

Hemingway said a story is like an iceberg. What appears in the novel is the tip, that ten percent above the water line, but the author must know everything below the surface, too.

When I met Tammy Jo Trask, the heroine of my Southern Witch series, in 2006, I didn't know much about her. Over the years, I learned a lot of things that haven't appeared in the published books...

From the diary of Tammy Jo Trask:

I wasn't allowed to have a boyfriend until I turned fourteen. Momma had made that real clear. But when the cutest boy in your class, the one all the guys admire and all the girls smile at, shares your apple slices at lunch and declares that if he had any secrets, you'd be the only he told them to, well you might be inclined to bend the no-boyfriends-until-fourteen rule by a year or two...or seven.

His name was Zach Sutton. He loved heights, dirt bikes and football, but not in that order. He believed that bullies belonged facedown in the dirt and proved it more than once. I thought the dimple that appeared in his left cheek when he smiled was so precious that I wanted to put it under my pillow at night.

When he said I should be his girlfriend, I told him that I wasn't allowed to have a boyfriend yet.

"But if you could have one? Would it be me or someone else?"

I blushed ten shades of pink and nodded. "You."

"Well," he said with a shrug. "That's done, and we'll keep it a secret." He climbed on his bike and added, "We won't kiss 'til we're both eight."

I forgot about that until the day before my birthday when Zach said I should sleep in my clothes so that I'd be ready when he knocked on my window at

midnight. I'd never stayed up past eleven, so it was already an adventure, even before I snuck out.

It was a hot night that smelled like honeysuckle and I sat on the handlebars of his bike as he pedaled us down empty roads to Corsic Creek, where he'd stashed a present under the bridge.

"George says on your girl's birthday you give her flowers," Zach said, referring to his older brother who seemed to know an awful lot about an awful lot. Of course, George was twelve, so there you go.

"But you've got a lot of flowers around your house already, so here." Zach held the box out. The paper was crooked, which for some reason I liked.

I took off the wrapping and, inside, found a pink-and-black helmet. Not for a bicycle, but the cool kind with a visor, for riding on motorcycles.

"I've got TJ's dirt bike now. There's some cool stuff on the trails to Old Town. If you want, I'll take you with me when I go."

I nodded, my smile as wide as it could get.

"You want me to keep your helmet at my house?" he asked.

"No, I'll find a place to hide it."

"You know, George said that when you give your girl a present, she'll give you a kiss." His denim blue eyes searched my face. "Maybe not always," he added with a shrug. "But we are both eight."

My heart beat like the wings of a trapped bird. I didn't know how to kiss a boy, but I guessed I'd kind of promised to figure it out. I set my helmet down and stepped forward. Then I put my fingertips on Zach's jaw, so I wouldn't lose my place when I closed my eyes.

His lips were soft, and they tasted like Root Beer. Pressing mine against them was as good as letting Hershey's chocolate melt on my tongue. When I stepped back, I took a slow breath and watched his eyes open.

"Did you like it?" I whispered.

"George says there's nothing better than football. Never thought anybody could prove him wrong about that." Zach smiled. "But I guess you did."

That was when I decided that if Zach Sutton asked me to marry him, I'd say yes.