
I swear I've never driven so far.
I don't even know
how far I gotta go.
I just know that it's far . . .
and I really have to pee . . .*

Okay, so I don't know if this is one of the best songs I've ever written. But it was the best I could do in my situation: stuck with a bulging bladder in the backseat of our old station wagon, somewhere between my house in New Jersey and a beach in

North Carolina where I'd be spending the next — gulp! — two months of my life.

Thank goodness we needed gas and could finally stop for a bathroom break after five hours. (My mom was a driving machine!)

The fact that I was stuck in the backseat *without* the new guitar that I'd gotten for my twelfth birthday a week before probably didn't help my songwriting much either. Talk about unfair! And no, it was not in the trunk or tied to the roof of the car, where I'd quite patiently explained to my parents that it should be. It was back at home in my room because, as my mom quite *impatiently* explained to me, I was insane if I thought she was going to haul that enormous thing I didn't even know how to play yet across four states. She was having a hard enough time cramming two months' worth of stuff into our clunky old car, anyway.

"Do you really have to bring two pairs of combat boots?" she actually asked me.

Hello! How could I be Goth (my awesome new twelve-year-old look) without them?

"Definitely, Mom," I told her. "These pink ones go with the outfit I'm wearing for the trip." (One pink-and-black-checked hoodie and an extremely cute black tutu skirt.) "And the black ones are for every day, thank you very much."

Even though I had to leave it behind, I was still psyched to have gotten the guitar at all. Especially after my mom kept reminding me how much I'd begged her and my dad for birthday gifts like ballet lessons . . . and a skateboard . . . and a hamster . . . and yeah, maybe a million other things — and how little interest I had in those things now. (Don't worry — the hamster's now loving life with Carole Anne, my neighbor who still takes ballet.) In fact, before my birthday, I'd pretty much geared myself up for getting some totally boring clothes — which could hopefully be exchanged for something cute and very Goth.

But my parents came through again!

(Plus, my dad said he'd bring my guitar when he joined us at the beach in two weeks.)

In the meantime, I had something else to keep me sane: my trusty iPod, headphones, and a fully charged battery. Do not leave home on a gazillion-mile car trip without them. Unless, of course, you actually *enjoy* listening to your mother sing along to show tunes for hours at the top of her lungs, or hearing your little brother's play-by-play of whatever annoying DS game he's glued to. (I, for one, do not.)

What I *do* like is finding a great new song, putting it on repeat, and listening to it over and over

and over again. After a while, every note and every lyric completely soaks into me just like one of those miracle sponges you see on TV — without anyone telling me to stop already, I’m driving them crazy. (And by “anyone,” I mean my mom . . . and even my BFFs, Mina and Liza, sometimes.) That’s the best, if you ask me. After a while, it’s almost like I’m not listening to the song anymore. I just *am* the song.

Then I usually get sick of it, and move on to the next one.

I hope one day I can write a song that someone wants to listen to again and again and again. . . .

So anyway, I had my new songs — thanks to one set of grandparents who’d given me a gift card that I used for twenty new downloads for my birthday — so I was in pretty good shape. Plus, I had a fresh *Tiger Beat*, *J-14*, and *Seventeen*, which I was dying to dig into (thank you very much, birthday money from other grandparents!). I had souvenirs for Liza and Mina to think about, too, since we’d promised to send one another something crazy and special while we were all away. And of course, I had the beach to look forward to.

In fact, I think if my annoying little brother, Josh, hadn’t insisted on letting his elbow touch

my pillow — gross! — it might have been a downright pleasant trip.

And to think that when my mom first told us about her whole summer plan, I'd totally dreaded it.

“Guess what!” my mom had said that night at the dinner table.

“Chicken butt!” yelled my brother. (He's nine. That's what he does. When will my mother learn?)

“Tell us, Mom,” I said.

“Well,” she began, flashing a goofy, giddy grin. (My mom can be so weird, I swear.) “Karen Abelard called today!”

“Uh . . . cool . . .” I told her. “So what's for dessert?”

“Strawberries,” said my mom. “And that's not the cool part.”

I think I groaned then for two reasons: One, I do not consider *strawberries* “dessert”; and two, how “cool” can anything be that begins with “Karen Abelard called today”?

Karen Abelard, you should know, is one of my mom's best friends from college. They were roommates, and bridesmaids at each other's weddings. I have to say, I'm constantly amazed that they're

BFFs. I mean, my mom is not cool — she wears Christmas socks (in *May!*), and refuses to wear makeup (what’s the point of being a grown-up?), and has all these mortifying old pictures of herself that she insists on posting on Facebook (think sweatshirts with shoulder pads, then add a pair of GIANT glasses). But Karen Abelard is *so* not cool. I mean, she’s nice . . . but a little out there. She’s from North Carolina, and she’s really into yoga, strange jewelry, and *extremely* ugly shoes. Plus, she has this crazy accent. And her husband, Jay? He’s just plain weird.

So whatever, she called. Big deal. I wanted ice cream.

“We’re going to spend the whole summer with her at the beach!” my mom said.

“What?!” I gasped. To be honest, it’s a miracle that I’m still here to tell this story, since I practically choked on my last sugar snap pea.

“Chicken butt!” said my brother.

“Would you be quiet?” I said. Then I turned back to my mother. “Did you say the *whole* summer? With the real-life ‘fairly odd parents’?!” Karen and her family had stayed with us for one night on their way to Vermont back in the fall, and that was quite enough for me.

My mom sighed and gave me one of those looks she just *loves* to give. “Sam,” she said. “They are wonderful people. It’ll be fun. And I exaggerated. It’s not the whole summer . . . exactly.”

I let out a sigh, too relieved to even bother to remind her for the zillionth time to call me Samantha now, and not Sam, please.

“Just July and August,” she added.

“Mom!” I moaned. “What are you trying to do? Destroy my life?” I asked her. “And my name is *Samantha*, remember?”

“Liza and Mina call you Sam. I just heard them today,” Josh spoke up.

“That’s different,” I replied, shooting him a glare.

“Okay, *Samantha*,” my mom said, nodding. “Now, how would a summer at the beach destroy your life?”

“Let me count the ways,” I said very calmly. I held up my hand and raised my carefully black-Magic-Marked fingers one by one. (So Goth, I know.) “One,” I said, “I’ll miss Liza. Two, I’ll miss Mina. Three, I’ll miss Jeremy Ryan. And four . . . Olivia Miner will steal Jeremy Ryan away while I’m gone!”

My mom sighed, reached out, and gently folded

down fingers one and two. “I thought Mina and Liza were going away for the summer, also,” she said. “Remember? Liza’s driving across the country with her family, and Mina’s going to art camp in New York.” Then she pointed to fingers three and four. “And who is Jeremy Ryan?”

“*Oooh*, Jeremy Ryan . . . Sam’s *boyfriend* . . .” Josh made some disgusting kissing sounds, which compelled me to punch him in the arm.

“He is not my boyfriend,” I said to my mom. “But he is the cutest, most amazing boy in school and I bet he *could* be my boyfriend if you didn’t drag me to the ends of the earth for the entire summer.”

“Salt Isle, North Carolina, is not the ends of the earth,” said my mom. “And I thought you liked Myles Porter.”

Ah, Myles Porter. A sore subject.

“I did like him,” I told her. “Until Olivia Miner stole him. Just like she stole Luke Lasky,” I pointed out. “And just like she’s going to steal Jeremy Ryan, too, if I’m gone.”

I didn’t say this, but I was pretty sure that naturally tan, naturally terrible Olivia Miner was put on this planet for no reason *but* to steal boys from me.

“Oh, Sam.” My mom rolled her eyes then. “I really can’t keep up with your crushes. And I’m definitely not going to work our vacations around them.”

“I think going to the beach sounds sweet, Mom!” Josh chimed in.

I shot him exactly the kind of who-asked-you glare that he deserved. “Of course you do,” I snapped. Karen’s son, Brian, was the same age as him, after all. But her other kids, Kiki and Emery, were still practically babies. “You’ll have Brian,” I told Josh. “But who am *I* going to hang out with? There won’t be anyone there my age at all.” Then I pointed to the TV on the counter by the table. “Have you talked with Dad about this?” I asked, turning back to my mom.

“Of course I have,” she said. She nodded toward my dad, who was currently on the screen and pointing to a big rain cloud over Pennsylvania. “You know how much your dad loves the beach — and Karen and Jay. Unfortunately, he’ll have to stay home and work a lot of the time. But he should be able to come down and meet us for part of the time.”

My dad is a weatherman on Channel 3: Mack Macintosh. (And no, “Mack” is not his real name.

It's Marvin. But that's just between us.) My mom used to be his producer, but now she makes commercials for the cable company occasionally. She's even let me be in some. I was most recently seen scarfing food in the background of a commercial for Tico's Tacos, and dropping a bowling ball on my toe in one for Central Jersey Lanes. (No joke — she kept that in there. She thought I was trying to be funny. Right, Mom.)

My mom went on, "And don't worry, honey — there *will* be kids your age. Karen says the house is so big, she's invited Jackie and her family, too." I swear she was smiling so hard, it looked like her teeth might pop out of her head. "Won't that be great?"

Great? I wasn't about to go that far. But better . . .

Jackie was my mother's *other* roommate from college — and she was a lot easier to take. (She wears normal shoes, for one thing.) I hadn't seen her or her family for a long time — maybe four years — but I'd never forget what a great time I had with her daughter, Juliette. I was seven, and Juliette was eleven. And the minute we got together, we were like sisters! (There is absolutely, positively nothing in this whole world that I want more, by the way, than a sister . . . except maybe

for Jeremy Ryan to be my boyfriend.) We hung out together the whole weekend. Our parents even let us sleep in the same room. Juliette taught me how to do cat's cradle and make a French braid and speak pig Latin and do a handstand in the pool. We even had the same favorite number — eleven, her age and my soccer number!

Suddenly, two months at the beach — with Juliette! — didn't seem so bad after all. Especially since my other wish-they-were-sisters, Mina and Liza, were already going to be away. Sigh.

I did regret that I didn't have any more hair for Juliette to braid. I'd just had it all chopped off and mailed it to Locks of Love, for kids who don't have any hair of their own. I was totally psyched to do it as soon as I saw it on the news. I mean, I don't have the most gorgeous hair (it's pretty stringy and this color that a kind, generous person might call dirty blond) but it was better than nothing, right? Plus, I read somewhere that your hair grows thirty feet in your lifetime. So I figured if I started now, I could donate it maybe twenty more times!

The day after I saw the story, I had my mom take me to the place where she gets her hair cut. My mom has short hair, and even though it's starting to get gray, it still looks pretty good. So I figured her hair guy could make someone young

like me look like a rock star. Right? Wrong. (Unless you're talking about a *male* rock star.) Mina and Liza both say I look great. But they're my best friends — they have to. If only I'd known I'd be spending the summer hanging out with Juliette, I might have waited until the end of August to cut all my hair off. (And then the ice-cream truck guy wouldn't have called me a boy in front of Jeremy Ryan on the way home from school. And I was wearing a barrette, too! That's why a boy's name like "Sam" was the last thing I needed to be called, thank you!)

Maybe Juliette would think my haircut was cool.

I closed my eyes and could practically see us together at the beach, talking about boys and makeup and clothes. It wasn't going to be like hanging out with Liza and Mina — nothing was. But close, I hoped!

"Okay, Mom," I said. "I'll go to Karen's beach house. But can we at least have ice cream for dessert?"

And now, just a few weeks later, school was over. I was officially twelve (and one year closer to the big thirteen!). And if the huge green bridge in front of us meant what I thought it did, we were almost at the beach. . . .