

GIRL ON THE BRINK By Christina Hoag  
EXCERPT

The carnival sets up for two weeks every summer in a field outside town. Everyone goes. It's something to vary Indian Valley's monotonous diet of bowling, the single-screen movie theatre, miniature golf, and hanging out at the Dairy Cream.

Kieran grabs my hand as we stroll into the fair. It's a riot of dazzling lights, whirling rides and thumping music. I scan the crowd, hunting for Morgan and Jade, who I spot waiting for funnel cakes.

"Hey, there are my friends." I wave frantically at them with my free hand as I tug Kieran with the other. Morgan sees me, points me out to Jade and they both look my way.

Kieran yanks my hand in the opposite direction. "We'll catch up with them later."

"I want you to meet them. I told them all about you."

"I just want to play my favorite game for you first."

I can't refuse. I let myself be pulled and make an apologetic face at them. Morgan's expression hardens. She says something to Jade. The crowd swarms between us, and I lose sight of them.

Kieran steers me to a shooting-at-moving-ducks game and grabs a rifle. He's a good shot and soon wins a white teddy bear with a red satin heart sewn on its chest. He hands it to me.

"For you."

"Thank you. It's adorable." I proudly tuck it under my arm.

"Just like you. Hungry?"

"Starving."

"Me, too."

We make for the food concessions. "Carnival hot dogs are the best," Kieran says. "The pizza and hamburgers blow."

"Totally," I say as we line up.

We buy hot dogs slathered with relish—and root beer, of course—and sit at a picnic table. Kieran straddles the bench, patting the seat in front of him. I sit astride like him. He inches closer so our knees touch.

"Open wide," he orders, looking at my mouth.

I obey. He feeds one end of the hot dog to me, then leans in and bites the other end. I crack up and almost choke.

"Don't laugh," which comes out something like "doan waf" through Kieran's mouthful of hot dog.

No hands, he chews, swallows and takes another bite. I do the same. We manage to eat the hot dog, and at the end, our lips touch. Kieran presses mine into a kiss.

"So that's why you like carnival hot dogs," I say when we break apart. "To steal kisses."

"Hey, I told you they were the best. Hold on, you have mustard on your face." He swoops in and licks the side of my mouth.

I wipe off his wetness. "Ew, Kieran!"

"Mmmm, salty."

I giggle. He swoops in again and licks all around my mouth and lips. His tongue tickles, and I laugh as I shake my head, sucking in my lips, trying to get him off me as I crack up harder, which only encourages him. He slurps my cheeks and chin, and I try to recoil out of his reach,

but he pulls me to him. Finally, he backs off and dabs my face with a napkin as I recover my breath.

“You’re worse than a puppy,” I say.

“Ruff, ruff.” He pants and holds up his hands like paws, then jumps to his feet, holding out his palm. “Come on. Time for rides.”

We run like it’s an emergency.

“Cup of tea, Madam?” Kieran points to the tea cups, then pushes open the just-closing gate and leaps in a cup.

We spin madly in the tea cups, chase, block and slam each other in the bumper cars, cling to each other in the haunted house. We finish with a ride on the Ferris wheel.

It’s getting late, and the crowd has swelled with rowdy revelers who obviously made a pitstop at a bar before the carnival.

“Let’s go,” Kieran says, after a guy, drunk or stoned, stumbles in front of us.

“I really wanted you to meet my friends.”

“We’ve got plenty of time for that. It gets nasty this time of night, a lot of fights.”

“Okay.” I give a last three-sixty turn in case Jade and Morgan appear. Kieran’s right. Cliques of older guys and girls hang around the perimeter, smoking and drinking from paper bags.

We swing our clasped hands as we walk to the parking lot. I wish the night would never end. When we get in the truck, he blasts the air conditioning and rolls down the windows. We pull out into the street, and as the AC chills, I close my window. Using his control, Kieran buzzes it down again.

“The AC’s on,” I say.

“I know, but doesn’t it feel great? To feel cold air and warm air at the same time?”

He accelerates. Bathtub-temperature air whooshes along the side of my body, while my chest is cooled by the AC. The combination feels luxurious.

“You’re right. It does feel great!”

He grins. “Told ya.”

“My mom would kill me for doing this.”

“That’s why you’re hanging with me, not with her.”

He snakes an arm over and slides off the elastic holding my ponytail. I shake my hair loose and let the wind whip it.

“That’s it, sweetpea, be free.”