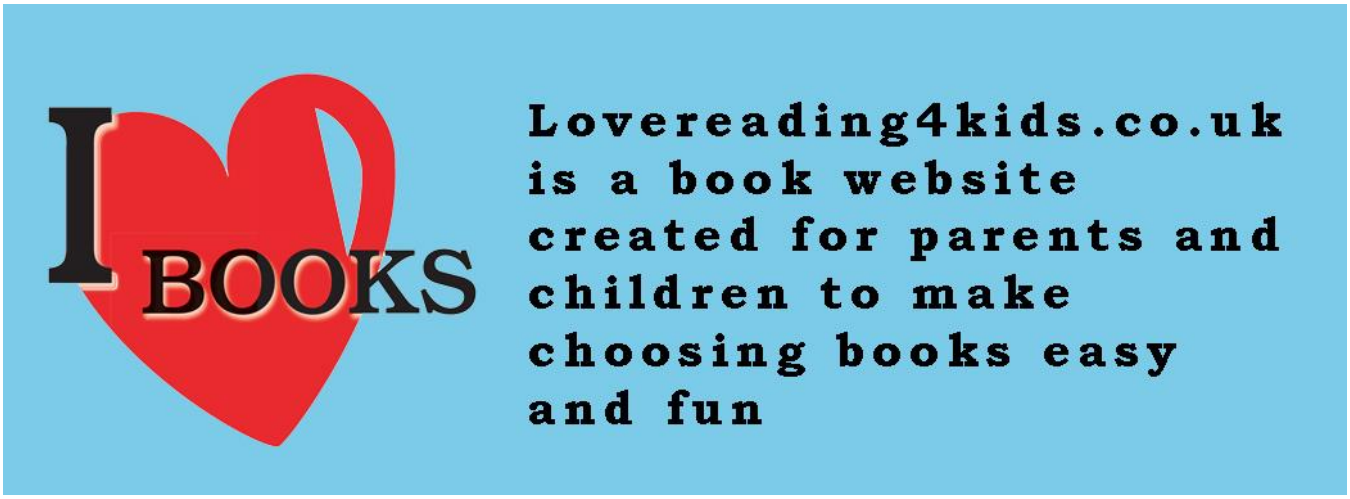


Opening extract from

Alex, Approximately

Written by

Jenn Bennett

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Lovereading4kids.co.uk

ALEX, APPROXIMATELY

Jenn Bennett



SIMON & SCHUSTER

For the evaders, avoiders, dodgers, and side-steppers.
You probably have a good reason for hiding.
May you work through it and find your inner lion.

LUMIÈRE FILM FANATICS COMMUNITY
PRIVATE MESSAGES>ALEX>ARCHIVED

@alex: They just announced the summer schedule for free films on the beach to kick off the annual film festival. Guess which Hitchcock they're showing? North by Northwest!

@mink: Seriously?! Hate you. But I already saw NxNW on the big screen last year, so . . .

@alex: Doesn't count. Beach movies are cooler. It's like a drive-in without the car exhaust. And who doesn't want to watch a chase sequence across Mount Rushmore while you dip your toes in the sand? Here's an idea. Tell your dad you want to visit him in June and we can go see it together.

@mink: Not a beach girl, remember?

@alex: You've never been to a real one. East Coast beaches are trash beaches.

@mink: ALL beaches are trash beaches. *peeks at film festival schedule* Besides, if I WERE going to visit my dad, I'd rather come the final week of the festival and see all those Georges Méliès films they're showing . . . INDOORS. As in: sand free.

@alex: --------> THIS IS ME FREAKING OUT. (Are you serious?! Please be serious. We could actually meet in real life?)

@mink: I don't know.

@alex: If you're serious, then come and see North by Northwest with me. Outside on the beach, as nature intended.

@mink: Films shouldn't be seen outdoors, but okay. If I come, we'll meet at North by Northwest on the beach.

@alex: It's a date!

@mink: Whoa, hold your horses. I said *if* I fly out to California to visit my dad. I'm just dreaming. It will probably never happen. . . .

"I don't think I caught your name."
—Cary Grant, *North by Northwest* (1959)

1

He could be any one of these people.

After all, I don't know what Alex looks like. I don't even know his real name. I mean, we've been talking online for months now, so I know things that matter. He's smart and sweet and funny, and we've both just finished our junior year. We share the same obsession—old movies. We both like being alone.

If these were the only things we had in common, I wouldn't be freaking out right now. But Alex lives in the same town as my dad, and that makes things . . . complicated.

Because now that I'm descending a Central California airport escalator in Alex's general vicinity, watching strangers drift in the opposite direction, endless possibilities duke it out inside my head. Is Alex short? Tall? Does he chew too loud or have some irritating catchphrase? Does he pick his nose in public? Has he had his arms replaced with bionic tentacles? (Note to self: not a deal breaker.)

So, yeah. Meeting real-life Alex could be great, but it could also be one big awkward disappointment. Which is why I'm not really sure if I want to know anything more about him.

Look, I don't do confrontation well. Or ever, really. What I'm doing now, moving across the country one week after my seventeenth birthday to live with my dad, is not an act of bravery. It's a masterpiece of avoidance. My name is Bailey Rydell, and I'm a habitual evader.

When my mom traded my dad for Nate Catlin of Catlin Law LLC—I swear to all things holy, that's how he introduces himself—I didn't choose to live with her instead of Dad because of all the things she promised: new clothes, a car of my own, a trip to Europe. Heady stuff, sure, but none of it mattered. (Or even happened. Just saying.) I only stayed with her because I was embarrassed for my dad, and the thought of having to deal with him while he faced his new postdump life was too much for me to handle. Not because I don't care about him either. Just the opposite, actually.

But a lot changes in a year, and now that Mom and Nate are fighting constantly, it's time for me to exit the picture. That's the thing about being an evader. You have to be flexible and know when to bail before it all gets weird. Better for everyone, really. I'm a giver.

My plane landed half an hour ago, but I'm taking a circuitous route to what I hope is the backside of baggage claim, where my dad is supposed to pick me up. The key to avoiding uncomfort-

able situations is a preemptive strike: make sure you see them first. And before you accuse me of being a coward, think again. It's not easy being this screwed up. It takes planning and sharp reflexes. A devious mind. My mom says I'd make a great pickpocket, because I can disappear faster than you can say, *Where's my wallet?* The Artful Dodger, right here.

And right there is my father. Artful Dodger, senior. Like I said, it's been a year since I've seen him, and the dark-headed man standing under a slanted beam of early afternoon sunlight is different than I remember. In better shape, sure, but that's no surprise. I've cheered on his new gym-crafted body every week as he showed off his arms during our Sunday-night video calls. And the darker hair wasn't new either; God knows I've teased him about dyeing away the gray in an attempt to slice off the last few years of his forties.

But as I stealthily scope him out while hiding behind a sunny CALIFORNIA DREAMERS! sign, I realize that the one thing I didn't expect was for my dad to be so . . . happy.

Maybe this wouldn't be too painful, after all. Deep breath.

A grin splits his face when I duck out of my hiding spot.

"Mink," he says, calling me by my silly adolescent nickname.

I don't really mind, because he's the only one who calls me that in real life, and everyone else in baggage claim is too busy greeting their own familial strangers to pay any attention to us. Before I can avoid it, he reels me in and hugs me so hard my ribs crack.

We both tear up a little. I swallow the constriction in my throat and force myself to calm down.

"Jesus, Bailey." He looks me over shyly. "You're practically grown."

"You can introduce me as your sister if it makes you look younger in front of your geekazoid sci-fi friends," I joke in an attempt to diffuse the awkwardness, poking the robot on his *Forbidden Planet* T-shirt.

"Never. You're my greatest achievement."

Ugh. I'm embarrassed that I'm so easily wooed by this, and I can't think of a witty comeback. I end up sighing a couple of times.

His fingers tremble as he tucks bleached platinum-blond strands of my long Lana Turner pin-curl waves behind my ear. "I'm so glad you're here. You are staying, right? You didn't change your mind on the flight?"

"If you think I'm going to willingly walk back into that MMA fight they call a marriage, you don't know me at all."

He does a terrible job at hiding his giddy triumph, and I can't help but smile back. He hugs me again, but it's okay now. The worst part of our uncomfortable meet-and-greet is over.

"Let's collect your stuff. Everyone on your flight has already claimed theirs, so it shouldn't be too hard to find," he says, gesturing with a knowing dart of his eyes toward the luggage carousels, one brow cocked.

Oops. Should've known. Can't dodge a dodger.

Having grown up on the East Coast, I'd never been farther

west than a single school trip to Chicago, so it's strange to step into bright sunlight and look up at such a big, überblue sky. It seems flatter out here without all the dense mid-Atlantic treetops blocking out the skyline—so flat, I can see mountain foothills girding the entire Silicon Valley horizon. I'd flown into San Jose, the nearest airport and actual big city, so we have a forty-five-minute drive to my dad's new house on the coast. Not a hardship, especially when I see we'll be cruising in a glossy blue muscle car with the sunroof wide open.

My father is a CPA. He used to drive the most boring car in the world. California has changed that, I suppose. What else has changed?

"Is this your midlife-crisis car?" I ask when he opens the trunk to stow my luggage.

He chuckles. It totally is. "Get in," he says, checking the screen on his phone. "And please text your mother that you didn't die in a fiery plane crash so she'll stop bugging me."

"Aye, aye, Captain Pete."

"Goofball."

"Weirdo."

He nudges me with his shoulder, and I nudge back, and just like that, we're falling back into our old routine. Thank God. His new (old) car smells like the stuff that neat freaks spray on leather, and there's no accounting paperwork stuffed in the floorboards, so I'm getting the posh treatment. As he revs up the crazy-loud engine, I turn on my phone for the first time since I've landed.

Texts from Mom: four. I answer her in the most bare-bones way possible while we leave the airport parking garage. I'm finally coming down from the shock of what I've done—holy crap, I just moved across the country. I remind myself that it's not a big deal. After all, I already switched schools a few months ago, thanks to Nate LLC and Mom moving us from New Jersey to Washington, DC, which basically means I didn't have a notable friend investment in DC to leave behind. And I haven't really dated anyone since my dad left, so no boyfriend investment either. But when I check the nonemergency notifications on my phone, I see a reply on the film app from Alex and get nervous all over again about being in the same town.

@alex: Is it wrong to hate someone who used to be your best friend? Please talk me down from planning his funeral. Again.

I send a quick reply—

@mink: You should just leave town and make new friends. Less blood to clean up.

If I look past any reservations I may have, I can admit it's pretty thrilling to think that Alex has no idea I'm even here. Then again, he's never really known exactly where I've been. He thinks I still live in New Jersey, because I never bothered to change my profile online when we moved to DC.

When Alex first asked me to come out here and see *North by Northwest* with him, I wasn't sure what to think. It's not exactly the kind of movie you ask a girl out to see when you're trying to win her heart—not *most* girls, anyway. Considered one of Alfred Hitchcock's greatest films, it stars Cary Grant and Eva Marie Saint, and it's a thriller about mistaken identity. It starts in New York and ends up out West, as Cary Grant is pursued to Mount Rushmore in one of the most iconic scenes in movie history. But now every time I think about seeing it, I picture myself as the seductive Eva Marie Saint and Alex as Cary Grant, and we're falling madly in love, despite the fact that we barely know each other. And sure, I know that's a fantasy, and reality could be so much weirder, which is why I have a plan: secretly track down Alex before *North by Northwest* plays at the summer film festival.

I didn't say it was a good plan. Or an easy plan. But it's better than an awkward meet-up with someone who looks great on paper, but in real life, may crush my dreams. So I'm doing this the Artful Dodger way—from a safe distance, where neither of us can get hurt. I have a lot of experience with bad strangers. It's best this way, trust me.

"Is that him?" Dad asks.

I quickly pocket my phone. "Who?"

"What's-his-face. Your film-buff soul mate."

I've barely told Dad anything about Alex. I mean, he knows Alex lives in this area and even jokingly dangled this fact as bait

to come out here when I finally decided I couldn't handle living with Mom and Nate anymore.

"He's contemplating murder," I tell Dad. "So I'll probably meet him in a dark alley tonight and jump into his unmarked van. That should be fine, right?"

An undercurrent of tension twitches between us, just for a second. He knows I'm only teasing, that I would never take that kind of risk, not after what happened to our family four years ago. But that's in the past, and Dad and I are all about the future now. Nothing but sunshine and palm trees ahead.

He snorts. "If he's got a van, don't expect to be able to track it down." Crap. Does he know I've entertained that idea? "Everyone's got vans where we're headed."

"Creepy molester vans?"

"More like hippie vans. You'll see. Coronado Cove is different."

And he shows me why after we turn off the interstate—sorry, the "freeway," as Dad informs me they're called out here. Once the location of a historical California mission, Coronado Cove is now a bustling tourist town between San Francisco and Big Sur. Twenty thousand residents, and twice as many tourists. They come for three things: the redwood forest, the private nude beach, and the surfing.

Oh, yes: I said redwood forest.

They come for one other thing, and I'd be seeing that up close and personal soon enough, which makes my stomach hurt to

think about. So I don't. Not right now. Because the town is even prettier than it was in the photos Dad sent. Hilly, cypress-lined streets. Spanish-style stucco buildings with terra-cotta tile roofs. Smoky purple mountains in the distance. And then we hit Gold Avenue, a two-lane twisting road that hugs the curving coast, and I finally see it: the Pacific Ocean.

Alex was right. East Coast beaches are trash beaches. This . . . is stunning.

"It's so blue," I say, realizing how dumb I sound but unable to think of a better description of the bright aquamarine water breaking toward the sand. I can even smell it from the car. It's salty and clean, and unlike the beach back home, which has that iodine, boiled-metal stench, it doesn't make me want to roll up the window.

"I told you, didn't I? It's paradise out here," Dad says. "Everything is going to be better now. I promise, Mink."

I turn to him and smile, wanting to believe he might be right. And then his head whips toward the windshield and we screech to a stop.

My seat belt feels like a metal rod slapping across my chest as I jerk forward and brace my hands on the dash. Brief pain shoots through my mouth and I taste copper. The high-pitched squeal that comes out of me, I realize, is entirely too loud and dramatic; apart from my biting my own tongue, no one's hurt, not even the car.

"You okay?" Dad asks.

More embarrassed than anything else, I nod before turning my attention to the cause of our near wreck: two teen boys in the middle of the street. They both look like walking advertisements for coconut tanning oil—tousled sun-lightened hair, board shorts, and lean muscles. One dark, one light. But the towheaded one is mad as hell and pounds the hood of the car with his fists.

"Watch where you're going, dickwad," he shouts, pointing to a colorful hand-painted wooden sign of a line of surfers marching their boards through an Abbey Road–looking crosswalk. The top says: WELCOME TO CORONADO COVE. The bottom reads: BE KIND—GIVE SURFERS RIGHT-OF-WAY.

Umm, yeah, no. The sign is nowhere near official, and even if it were, there's no real crosswalk on the street and this white-haired shirtless dude doesn't have a board. But no way am I saying that, because (A) I just screamed like a 1950s housewife, and (B) I don't do confrontation. Especially not with a boy who looks like he's just inhaled a pipeful of something cooked up in a dirty trailer.

His brown-haired buddy has the decency to be wearing a shirt while jaywalking. On top of that, he's ridiculously good-looking (ten points) and trying to pull his jerky friend out of the road (twenty points). And as he does, I get a quick view of a nasty, jagged line of dark-pink scars that curves from the sleeve of his weathered T-shirt down to a bright red watch on his wrist, like someone had to Frankenstein his arm back together a long time ago; maybe this isn't his first time dragging his friend out of the

road. He looks as embarrassed as I feel, sitting here with all these cars honking behind us, and while he wrestles his friend back, he holds up a hand to my dad and says, "Sorry, man."

Dad politely waves and waits until they're both clear before cautiously stepping on the gas again. *Go faster, for the love of slugs.* I press my sore tongue against the inside of my teeth, testing the spot where I bit it. And as the drugged-out blond dude continues to scream at us, the boy with the scarred arm stares at me, wind blowing his wild, sun-streaked curls to one side. For a second, I hold my breath and stare back at him, and then he slides out of my view.

Red and blue lights briefly flash in the oncoming lane. Great. Is this kind of thing considered an accident here? Apparently not, because the police car crawls past us. I turn around in my seat to see a female cop with dark purple shades stick her arm out the window and point a warning at the two boys.

"Surfers," Dad says under his breath like it's the filthiest swear-word in the world. And as the cop and the boys disappear behind us along the golden stretch of sand, I can't help but worry that Dad might have exaggerated about paradise.

LUMIÈRE FILM FANATICS COMMUNITY
PRIVATE MESSAGES>ALEX>ARCHIVED

@alex: Busy tonight?

@mink: Just homework.

@alex: Wanna do a watch-along of The Big Lebowski? You can stream it.

@mink: *blink* Who is this? Did some random frat boy take over your account?

@alex: It's a GOOD MOVIE. It's classic Coen Brothers, and you loved O Brother, Where Art Thou?. Come on . . . it'll be fun. Don't be a movie snob.

@mink: I'm not a movie snob. I'm a FILM snob.

@alex: And yet I still like you. . . . Don't leave me hanging here, all bored and lonely, while I'm waiting for you to get up the courage to beg your parents for plane tickets to fly out to California so that you can watch North by Northwest on the beach with a lovable fellow film geek. I'm giving you puppy eyes right now.

@mink: Gee, drop hints, much?

@alex: You noticed? *grin* Come on. Watch it with me. I have to work late tonight.

@mink: You watch movies at work?

@alex: When it's not busy. Believe me, I'm still doing a better job than my coworker, a.k.a. the human blunt. I don't think he's ever NOT been high at work.

@mink: Oh, you deviant Californians. *shakes head*

@alex: Do we have a date? You can do your homework while we watch. I'll even help. What other excuses do you have? Let me shoot them down now: you can wash your hair during the opening credits, we can hit play after you eat dinner, and if your boyfriend doesn't like the idea of you watching a movie with someone online, he's an idiot, and you should break up with him, pronto. Now, what do you say?

@mink: Well, you're in luck, if you pick another movie. My hair is clean, I usually eat dinner around eight, and I'm currently single. Not that it matters.

@alex: Huh. Me too. Not that it matters. . . .