First Love
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For Jane—

In the fall of 2010, I turned in the outline for First Love to my editor, but the story actually began many years before. I was in love with a woman named Jane Blanchard. One morning we were out for a walk in New York City. Seemingly out of nowhere, Jane suffered a violent seizure. She was sick with cancer for nearly two years after that, then died at a young age. Far too young, Janie, I miss your smile. I hope it lives on in this book, this love story that reminds me of our time together (though I don’t remember stealing any cars).

—J.P.
prologue
Okay, I may not be putting myself in the best possible light by admitting this, but let me say right at the start that I was such a straight arrow, such a little do-gooder, that skipping my last two classes that day (AP physics and AP English) made me so insanely, ridiculously jittery that it actually occurred to me this whole crazy plan wasn’t going to be worth it.

Looking back on it now, I can’t believe I was this close to backing out of the most beautiful, funny, painful, and life-changing experience I will ever have.

What an idiot I was.

I was at Ernie’s Pharmacy & Soda Fountain, and I had about five hundred butterflies throwing an epic party in my stomach. The toes of my vintage Frye cowboy boots kept
knocking against the counter, until Ernie—who’s about a million years old and pretty much a total grouch—told me to quit it. Ernie is one Nickelback concert away from complete deafness, though, so I took my boots off and kept knocking away.

I was glad he didn’t ask why I was sitting in his ancient shop, drinking a giant coffee (which I needed like I needed a hole in the head), instead of two blocks down the street at Klamath Falls High School, listening to Mr. Fox blather on about the space-time continuum. Because what would I have said?

Well, Ernie—Mr. Holman, I mean—I’m waiting for a boy I could never date, and I’m about to ask him to do something so major that it’s going to either save our lives or completely destroy us.

Ernie doesn’t care much for teen angst, which is probably why practically no one I know ever comes to his shop—that and the fact that all his candy has dust on it and the Snickers bars are hard enough to use as crowbars.

But I don’t mind. And neither does the boy I mentioned. Ernie’s is our place.

That boy had sent me a note earlier in the day. He’d somehow gotten it inside my locker, even though he doesn’t go to my school anymore and we have Navy SEAL—type security guards to protect us against God-knows-what (rioting due to sheer small-town boredom, maybe).
Axi —
So, you got earth-moving news, huh?
I'm shocked you think you can surprise me —
or surprised you think you can shock me.
Or something like that.
You're the word nerd.
Well, anyway, can't wait to hear it.
Ernie's. 1:15.
Yeah, that means cutting class.
No excuses.

— Your favorite “scalawag”

That's Robinson for you. I'd jokingly called him a scalawag once, and he'd never let me forget it. He's almost seventeen years old. My best friend. My partner in crime.

I heard the front door open and could tell he'd arrived by the way Ernie's face perked up like someone had just handed him a present. Robinson has that effect on people: when he walks into the room, it's like the lights get brighter all of a sudden.
He came over and clapped a hand on my shoulder. “Axi, you dope,” he said (affectionately, of course). “Never drink Ernie’s coffee without a doughnut.” He leaned in close and whispered, “That stuff will eat a giant hole in your guts.” Then he straddled the stool next to me, his legs lanky and slim in faded Levi’s. He was wearing a flannel shirt, even though it was late May and seventy-five degrees outside.

“Hey, Ernie,” he called, “did you hear the Timbers fired their coach? And can we get a chocolate cruller?”

Ernie came over, shaking his grizzled head. “Soccer!” he groused. “What Oregon needs is a pro baseball team. That’s a real sport.” He put the doughnut on an old chipped plate and said, “On the house.”

Robinson turned to me, grinning and pointing a thumb at Ernie. “I love this guy.”

I could tell the feeling was mutual.

“So,” Robinson said, giving me his full attention, “what’s this crazy idea of yours? Are you finally going to apply for your learner’s permit? Have you decided to drink a whole beer? Are you going to quit doing your homework so religiously?”

He’s always getting on me for being a good girl. Robinson thinks—and my dad agrees—that he’s such a bad boy because he quit high school, which he found “insufficiently compelling” and “populated by cretins” (*cretins* being a word that I taught him, of course). Personally, I think he has a point there.

“I’m probably going to fail everything but English,” I said, and I wasn’t exaggerating. My GPA was about to take a nose-
dive, because finals were coming up, and with any luck, I wasn’t going to be around to take them. A week ago, knowing that would have kept me up at night. But I’d managed to stop car- ing, because if this plan worked, life as I knew it was about to change.

“Knowing you, that seems highly unlikely,” Robinson said. “And so what if you’re a little distracted and you—God forbid—get a B plus on something? You’re busy writing the Great American Novel—ow!”

I’d swatted him on the arm. “Please. Between school and taking care of dear ol’ Dad, I haven’t had any time to write.” My dad hit a rough patch a few years ago, and he’s been trying to drink his way out of it. Needless to say, the strategy isn’t working that well. “Can we focus on the matter at hand?” I asked.

“Which is . . .?”

“I’m running away,” I said.

Robinson’s mouth fell open. By the way, unlike yours truly, he never had braces and his teeth are perfect.

“And FYI, you’re coming, too,” I added.
“Did you hear that, Ernie?” Robinson called. I’d have told him he sounded gobsmacked, but he’d never let me forget that particular vocabulary word, either.

Of course, Ernie hadn’t heard anything, not even Robinson’s question. So Robinson pushed away the doughnut and stared at me like he’d never seen me before. It’s not often I can surprise him, so I was enjoying this.

“Did you ever read that copy of On the Road I gave you?” I demanded.

Now Robinson looked sheepish. “I started it . . .”

I rolled my eyes. I’m forever giving Robinson books and he’s forever giving me music, but since he’s distractible and my iPod is dead, that’s usually about as far as it gets. “Well, Sal—who’s really just Jack Kerouac, the author—and his friends go all over the country, and they meet crazy people and dance in
dive bars and climb mountains and bet on horse races. We’re going to do that, Robinson. We’re leaving this dump behind and taking an epic road trip. Oregon to New York City—with stops along the way, of course.”

Robinson was blinking at me. Who are you? the blinks were asking.

I sat up straighter on my stool. “First we’re going to see the redwoods, because those things are totally mystical. Then we’ll hit San Francisco and Los Angeles. East to the Great Sand Dunes in Colorado. Then Detroit—Motor City, Robinson, which is so right up your alley. Then, because you’re such a speed addict, we’ll ride the Millennium Force at Cedar Point. It goes, like, a hundred twenty miles an hour! We’ll go to Coney Island. We’ll see the Temple of Dendur at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. We’ll do anything and everything we want!”

I knew I sounded nuts, so I spread out the crumpled map to show him how I’d figured it all out. “Here’s our route,” I said. “That purple line is us.”

“Us,” he repeated. Clearly it was taking him a while to wrap his head around my proposition.

“Us. You have to come,” I said. “I can’t do it without you.”

This was true, in more ways than I could admit to him, or even to myself.

Robinson suddenly started laughing, and it went on so long and hard I was afraid it was his way of saying No way in hell, you totally insane person who looks like Axi but is clearly some sort of maniac.
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“If you don’t come, who’s going to remind me to have a doughnut with my coffee?” I went on, not ready for him to get a skeptical, sarcastic word in edgewise. “You know I have a terrible sense of direction. What if I get lost in LA and the Scientologists find me, and suddenly I believe in Xenu and aliens? What if I get drunk in Las Vegas and marry a stranger? Who’s going to poke me in the ribs when I start quoting Shakespeare? Who’s going to protect me from all that? You can’t let a sixteen-year-old girl go across the country by herself. That would be, like, morally irresponsible—"

Robinson held up a hand, still chuckling. “And I may be a scalawag, but I am not morally irresponsible.”

Finally, the guy says something! “Does that mean you’re coming?” I asked. Holding my breath.

Robinson gazed up at the ceiling. He was torturing me and he knew it. He reached for the plate and took a thoughtful bite of cruller. “Well,” he said.

“Well, what?” I was kicking the counter again. Hard.

He ran his hand through his hair, which is dark and always a little bit shaggy, even if he’s just gotten it cut. Then he turned and looked at me with his sly eyes. “Well,” he said, very calmly, “hell yes.”
part one
It was 4:30 am when I woke up and pulled my backpack out from under the bed. I’d spent the last few nights obsessively packing and unpacking and repacking it, making sure I had exactly what I needed and no more: a couple of changes of clothes, Dr. Bronner’s castile soap (good for “Shave-Shampoo-Massage-Dental-Soap-Bath,” says the label), and a Swiss Army knife that I’d swiped from my dad’s desk drawer. A camera. And, of course, my journal, which I carry everywhere.

Oh, and more than fifteen hundred dollars in cash, because I’d been the neighborhood’s best babysitter for going on five years now, and I charged accordingly.

Maybe there was a part of me that always knew I was going to split. I mean, why else didn’t I blow my money on an iPad and a Vera Wang prom dress, like all the other girls in my class?
I’d had that map of the US on my wall for ages, and I’d stare at it and wonder what Colorado or Utah or Michigan or Tennessee is like.

I can’t believe it took me as long as it did to get up the guts to leave. After all, I’d watched my mom do it. Six months after my little sister, Carole Ann, died, Mom wiped her red-rimmed eyes and took off. Went back East where she’d grown up, and as far as I know, never looked back.

Maybe the compulsion to run away is genetic. Mom did it to escape her grief. My dad escapes with alcohol. Now I was doing it . . . and it felt strangely right. At long last. I could almost forgive Mom for splitting.

I slipped on my traveling clothes and sneakers — saying good-bye to my favorite boots — and hoisted my backpack onto my shoulder, cinching the straps tight. I was going to miss this apartment, this town, this life, like an ex-con misses his jail cell, which is to say: Not. At. All.

My dad was asleep on the ugly living room couch. It used to have these pretty pink flowers on it, but now they look sort of brownish orange, like even fabric plants could die of neglect in our apartment. I walked right by and slipped out the front door.

My dad gave a small snort in his sleep, but other than that, he never even stirred. In the last few years, he’d gotten pretty used to people leaving. Would it really matter if another member of the Moore family disappeared on him?

Out in the hallway, though, I paused. I thought about him.
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waking up and shuffling into the kitchen to make coffee. He’d see how clean I’d left it, and he’d be really grateful, and maybe he’d decide to come home from work early and actually cook us a family dinner (or a what’s-left-of-the-family dinner). And then he’d wait for me at the table, the way I’d waited so many nights for him, until the food got cold.

Eventually, it would dawn on him: I was gone.

A dull ache spread in my chest. I turned and went back inside.

Dad was on his back, his mouth slightly open as he breathed, his shoes still on. I put out a hand and touched him lightly on the shoulder.

He wasn’t a horrible father, after all. He paid the rent and the grocery bill, even if it was me who usually did the shopping. When we talked, which wasn’t often, he asked me about school and friends. I always said everything was great, because I loved him enough to lie. He was doing the best he could, even if that best wasn’t very good.

I’d written about eight hundred drafts of a good-bye note. The Pleading One: Please try to understand, Dad, this is just something I have to do. The Flattering One: It’s your love and concern for me, Dad, that give me the strength to make this journey. The Literary One: As the great Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw wrote, “Life isn’t about finding yourself. Life is about creating yourself.” And I want to go create myself, Dad. The Pissy One: Don’t worry about me, I’m good at taking care of myself. After all, I’ve been doing it since Mom left. In the end, though, none of them seemed right, and I’d thrown them all away.
I bent down closer. I could smell beer and sweat and Old Spice aftershave.

“Oh, Daddy,” I whispered.

Maybe there was a tiny part of me that hoped he’d wake up and stop me. A small, weak part that just wanted to be a little girl again, with a family that wasn’t sick and broken. But that sure wasn’t going to happen, was it?

So I leaned in and kissed my father on the cheek. And then I left him for real.
Robinson was waiting for me in the back booth of the all-night diner on Klamath Avenue, two blocks from the bus station. Next to him was a backpack that looked like he’d bought it off a train-hopping hobo for a chicken and a nickel, and his face made me think of a watchdog resting with one eye open. He looked up at me through the steam rising from his coffee.

“I ordered pie,” he said.

As if on cue, the waitress delivered a gooey plate of blueberry pie and two forks. “You two are up early,” she said. It was still dark. Not even the birds were awake yet.

“We’re vampires, actually,” Robinson said. “We’re just having a snack before bed.” He squinted at her name tag and then smiled his big, gorgeous smile at her. “Don’t tell on us, okay,
Tiffany? I don’t need a stake through my heart. I’m only five hundred years old — way too young and charming to die.”

She laughed and turned to me. “Your boyfriend’s a flirt,” she said.

“Oh, he’s not my boyfriend,” I said quickly.

Robinson’s response was almost as quick. “She asked me out, but I turned her down.”

I kicked him under the table and he yelped. “He’s lying,” I told her. “It’s the other way around.”

“You two are a comedy act,” Tiffany said. She wasn’t that much older than we were, but she shook her head like we were silly kids. “You should take that show on the road.”

Robinson took a big bite of pie. “Believe me, we’re gonna,” he said.

He shoved the plate toward me, but I shook my head. I couldn’t eat. I’d managed to keep a lid on my nerves, but now I felt like jumping out of my skin. When had I ever done anything this crazy, this monumental? I never even broke my curfew.

“Hurry up with that pie,” I said. “The bus to Eureka leaves in forty-five minutes.”

Robinson stopped chewing and stared at me. “Pardon?”

“The buuuuuus,” I said, drawing it out. “You know, the one we’re getting on? So we can get the heck out of here?”

Robinson cracked up, and I considered kicking him again, because it doesn’t take a genius to tell the difference between being laughed with and laughed at. “What’s so funny?”

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He leaned forward and put his hands on mine. “Axi, Axi, Axi,” he said, shaking his head. “This is the trip of a lifetime. We are not going to take it on a Greyhound bus.”

“What? Who’s in charge of this trip, anyway?” I demanded. “And what’s so bad about a bus?”

Robinson sighed. “Everything is bad about a bus. But I’ll give you some specifics so you’ll stop looking at me with those big blue eyes. This is our trip, Axi, and I don’t want to share it with a dude who just got out of prison or an old lady who wants to show me pictures of her grandkids.” He pointed a forkful of pie at me. “Plus, the bus is basically a giant petri dish for growing superbacteria, and it takes way too long to get anywhere. Those are your two bonus reasons.”

I threw up my hands. “Last I checked, we don’t have a private jet, Robinson.”

“Who said anything about a plane? We’re going to take a car, you dope,” he said. He leaned back in the booth and crossed his hands behind his head, totally smooth and nonchalant. “And I do mean take one.”
“What are you doing?” I hissed as Robinson led us down one of the nearby side streets. His legs are about twice as long as mine, so I had to jog to keep up with him.

When we came to an intersection, I grabbed his arm and whirled him around to face me. Eye to eye. Scalawag to Ms. Straitlaced.

“Are you serious about this?” I said. “Tell me you’re not serious.”

He smiled. “You took care of the route. Let me take care of the ride.”

“Robinson—”

He shook off my grip and slung his arm around my shoulder, big brother–style. “Now settle down, GG, and I’ll give you a little lesson in vehicle selection.”
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“A lesson in what? And don’t call me that.” It stands for Good Girl, and it drives me absolutely nuts when he says it.

Robinson pointed to a car just ahead. “Now that, see, is a Jaguar. It’s a beautiful machine. But it’s an XJ6, and those things have problems with their fuel filters. You can’t have your stolen car leaking gas, Axi, because it could catch on fire, and if you don’t die a fiery death, well, you’re definitely going to jail for grand theft auto.”

We walked on a little farther, and he pointed to a green minivan. “The Dodge Grand Caravan is roomy and dependable, but we’re adventurers, not soccer moms.”

I decided to pretend this was all make-believe. “Okay, what about that one?” I asked.

He followed my finger and looked thoughtful. “Toyota Matrix. Yeah, definitely a good option. But I’m looking for something with a bit more flair.”

By now the sun was peeking over the horizon, and the birds were up and chattering to each other. As Robinson and I walked down the leafy streets, I felt the neighborhood stirring. What if some guy stepped outside to grab the newspaper and saw us, two truants, suspiciously inspecting the neighborhood cars?

“Come on, Robinson,” I said. “Let’s get out of here.” I was still hoping we’d make the bus. We had ten minutes left.

“I just want the perfect thing,” he said.

At that moment, we saw a flash in the corner of our eyes. It was brown and fast and coming toward us. I gasped and reached out for Robinson.
He laughed and pulled me close. “Whoa, Axi, get a grip. It’s only a dog.”

My heart was thrumming. “Yeah, I can see that... now.”

I could also now see it wasn’t likely to be an attack dog, either. He was a small thing, with matted, shaggy fur. No collar, no tags. I took a step forward, my hand extended, and the dog flinched. He turned around and went right up to Robinson instead (of course) and licked his hand. Then the darn thing lay down at his feet. Robinson knelt to pet him.

“Robinson,” I said, getting impatient, “Greyhound bus or stolen car, the time is now.”

He didn’t seem to hear me. His long, graceful hands gently tugged on the dog’s ears, and the dog rolled onto his side. As Robinson scratched the dog’s belly, the animal’s leg twitched and his pink tongue lolled out of his little mouth in total canine ecstasy.

“You’re such a good boy,” Robinson said gently. “Where do you belong?”

Even though the dog couldn’t answer, we knew. He was skinny and his fur was clumped with mud. There was a patch of raw bare skin on his back. This dog was no one’s dog.

“I wish you could come with us,” Robinson said. “But we have a long way to go, and I don’t think you’d dig it.”

The dog looked at him like he’d dig anything in the world as long as it involved more petting by Robinson. But when you’re running away from your life and you can’t take anything you don’t need, a stray dog falls in the category of Not Necessary.

“Give him a little love, Axi,” Robinson urged.
I bent down and dug my fingers into the dog’s dirty coat the way I’d seen Robinson do, and when I ran my hand down the dog’s chest, I could feel the quick flutter of his heart, the excitement of finding a home, someone to care for him.

Poor thing, I thought. Somehow, I knew exactly what he was feeling. He had no one, and he was stuck here.

But we weren’t. Not anymore.

“We’re leaving, little buddy. I’m sorry,” I said. “We’ve just got to go.”

It was totally weird, but for some reason that good-bye hurt almost as much as the one I’d whispered to my father.
We left the dog with one of Robinson’s sticks of beef jerky, then headed to the end of the block, where Robinson pulled up short. “There it is,” he whispered, with real awe in his voice. He grabbed my hand and we hurried through the intersection.

“There what is?” I asked, but of course he didn’t answer me.

If things went on like this, we’d have to have a little talk—because I didn’t want a traveling companion who paid attention to 50 percent of whatever came out of my mouth. If I wanted to be ignored, I could just stay in Klamath Falls with my idiotic classmates and my alcoholic father.

“There is the answer,” Robinson said finally, sighing so big you’d have thought he just fell in love. He turned to me and bent down in an exaggerated bow, sweeping his arm out like a
valet at some superfancy restaurant (the kind of place we don’t have in K-Falls).

“Alexandra, milady, your chariot awaits,” Robinson said with a wild grin. I rolled my eyes at him, like I always do when he does this fake-British shtick with my full name.

And then I rolled my eyes again: my so-called chariot, it turned out, was actually a motorcycle. A big black Harley-Davidson with whitewall tires and yards of shining chrome, and two black leather side bags decorated with silver grommets. There were tassels on the handlebars and two cushioned seats. The thing gleamed like it was straight off the showroom floor.

Robinson was beside me, whispering in some foreign language. “Twin Cam Ninety-Six V-Twin,” he said, then something about “electronic throttle control and six-speed transmission” and then a bunch of other things I didn’t understand.

It was an amazing bike, even I could see that, and I can hardly tell a dirt bike from a Ducati. “Awesome,” I said, checking my watch. “But we really should keep moving.”

That was when I realized Robinson was bending toward the thing with a screwdriver in his hand.

“Are you out of your mind?” I hissed.

But Robinson didn’t answer me. Again.

He was going to hot-wire the thing. Holy s—

I ran to the other side of the street and ducked down between two cars. Adrenaline rushed through my veins and I pressed my eyes shut.
There was no way this was happening, I told myself. No way he was going to actually get the thing started, no way this was how our journey would begin.

I had it all planned out, and it looked nothing like this.

Then the roar of an engine split open the quiet morning. I opened my eyes and a second later Robinson’s feet appeared, one on either side of the Harley.

_We’re breaking the law!_ I should have screamed. But my mind simply couldn’t process this change in plans. I couldn’t say anything at all. I just thought: _He’s running away in cowboy boots! That is so not practical!_ And: _Why didn’t I bring mine?_

“Stand up, Axi,” Robinson yelled. “Get on.”

I was rooted to the spot, my chest tight with anxiety. I was going to have a heart attack right here on Cedar Street, in between a pickup and a Volvo with a _My other car is a broom_ bumper sticker. So much for my great escape!

But then Robinson reached down and hauled me up, and the next thing I knew I was sitting behind him on the throbbing machine with the engine revving.

“Put your arms around me,” he yelled.

I was so heart-and-soul terrified that I did.

“Now hang on!”

He put the thing in gear and we took off, the engine thundering in my ears. My dad was probably going to wake up on the couch and wonder if he’d just heard the rumble of an early-summer storm.

We shot past the Safeway, past the high school football
field, past the Reel M Inn Tavern, where every Friday night my dad hooked himself up to a Budweiser IV, and past the “Mexican” restaurant (where they put Parmesan cheese on top of their burritos).

Yeah, Klamath Falls. It was the kind of place that looked best in a rearview mirror.

Seeing it flash past me, feeling the rush of the wind in my face, I suddenly didn’t care if we woke up the entire stinking town.

*Eat my dust!* I wanted to shout.

Robinson let out a joyful whoop.

We’d done it. We were free.
This wasn’t anything like the moped
I rode once. It wasn’t like anything I’d ever felt before. We weren’t even on the highway yet, but already it felt like we were flying.

Then above the roar of the engine I heard Robinson’s voice.
“I don’t want a tickle / ’Cause I’d rather ride on my motorsickle!” It was an old Arlo Guthrie song. I knew the words because my dad used to sing them to me when I was a little girl.

“And I don’t want to diiiiie / Just want to ride on my motorcy...cle,” I joined in, even though I can’t carry a tune to save my life.

Robinson leisurely steered us past strip malls on the outskirts of town. He was whistling now (because if you ever want to blow out your vocal cords, try singing loudly enough to be heard over a Harley). He was acting like it was no big deal to be zipping away on a stolen motorcycle.
My God, what in the world did we think we were doing? We were supposed to be on a bus, and instead we were on a stolen motorcycle that cost more than my dad made in two years. Escape was one thing, but robbery took it to another level. Suddenly I couldn’t stop picturing the disappointment on my dad’s face when he posted my bail, or the headline in the *Klamath Falls Herald and News*—GOOD GIRL GONE BAD—next to an unflattering mug shot that washed out my blue eyes and pale skin.

I tried not to imagine a cop around every bend as we headed south of the Klamath Falls Country Club, where my mom used to go for sloe gin fizzes on Ladies’ Poker Night. And I kind of freaked out when we were actually acknowledged by another motorcycle rider, heading into town. As he passed, the biker dropped his arm down, two fingers angling toward the road, and Robinson mirrored the gesture.

“Don’t take your hands off the handlebars!” I yelled. “Ever!”

“But it’s the Harley wave,” Robinson hollered.

“So?”

“So it’s rude not to do it back!”

Of course, manners are useless when you’re flat on your back in the bottom of a ditch…. I didn’t say that to Robinson, though, because I had to admit, Robinson was driving the motorcycle like he’d done it a thousand times before. Had he? Didn’t a person need a special license to drive a motorcycle? And what about the hot-wiring? It would’ve taken me that long to figure out how to start the motorcycle with a key. Yeah, we had a few things to talk about, Robinson and me.
Past the Home Depot and Eddie’s 90-Days-Same-as-Cash, Robinson yelled something, but the roar of the engine swallowed his voice. I think it was “Are you ready?” I didn’t know what he was talking about, but whatever it was, I was probably not ready. Then I noticed that the speed limit went up to fifty-five, and Robinson pulled back on the throttle.

This may be obvious, but the thing about being on a motorcycle is that there is nothing between you and the world. (Or between you and the hard pavement.) The wind roars in your face. The sun shines in your eyes like a klieg light. There is no windshield. There are no seat belts. We were going sixty-five now, and the little white needle was rising. I tightened my arms around Robinson’s waist.

“What are you doing?” I yelled.

Eighty, and the roar of the wind drowned out the sound of my screaming.

Ninety, and tears were streaming from my eyes. I clung to Robinson for dear life.

One hundred, and I might as well have been on a rocket ship blasting into the stratosphere.

Adrenaline coursed through us like liquid fire. We were charged. Dangerous. The motorcycle shuddered and gained even more speed, and the wind was like a giant’s merciless hand trying to push me off the back of the bike.

My life flashed before my eyes—my small, sad life.

Good riddance!

The fear was electrifying. It was terrifying and amazing,
and if I’d thought I was having a heart attack before, I was definitely having one now.

And I was totally, dizzyingly, thrillingly loving every second of it.

In those brief moments, I shed my small-town good-girl reputation like an ugly sweater, and I burned it in the flames of the Harley insignia. We were runaways. Outlaws. Me and Robinson. Robinson and me.

And if we died in a fiery crash—well, we’d die happy, wouldn’t we?
But whether it was luck or fate or Robinson’s driving skills, we didn’t die. We rode for hours along twisting back roads, until I felt like I’d molded myself to Robinson’s back. Like I’d become some kind of giant girl-barnacle he’d need to pry off with that screwdriver of his.

At lunchtime we finally stopped in the town of Mount Shasta, California. It was tucked into the lower slope of a mountain, a giant, snow-streaked peak that’s supposedly some kind of cosmic power center.

Yeah, you heard me right.

If you believe local legend, it’s home to an ancient race of superhumans called Lemurians, who live in underground tunnels but surface every once in a while, seven feet tall and decked out in white robes. In other words, Mount Shasta is totally
unlike Klamath Falls, which is the world’s capital of monotony and is home to guys with names like Critter and Duke.

Also, UFOs have allegedly landed on Mount Shasta. And that’s just the tip of the bizarro iceberg.

Even the smiling attendant at the Shell station was wearing a giant amethyst crystal around his neck and had a chakra diagram on his T-shirt.

Robinson returned the attendant’s blissed-out grin, but his didn’t come from Mount Shasta’s cosmic power rays. It came from the Harley. He struck a pose, one hand on the gas tank, a thumb hooked in his belt loop, and offered me a goofy Hollywood sneer. “Am I James Dean or what? Rebel Without a Cause?”

I squinted at him. Though I would never admit it, Robinson kind of looked like he could be a movie star. Sure, he was a little on the skinny side, but that face of his? It belonged on a poster tacked to a tween girl’s bedroom wall.

“James Dean died in a car crash. You know, because he was speeding,” I said. My legs were trembling so much I could barely stand. The thundering rumble of the engine had burrowed into my bones.

“I only sped once,” Robinson countered. “I had to see what this bad boy could do.”

“Once was plenty,” I shot back, trying to sound stern. I’d loved it, sure. Because ohmygod it felt like flying. But I was pretty sure that—like paragliding or jumping out of an
airplane—going 110 on the back of a stolen Harley was the sort of thing you only needed to do once.

Robinson walked into the station to pay for the gas and emerged with two Vitaminwaters and a Slim Jim, which, if you ask me, is like eating a pepperoni-flavored garden hose. But Robinson had loved horrible food for as long as I’d known him.

We took a little stroll into the town center. There was a guy wearing a sandwich board that read ARE YOU SAVED? But instead of a picture of Jesus or angels, there was a drawing of a green-skinned alien holding up two fingers in a peace sign. Robinson stopped to talk to him. Of course.

I ducked into a health food store that smelled like patchouli and nutritional yeast and got some vegetables for our dinner. When I came outside, Robinson was reading a flyer that the man had given him.

“We could go on a spirit quest,” he said. “Meet our Star Elders.”

“No way, Scalawag,” I said, snatching the pamphlet from him and tossing it into a recycling bin. “As fascinating as that sounds, I spent months planning this trip, and last I checked, communing with our so-called Star Elders was not on the to-do list.”

“Well, neither was stealing a motorcycle, and look how well that turned out.”

He looked pretty proud of himself for that comeback.

“Okay, fine,” I acknowledged. “It’s been great so far. But we can’t ride a hot bike across the country. For one thing, we’ll get caught. And for another, I don’t think my butt can take it.”
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Robinson laughed. “You actually look kind of annoyed right now. Are you?”

“No,” I lied. “But next time, I pick the ride.”

“Oh, Axi—” he began.

“I don’t want this trip to be a huge mistake, okay?” I interrupted. “I’m not interested in jail time.”

Robinson leaned over and plucked a swirly glass orb from the sidewalk display in front of the Soul Connections gift shop. He waved it in front of my face. “By everything that is cosmic and weird and awesome, I banish all doubts from your mind.” He glanced at the price tag. “Only five ninety-five. A bargain!”

He dashed into the store and a moment later reappeared with the orb nestled in a purple velvet bag. He placed it in my hands. “This is magic,” he said. “It will keep you from ever being annoyed at me again.”


“Axi,” Robinson said, his voice softer now, “if this trip is a mistake, it’s the best one we’ll ever make.”

And somehow, by the look he gave me then, I knew he was right.
By the time we stopped at a campground in Humboldt Redwoods State Park, we’d been driving for seven hours. Robinson had stuck to the back roads, and I wasn’t complaining. My fear of getting pulled over by cops looking for a black Harley with an Oregon plate hadn’t completely disappeared, but I was thinking about it less as we got farther and farther from home.

The sun was low above the horizon when we pulled into the park, and it vanished completely as we entered the green canopy of trees. Robinson let out a low whistle as the shadows enveloped us.

Old-growth redwoods. How can I even describe them? They towered above us darkly, and they felt alive. Not alive like regular trees, but alive like they had souls. Like they were wise, ancient creatures, watching with only the faintest hint of inter-
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as two road-weary teenagers walked beneath them. The air was cool and slightly damp, and the silence was profound. I felt like we were in church.

“I totally understand the whole Druid thing now,” Robinson whispered.

“I think the Druids actually worshipped oak trees,” I noted. “They didn’t have redwoods in ancient Ireland.”

“Smarty-pants,” Robinson said, poking me.

I put my hand on a rough, cool trunk. “Majestic tranquility,” I said softly, seeing how the words felt in my mouth. A little too pretentious: I wouldn’t be writing that down in my journal. But there were real writers who’d seen redwoods like these, and I could steal from them, couldn’t I? “They are not like any trees we know, they are ambassadors from another time,” I said.

“Huh?” said Robinson.

“John Steinbeck wrote that in Travels with Charley.”

He sighed. “Another one of the books you gave me—”

“That you didn’t read.”

Robinson used to pretend he felt guilty about ignoring the stacks of books I passed to him, but eventually he stopped bothering. “I thought I was supposed to read East of Eden first,” he said.

“Let me know when you get to it,” I said. “I won’t hold my breath.”

“Well, you can let me know when you listen to that Will Oldham CD I got you.”

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“I put it on my iPod but, as you know, it’s broken,” I pointed out. “Your eyeballs work just fine.”

We found our campsite then, a small clearing surrounded by a ring of redwoods, with a picnic bench, a fire pit, and a spigot for cold, clear water. I unhooked my tent from the backpack. It was an army-green miracle of engineering: big enough to contain two people and their sleeping bags, it weighed less than a pound and, folded up, fit into a bag the size of a loaf of Wonder Bread. Robinson eyed it, impressed.

“Watch how I set this up,” I directed. “Because tomorrow night it’s your job.”

“I thought it was the woman’s job to keep house and the man’s job to hunt for food,” he said, grinning slyly.

I snorted. “Are you planning to kill an elk with your screwdriver? Good luck.”

“I was thinking more along the lines of a squirrel,” he said, but even that was ridiculous, because Robinson would never hurt anything. I mean, the guy had to grit his teeth to kill a mosquito.

I unpacked the veggies I’d bought, plus a hunk of aged Gouda and a bag of lavash, the thin flatbread I love and couldn’t get in Klamath Falls because apparently it was too exotic.

“Well, well, well,” Robinson said as he watched me skewer mushrooms and peppers on sticks I’d stripped of their bark. “I guess you’d do all right on Survivor.”

I rolled my eyes at him. “I paid for this stuff, Robinson. I
didn’t forage for wild green peppers and cheese. Now, are you going to gather some sticks for the fire or what?”

“You couldn’t buy firewood, too?” he asked, but he ambled good-naturedly into the brush to find things to burn.

Soon we had a nice fire going, and we roasted our kebabs over the flickering flames. I stuck slices of cheese between pieces of lavash, wrapped them in foil, and set them near the fire until the cheese melted. When everything was ready, we leaned against a fallen log that was covered with springy green moss, which made a surprisingly comfortable backrest. We didn’t have plates, and the vegetables were a bit burned in places, but it was the best dinner I’d ever had. It tasted like freedom.

Robinson complimented my cooking, but within the hour he was raiding my backpack for junk food, claiming to be suffering from vitamin overdose.

“What else do you have in here?” he demanded. “I know you’re keeping Fritos or Oreos or something terrible and delicious from me.” I watched as he pulled out the map, two feather-light rain ponchos, my Dr. Bronner’s, my toothbrush, and my journal.

“Open that on pain of death,” I warned.

Finally Robinson held up a chocolate bar, triumphant.

“Half for you, half for me,” he said.

“A quarter for you and a quarter for me,” I corrected. “I’m rationing.”

Robinson laughed. “You’re a planner, I know. You always
have everything figured out. But do you really think there’s a shortage of chocolate bars on the West Coast?” He reached out and handed me a small piece of chocolate. When our fingertips touched, I twitched as if I’d been shocked. It surprised both of us.

“You’re jittery all of a sudden,” he said. “We’re safe here, Axi. No one’s going to find us.” He walked over to the bike and lovingly patted its seat. “Or the hot Harley.”

While Robinson fondled his new toy, I tried to calm down, breathing in that “sweeter, rarer, healthier air,” as old Walt Whitman would say. Night was coming, bringing darkness and deeper silence. It seemed like in all the world, there were only the two of us.

I’d always told Robinson pretty much everything I thought about, but I couldn’t tell him this: I wasn’t nervous about being discovered. I was suddenly nervous about something else.

Sleeping arrangements.
Inside the tent, I unrolled our sleeping bags. There wasn’t an inch to spare. We were going to be thisclose to each other, Robinson and me.

He was still outside the tent, throwing leaves into the fire and watching them curl and blacken. “Do we need to string up the packs? You know, to protect them from bears?” he called.

“There aren’t any bears around here,” I assured him, smoothing out my bag. It was pink camo. Hideously ugly, but it’d been on sale. “Only elk. Spotted owls. That sort of thing.”

Robinson poked his head inside the tent. “Do you know that for real?” he asked. “Or are you just saying it to make yourself feel better?” He looked me right in the eyes. He knew me too well.

“I’m, like, sixty percent positive,” I admitted. “Or less.”
Robinson was unsurprised. “I’m stringing up the packs, then.”

He ducked back out and I heard him rustling around. He took a long time, whether because he was new to the demands of camping or because he was sneaking more of the chocolate bar... well, that could be his secret.

When he popped his head in again, he was grinning. There was a tiny spot of melted chocolate in the corner of his mouth. “Cozy in here, isn’t it?”

Then he slipped off his boots and climbed all the way inside, and cozy became something of an understatement. I felt weirdly shy. Like suddenly my body was bigger and more awkward — and more *female* — than it had ever been before. I wondered if I smelled like motor oil and BO. I noticed that Robinson smelled like campfire, like soap, like *boy*.

Robinson could have had his pick of girls from our high school. Even after he dropped out (which for everyone else who’d done it was the social kiss of death), all the cheerleaders and the student council girls still wanted to take him to prom. Sometimes I pictured them hanging off his arms, like those little game pieces in Barrel of Monkeys, brightly colored and plastic.

“I’m not interested in them,” he’d say. Eventually, I’d gotten up the nerve to ask: who—or what—was he interested in? He’d laughed and slung his arm around my shoulders the way he did sometimes.

“I’m interested in you, GG,” he’d said lightly. As if that settled it.
But what did that mean, really? Because as far as I could tell, he wasn’t interested in me in that way. We’d held hands a few times, like when we were in the movie theater watching *Cabin in the Woods* or *Paranormal Activity*. And once when I’d drunk three-quarters of a beer, I had kissed him, sloppily, good night.

But that was all, folks.

Now we lay side by side, staring at the tent ceiling only three feet above our heads. I listened to the wind in the tops of the trees and the sound of Robinson’s breathing, and for the first time considered what traveling together would mean in practical terms. Where was I supposed to change? What if I wanted to sleep in my underwear? What would Robinson think when he saw me in the morning, mussed and sleepy, with tousled hair and flushed cheeks and breath that could kill a small animal?

Not that that was the problem. No, the problem—or, at the very least, the Thing That Mattered—was that we would be sleeping right next to each other. Alone. Not even a stuffed teddy bear between us.

Robinson shifted, trying to make himself comfortable. No doubt he was realizing the same thing I was. I cleared my throat.

“Before you say anything,” Robinson said, “here’s the deal.”

I could almost hear my heart doing a tiny shuffling dance.

“Stealing is—well, it’s not a good thing, Axi, but it’s not necessarily that bad, either. I mean, we’re taking good care of the bike. And this guy’s going to get it back.”
That dancing ticker of mine slowed. I’d thought we were going to talk about us. Honestly, I was already over the stealing.

Regret is a waste of time, my mom used to say. She’d served up that platitude a lot before she split town. Maybe it made her feel better about leaving.

“And if for some reason he doesn’t get it back,” Robinson went on, “his insurance covers the loss and he gets a brand-new one.”

He made it sound so simple. And maybe it was. In some ways it was simpler than talking about us.

Robinson rolled over so he was facing me. His nose, I noticed, was sunburned. His chin was covered in faint dark stubble. I watched his Adam’s apple move as he swallowed. Our eyes met, but I quickly looked away.

He reached out and brushed a piece of hair from my forehead. I held my breath.

Suddenly I understood that running away was all the thrill I could stand today. If Robinson touched any other part of me, I might explode into a million pieces.

But he didn’t touch me again. He smiled. “Sweet dreams, Axi Moore,” he said softly. Then he rolled back over.

Inside I ached a little, but I wasn’t sure what for.
I stared into the darkness for a long time, feeling the contrast between the cold, hard ground beneath me and the soft warmth of Robinson beside me. Thoughts raced through my mind endlessly: What if Robinson and I get caught? Or if we chicken out and go back home? Or if we keep on and each night lie side by side, chaste as children? If we kiss? If we whisper the word love, or if it remains unsaid forever?

It would probably only matter to me. I didn’t know if it would matter to Robinson. I tentatively put my head on his shoulder, but he didn’t move a muscle.

When I finally slept, I dreamed we were on the edge of a cliff, peering down. Dream-Robinson was holding my hand. “Don’t worry,” he said. “It only looks like a cliff. It’s actually a mountain, and the way is up, not down.”

Even in dreams, he was an optimist.
By the time Robinson stumbled out of the tent the next morning, looking rumpled and adorable, I’d packed our bags and plotted our route to Bolinas, a tiny town nestled between the California hills and the Pacific Ocean. I wanted to see it mostly because the town is supposed to be a secret. The people who live there are always tearing down the road signs that point to it. But that wasn’t going to stop me from discovering what the big deal was about this place.

“Maybe,” Robinson said teasingly as he mounted the bike, “buried deep inside the Good Girl, there’s the heart of a rebel.”

“Haven’t I already proven that to you by suggesting this crazy trip?” I climbed up behind him and commanded, “Now, drive.”

Naturally, we missed our turn the first time, but when we finally got there, we were a little mystified.

“This is what they want to keep to themselves?” Robinson asked.

The downtown consisted of two intersecting streets. There was a restaurant called the Coast Café—which, FYI, did not overlook the coast—and an old-fashioned-looking bar. I had to agree: Bolinas didn’t seem particularly inspiring.

But the adjacent beach was beautiful. We kicked our shoes off and sat down in the sand, staring at the blue water and feeling the sun on our shoulders. Tanned, half-wild children ran around us, throwing rocks at seagulls. Robinson started digging his toes in the sand, and more than once I caught him looking at me, an unreadable expression on his face.
“So...what are you thinking about?” I finally asked. I hoped he didn’t detect the slight edge of apprehension in my question.

“Corn dogs,” Robinson answered without missing a beat. Sometimes I could just kill him.

He could have been thinking about me, about us, but instead his mind had settled on wieners encased in corn batter.

We ducked into Smiley’s Schooner Saloon, and Robinson walked up to the bar like it was the counter at Ernie’s. “Good afternoon, sir,” he said. “Two Rainiers, please, and a corn dog.”

I swear, if Robinson ever had to pick a last meal, it’d be corn dogs, French fries, and a deep-fried Twinkie.

“ID?” the bartender said.

Robinson fished out his wallet. The bartender’s eyes darted from Robinson’s fake license to Robinson’s face and back again. “Okay... Ned Dixon.” Then he turned to me.

I shrugged. “I wasn’t driving, see, so I left my license back—”

The bartender crossed his meaty arms. “Listen, kids, how about you head across the street and get yourself a nice ice-cream cone at the café.”

“Actually, I’m lactose intol—” Robinson began, but I interrupted him.

“Oh, I get it!” My voice came out surprisingly fierce. “We can fight in Afghanistan, but we can’t have a beer and watch the sunset?” My hands gripped the edge of the bar and I leaned forward, hostility coming off me in waves. I had no idea where
this was coming from, but it actually felt kind of good to be angry with someone. Someone who didn’t matter, someone I would never see again.

I probably would have yelled more, but Robinson dragged me outside. Then he bent over, practically choking with laughter. “Fight in Afghanistan?” he wheezed. “Us?”

“It just came out,” I said, still not sure what had just happened. I started to giggle a little, too.

Robinson wiped his eyes. “You don’t even like beer.”

“It was a matter of principle. A lot of people die in Afghanistan before they’re allowed to buy a six-pack.”

“A lot of people die every day, Ax. They don’t go off on bartenders in secret towns about the unfairness of the drinking laws. I can’t wait to see what you come up with next,” he said, still laughing at my outburst as he strode ahead of me.

His flip tone made me stop short in the middle of the sidewalk. Yeah, people do die every day. Some people, like Carole Ann, die before they even learn to tie their shoes. Others die before they graduate from high school.

Hell, either one of us could die on this crazy trip.

There were so many more important things to do than buy a beer before that happened. I hurried to catch up with Robinson, who was turning the corner to where we’d parked the motorcycle in an empty lot behind the saloon. But now there was a man in a leather jacket and chaps standing right beside it, giving it a long—and much-too-close-for-my-comfort—look.
“Nice bike,” the guy said. “Got a cousin in Oregon who has one exactly like it.”

My lungs felt like bellows that someone had just squeezed shut. I took a step backward. Should we just run?

But Robinson didn’t flinch. “Your cousin has good taste,” he said. He glanced at the bike behind Chaps. “You riding a Fat Boy these days? I love those, but my girl here likes a bigger bike.” His voice had taken on an easy drawl, like he and Chaps were two dudes who’d see eye to eye over a Harley.

Chaps was still sizing Robinson up: Robinson was taller but about a hundred pounds lighter. Me, I was still thinking about running—and about how Robinson had called me his girl. That sounded . . . interesting. But did he mean it, or was it just part of his act?

“Happy hour’s almost over, y’know,” Robinson said.

Chaps gave him one long, last look, then shook his head and went inside.

I was already reaching for paper and pen.

*Thanks so much for letting us ride your motorcycle, I wrote. We took really good care of it. We named it Charley.*

Robinson read over my shoulder. “We did?”

“Just now,” I said. “Charley the Harley.”

*I’m sorry we didn’t ask you if we could borrow it, but rest assured that your bike was used only for the forces of good. Sincerely, GG & the Scalawag*

I tucked the note into the handlebars. “Come on. Time to find another ride,” I said, like I’d been stealing cars my whole
In all of downtown Bolinas there were only about five cars, though.

“That one,” I said, pointing to a silver Pontiac.


I could feel the tingling beginning in my limbs. Robinson took a quick look around and then got in. I ducked into the passenger side, mentally thanking the owner for leaving the doors unlocked.

From his backpack Robinson removed a small cordless drill and aimed it at the keyhole. I watched as glittering flecks of metal fell onto the seat.

_He packed a drill? _I thought.

A grizzled surfer was looking right at us. I smiled and waved.

“Hurry up,” I hissed at Robinson.

He produced his screwdriver and inserted it into the mangled keyhole. “One more minute.”

The adrenaline tingle was growing more intense. Painful, even.

“I had to break the lock pins,” Robinson explained.

As if I cared! I just wanted the engine to turn on. I sucked in a deep breath. Any moment we were going to be racing out of town, and everything would return to normal—my _new_ normal, that is.

That was when two people came out of the Coast Café—and began heading toward their silver Pontiac. I met the woman’s eyes, saw her jaw drop open. The man started running. “Hey,” he shouted. “Hey!”
His arms flew forward, and he was just inches from us when the engine suddenly roared to life. Robinson slammed the car into reverse and we shot backward into the street. A moment later we were blazing out of town, going fifty in a twenty-five zone.

“I’m going to miss Charley,” I said, my heart pounding.
Robinson nodded. “Me too.”
“But not Bolinas,” I added.
“That was your idea,” Robinson reminded me with a smirk.
I shrugged and let out a deep sigh of relief. The sun was flashing deep vermilion over the blue ocean, calming me as I watched it slip lower and then vanish before my heart rate had even returned to normal.

Amazing how beauty can be so fleeting.
We drove across the Golden Gate Bridge that night, gliding over a dark San Francisco Bay into the narrow streets of the Presidio. Since the car offered a solid roof over our heads—and since cops apparently frown on urban camping—we decided to spend the night in the Pontiac.

I curled up in the backseat, and Robinson folded himself, with difficulty, into the front. There was no question of us touching (or, as the case may be, not touching) with all that upholstery in the way. A tiny part of me felt relieved, but a larger part of me longed for the so-cozy-it’s-claustrophobic tent.

That was my realization for the night: I was capable of missing Robinson when he was less than two feet away from me.

I was starting to develop a theory about missing things in general. It had started when we left Charley the Harley behind,
and I hadn’t stopped thinking about it the rest of the drive. If I practiced missing small things—like the rumbling ride of a motorcycle, or the faint murmur of my dad talking in his sleep, or now sleeping right next to Robinson—maybe I could get used to missing things. Then, when it came time to miss something really important, maybe I could survive it.

We listened to the radio for a while, Robinson humming along and me keeping my tuneless mouth shut until we drifted off. In the morning, fog rolling in from the bay blurred the streetlights into soft orange halos. I peered over the seat at Robinson’s tangled limbs.

“Rise and shine,” I sang. He opened one eye and gave me the finger.

Not everyone is a morning person.

“There’s someone I want you to meet,” I told him.

“Now?” Robinson asked. But I simply handed him his shoes.

There was one book I’d gotten Robinson to read in the last six months. *The Winding Road* was a memoir about growing up as the daughter of an alcoholic father (I could seriously relate) and a beauty-queen mother (ditto) in a small town in southern Oregon. The author, Matthea North, could have been me, which is maybe why I found her story so fascinating. A couple of years ago, I wrote her a fan letter. She wrote me back, and an epistolary friendship—I guess you could call it that—was born.

(Epistolary: a word I’m not going to use in front of Robinson.)
James Patterson

You must stop by for a visit sometime, Matthea had written. We’ll drink tea and ponder the vagaries of love, the secrets of life, the mysteries of the universe...

If ever there was a time for that conversation, it was now.

Matthea’s house was on Nob Hill, at the top of an impossibly steep street. I rang the bell and we waited nervously on the stoop. Robinson didn’t even know what we were doing here, and I refused to tell him. If you ask me, a person doesn’t get enough good surprises in life. Birthday, Christmas... that’s only two times a year to count on.

But when the front door opened, I was even more surprised than Robinson. Since Matthea North and I had so much in common childhood-wise, I guess I thought she’d look like an older version of me: slender, medium-sized, with the full lips and wide-set eyes of a beauty-queen mother somehow diluted into a slightly less remarkable prettiness.

Matthea looked like Bilbo Baggins. In a Gypsy costume. Under five feet tall, bedecked in scarves and necklaces, she reached up to take my hand. “You must be Axi,” she said. Her green eyes, set deep in rosy cheeks, positively twinkled at me.

I swallowed. “Yes!” I said brightly. “Robinson, this is... the one and only Matthea North.”

He turned toward her, smiling his wide, gorgeous grin. “Hey, you wrote that book— the one about the town even worse than ours.” If he was fazed by her clothes, he didn’t look it.

Matthea laughed. Older ladies love Robinson.

We followed her into the darkness of her home, and already
she was chattering about how Mark Twain never said the famous line about how the coldest winter he ever spent was a summer in San Francisco, but he should have, because it was absolutely Arctic today; how birdsong had evolved over decades to compete with the sound of traffic, and weren’t those sparrows outside just deafeningly loud; how she’d gotten a bad fortune in her cookie from Lucky Feng’s, but did we know that it was the Japanese who’d actually invented the fortune cookie?

She motioned for us to sit on a dusty-looking Victorian couch. “I loved your short story about that old deli, Axi,” she said, “the one about that girl and boy who are best friends but maybe something more—”

“Oh, yeah, thanks,” I said hurriedly, not wanting to cut her off but needing to.

Robinson cleared his throat. I could practically hear him thinking: You wrote a story about Ernie’s? And us?

I ignored him. Of course I’d written about him. He was my best friend, wasn’t he? The one who knew me like no other. The one I thought about approximately 75 percent of my waking hours, if not more.

“Thanks for letting us come over,” I said. “I really wanted Robinson to meet you. I can’t get him to finish any book, ever, but he read yours in a night.”

“It gave me… insights,” Robinson said, looking pointedly at me.

Matthea laughed. “Axi and I share certain background details, don’t we? But Axi’s much smarter than I was at her age.”
“She’s ornerier,” Robinson said. “That’s for sure.”
I kicked him in the shins—lightly.
Matthea produced a pitcher of iced tea and a plate of lemon cake, and Robinson helped himself to two slices.
“So, how’s the writing going, Axi?” Matthea asked.
“Um, not much at all lately,” I admitted, reaching for my own slice of cake. “Please tell me there’s some secret to keeping at it. Not giving up. Believing in yourself. That kind of stuff.” I tried to keep the desperation out of my voice.
Matthea sighed and began to braid the fringe on her scarf. “My dear, there is no universal secret. There’s only the secret each writer discovers for herself. The path forward.”
I could feel my shoulders slump. Of course. There’s no such thing as a magic bullet. Who doesn’t know that?
“Are you aware that European kings used to have their hearts buried separately from their bodies?” Matthea asked.
“Um…no,” I said, and I saw Robinson raise his eyebrows with that slight grin I loved. Clearly, he was amused by my weirdo writing mentor.
“It was a way of offering their hearts, literally and figuratively, to their country. Forever.” Matthea sighed. “Macabre practice, if you ask me. But I like it as a metaphor. You give your country—which, in this case, is your story—your heart.”
“Oh,” I said. “Okay.” No wonder I hadn’t written the Great American Novel yet. My heart was still firmly planted in my chest. Wasn’t it?
“Be patient,” Matthea said gently. “Keep writing, but keep dreaming, too. Remember that inspiration struck the brilliant mathematician Archimedes when he was in the bathtub.”

And inspiration struck the brilliant physicist Richard Feynman when he was in a strip club, I thought. (I may be failing AP physics, but I did learn a thing or two.)

That’s pretty much how the rest of the conversation went. We didn’t ponder the unpredictability of love or the mysteries of the universe, but since we touched on everything from the mummified hearts of European kings to Einstein’s theory that creativity was more important than knowledge, I felt like it was time well spent.

After a fourth piece of lemon cake, though, Robinson excused himself, saying he needed to get a bit of fresh air. I watched his retreating back, feeling a vague sense of unease. My body gave an involuntary shiver, and Matthea looked at me piercingly. We continued our chat, but later, as we were leaving, she put her hand on my shoulder. “Are you all right?” she asked.

For one tiny millisecond, I wanted to tell her everything. The real reason behind what Robinson and I were doing, which I hadn’t even wanted to admit to myself this whole time. It didn’t actually have anything to do with me escaping my boring life in Klamath Falls. But I couldn’t tell her.

“I’m great,” I said.

“And your friend?” She squinted toward Robinson, who was leaning against the car, staring down the hill toward the
bay. He brought his arms up and almost seemed to hug himself, as if he were cold. Or as if, for a moment, he felt the need to reassure himself about something.

“He’s great, too,” I insisted. Why are you lying, Axi?

Matthea picked a yellow flower from one of the vines around her door and tucked it behind my ear. “Give your story your heart,” she repeated.

It sounded reasonable enough. But when I looked at Robinson, I knew I’d already given my heart to something—to someone—else.
If I didn’t know it was medically impossible, I’d say that Robinson was born with a wrench in his hand. Or that as a baby, he sucked on a spark plug instead of a pacifier.

This gearhead gene was why I was taking him to Torrance, California, next—because it certainly wasn’t my kind of place. Torrance breeds NASCAR drivers and semiprofessional cage fighters. (Ugh.) It has a racetrack, a giant rock ’n’ roll car show, and about five hundred stores that sell car parts.

In other words, for a guy like Robinson, it’s the Promised Land. The kind of place he had to—he deserved to—experience.

When we pulled into the parking lot of the Cal-Am Speedway the following afternoon, Robinson sucked in his breath and gave me his crooked, perfect grin.
“Axi Moore,” he said, “you are greatest person I have ever known.”

“You just wait,” I said, smiling back.

I steered him away from the glass atrium entrance and toward a side door propped open with a rolled-up copy of Car and Driver.

Brad Sewell was waiting for us in the pit. “Alexandra,” he said, stepping forward to give me a bear hug. “Long time no see, kiddo.”

Robinson clearly wanted to know how this beefy dude with a Dale Earnhardt tattoo and I were acquainted. But I simply said, “Robinson, this is Brad. Brad, this is my friend Robinson.”

“Nice to meet ya,” Brad said. “Let me walk you through a few things, and then we’ll get you in the cockpit.”

It was only then that Robinson understood what he was actually here for, and he looked like he might spontaneously combust from excitement.

He turned to me. “It’s like Say Anything,” he whispered.

We’d watched that old movie a hundred times. One of the best scenes is when the geeky main character takes his reluctant date, one of the Beautiful People, to an art museum after hours. He can do this because he’s friends with the museum guard, and because he’s hung a painting of the Beautiful Girl in one of the galleries.

Today was my museum moment for Robinson, but better. I’d bribed Brad with a chunk of my savings, and I’d shamelessly pulled the “I knew you when our sisters were in the cancer ward” card.
Brad began talking gibberish to Robinson, something about “initial turn-in” and “apex of the curve” and “neutral throttle on the corner.” But Robinson was nodding confidently, and then he was climbing into a flame-resistant Nomex suit, and Brad was fitting him with a radio helmet and snapping him into a five-point harness.

“Any fool can speed on the straightaway; it’s the curves that make a racer,” Brad said over his shoulder.

“Oh, sure,” I said. Like I knew what he was talking about—I couldn’t even drive to the grocery store.

Robinson revved the engine and then pulled out of the pit. He didn’t go that fast at first, but he must have gotten the hang of it after a while, because the engine got louder and the car became a green blur flashing past us again and again.

“So how’s your little sister?” I asked Brad.

“She’s in remission. Two years now.”

“That’s fantastic,” I said. Lizzie Sewell had been really nice to Carole Ann. Lizzie, it seems, was one of the lucky ones.

“And what about you?” Brad asked, and I pretended not to hear. Fortunately, just at that moment, the bright green car came screeching to a halt on the track outside the pit, and Robinson opened the door.

“Axi, you have got to get in here!” he yelled.

I looked over at Brad. I was hoping he’d tell me that the other seat belt was broken or that he was fresh out of helmets.

“There’s a suit over there that’ll fit you,” he said.

And that’s how I found myself in the passenger seat of a
custom Chevy race car, outfitted like Danica Patrick and quivering with excitement.

“On your mark, get set, go!” yelled Robinson, and we peeled out onto the track, zero to sixty in about a millisecond.

The g-force slammed me against the seat, and the stunning, brain-shaking roar of the engine filled my ears. I could feel the noise as much as hear it. It vibrated in my chest and shook me deep in my guts.

I couldn’t help it: in joy and terror, I screamed.

I stopped, though, because I couldn’t even hear myself. And then I screamed some more.

We came toward the first curve, and I noticed the tall chain-link fence that arced inward over the track. Somehow I understood—even though I was totally incapable of higher thought, of abstract things such as words—that the fence was to keep us from splattering our body parts all over the bleachers in a crash.

The car had thick mesh netting instead of windows, so the wind came rushing in, hot and smelling like asphalt and oil. I couldn’t see how fast we were going, and I didn’t want to know.

We banked around the curve, the engine squealing.

As we pulled into the straightaway and Robinson hit hard on the throttle, suddenly my vision seemed to narrow. It was like looking through a tunnel. Everything on either side of me blurred and faded, and all that mattered was the airspace in front of us, and how lightning fast we were going to blast through it.
My body was singing with fear and happiness and an incredible feeling of being completely alive in the moment. I was no longer Alexandra Jane Moore—I was a supernova strapped into a bucket seat.

Go, go, go! I thought wildly. Because screaming, after all, was useless.

We took three more sound barrier–shattering laps, and when we finally slowed, I turned to Robinson with wide and no doubt crazy-looking eyes.

“Oh my God,” I said, pulling off my helmet and shaking out my sweat-drenched hair. “Oh. My. God.”

Robinson cackled madly. Brad came over and said, “Whaddja think?”

It took Robinson a moment to answer, probably because he had to wait for his brain to stop vibrating. Then he said, “I might have just had the best time of my life.”

I started laughing like an idiot, because that was exactly what we’d come for, what I’d wanted to give him.

*Carpe diem.* Because today, after all, was all we knew we had.
“I’m standing on Tom Cruise,” Robinson yelled. “Take my picture!”

“You’re on his star, Scalawag,” I said. But I snapped the photo anyway: dark-eyed Robinson, handsome as any movie star, dressed like a hipster lumberjack. Even in Southern California, he couldn’t give up the flannel.

We were fresh off the Cal-Am racetrack, still hopped up on the experience. Hollywood was a hop, skip, and a jump up the 110 from Torrance, so that’s where we went next.

Of course we had to go straight to the Walk of Fame. While Robinson ogled the street performers (buskers, hustlers, and dudes dressed like Iron Man and Captain Jack Sparrow), I dashed around taking photos of the names I knew and loved: Marilyn Monroe, Audrey Hepburn, James Dean... and, okay,
Drew Barrymore and Jennifer Aniston, because it’s 2013, people, and not all good movies are in black and white.

“This place is nuts,” Robinson said, hopping over to Snow White’s star. “Look, now I’m on top of a fairy tale.”

“I used to be Snow White, but I drifted,” I said. Then I cocked a hip and gave my best sultry wink—like Mae West, whose line I’d just stolen.

Then I turned, and together we walked up Highland Avenue, toward the golden Hollywood Hills and the giant, iconic white sign. Our destination: the Hollywood Hotel. Robinson didn’t know it, though, because I wanted to keep surprising him. The delight on his face—the way his eyes went wide when he was taken aback—I wanted to keep seeing that for as long as I possibly could.

The fact that we would be alone together in a hotel room had nothing to do with my decision.

(Quit laughing!)

When Robinson saw me striding up to the reservation desk, he said, “Do we have enough money for this?”

I wasn’t sure if we did, but it didn’t matter. “My back can’t take another night in the car, and I am not camping out with those shirtless dudes I saw in the park.” (If I couldn’t tell him the truth, didn’t that seem like a good enough reason?)

“I thought that guy with the python looked nice,” Robinson joked. “But hey, I’m down with creature comforts. Are we gonna get room service?”

“I totally don’t know what those words mean,” Robinson said, “but I’m not the one who booked us the expensive hotel room.”

We rode the mirrored elevator to the fifteenth floor in silence. We didn’t meet each other’s eyes, either in person or in our reflections. Did Robinson feel shy, the way I suddenly did? I didn’t know, because I couldn’t look at him.

A minute later, we opened a door onto a spacious cream-colored room, with a giant flat-screen TV, floor-to-ceiling windows, a little seating area, and one giant boat of a bed.

I felt my breath catch in my throat. Robinson and I had slept in a tent, as close together as spoons. And this bed was so stupidly huge that we could be on either side of it and not touch at all. And yet—it felt way more intimate.

I went to the sink to wash the racetrack grit from my face. In the mirror was a girl I hardly recognized. For one thing, she desperately needed a shower. For another, she looked...well, wild was the word that came to mind. Certainly she did not resemble a straight arrow or a do-gooder, which were the kinds of nouns I was used to.

I met her pale blue eyes and smiled faintly at her. Who are you? What do you want? I mouthed. But she only offered me that strange smirk.

When I came out of the bathroom, Robinson was already in bed, though it was barely after eight. He was wearing an ancient Bob Dylan T-shirt and pressing buttons on the remote. The TV was on but muted.
“Axi Moore,” he said, smiling at me, the blue light from the screen flickering on his handsome face.

“Robinson,” I said, barely above a whisper.

“What do you want to do now?” he asked.

I almost cracked up. That was the question to end all questions, wasn’t it?

For a moment I stood there, caught between the hallway and the bed, between fear and desire. On the one hand, I wanted to sink into Robinson. Reach my fingers into his hair. Feel his lips on my neck. Hold his smooth skin close against mine.

But then I thought of the dream I’d had among the redwoods—how something could be both perfect and terrifying, both mountain and abyss. What was the right thing to do?

“Hey, look,” Robinson said suddenly, his voice brightening.

“It’s Puss in Boots.”

Just like that, the tension in the air snapped. We loved that movie, even though it’s for kids. Robinson insisted—I think seriously—that it was Antonio Banderas’s best role.

So the fuzzy orange cat with the big boots and the Spanish accent banished my questions and doubts until another day. I crawled under the covers next to Robinson. The sheets were silky white and smelled like bleach. I took a deep breath, and I scooted right up against his side. Then I tipped my head onto his shoulder.

Robinson seemed to stiffen. I froze, too. My heart sank in my chest, and my eyes closed in shame. Had I read the situation
so wrong? I told myself I would count to five and then pull away to the far side of the giant bed.

But then I felt Robinson’s body shift. He curved toward me. And he leaned down and kissed the top of my head. Under the covers, his hand found mine. Our fingers intertwined.

That’s enough, I thought. That’s all I need.

For now.
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