

A photograph of a young woman and a young man walking away from the camera on a sandy beach. They are both wearing white, long-sleeved shirts and are holding hands. The woman is on the left, and the man is on the right. The background is a bright, overcast sky.

**They thought
nothing could
tear them apart...**

First Love

**JAMES
PATTERSON**

The Sunday Times No.1 Bestselling Author

and EMILY RAYMOND

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About the Book

When Axi Moore decides to take a road trip across the US, the only person she wants to go with her is her best friend Robinson - who she also happens to be secretly in love with. She's planned it all out, all he has to do is say yes.

Axi has had a tough life: her little sister died young, her mother walked out and her father turned to the bottle for comfort. Her parents escaped their grief in their own way; this trip will be hers.

But life doesn't always work out as you plan it, and there are some things you just can't run away from.

About the Authors

JAMES PATTERSON is one of the best-known and biggest-selling writers of all time. He is the author of some of the most popular series of the past decade – the Alex Cross, Women’s Murder Club and Detective Michael Bennett novels – and he has written many other number one bestsellers including romance novels and stand-alone thrillers. He lives in Florida with his wife and son.

James is passionate about encouraging children to read. Inspired by his own son who was a reluctant reader, he also writes a range of books specifically for young readers. James is a founding partner of Booktrust’s Children’s Reading Fund in the UK. In 2010, he was voted Author of the Year at the Children’s Choice Book Awards in New York.

Find out more at www.jamespatterson.co.uk

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EMILY RAYMOND is the ghostwriter of numerous young adult novels, including a No. 1 *New York Times* bestseller. She lives with her family in Portland, Oregon.

Also by James Patterson

ROMANCE

Sundays at Tiffany's (*with Gabrielle Charbonnet*)
The Christmas Wedding (*with Richard DiLallo*)

ALEX CROSS NOVELS

Along Came a Spider • Kiss the Girls • Jack and Jill • Cat and Mouse • Pop Goes the Weasel • Roses are Red • Violets are Blue • Four Blind Mice • The Big Bad Wolf • London Bridges • Mary, Mary • Cross • Double Cross • Cross Country • Alex Cross's Trial (*with Richard DiLallo*) • I, Alex Cross • Cross Fire • Kill Alex Cross • Merry Christmas, Alex Cross • Alex Cross, Run • Cross My Heart

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Private (*with Maxine Paetro*) • Private London (*with Mark Pearson*) • Private Games (*with Mark Sullivan*) • Private: No. 1 Suspect (*with Maxine Paetro*) • Private Berlin (*with Mark Sullivan*) • Private Down Under (*with Michael White*) • Private L.A. (*with Mark Sullivan*)

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NYPD Red (*with Marshall Karp*) • NYPD Red 2 (*with Marshall Karp*)

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• Watch the Skies (*with Ned Rust*) • Demons and Druids
(*with Adam Sadler*) • Game Over (*with Ned Rust*) •
Armageddon (*with Chris Grabenstein*)

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For more information about James Patterson's novels, visit
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*First
Love*



**JAMES
PATTERSON**
and EMILY RAYMOND



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

One

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 nosedive, 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 caring, 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.

Two

“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*.

"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.”

