

*In the
Direction
of the
Sun*

**IN LIEU OF
GALLEYS**

LUCY J. MADISON

Summary

“The emotions flying between the two women who tell their story here is as dramatic as the Appalachian Trail and as tumultuous as the Atlantic Ocean. These natural elements are a perfect backdrop for the revelations of love which both repel and engage them.”

– **Jewelle Gomez**, author, *The Gilda Stories*

Steady and smart, Alex McKenzie is settled into a comfortable life in her beloved hometown of Stockbridge, MA. Everything Alex thought she knew about life and about herself changes the moment Cate Conrad blows into town like a warm breeze. Alex falls head over heels in love with the free-spirited artist and sailor but there's one problem: Cate's complicated past makes it impossible for her to open her heart completely and so she does what she's always done—she runs away. Devastated, Alex tries to heal her heart by literally walking away from her life to hike the famed Appalachian Trail while Cate takes to the water. The unexpected turn of events shows Cate and Alex how fragile life is and how love is the all that really matters.

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In the Direction of the Sun

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Dedication

This book is affectionately dedicated to my best friends Deb, Nella, Missy, and Carla. We've been friends thirty years and counting and not once have you ever gone hiking with me.

Just saying.

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Finally, thank you to all my generous readers and fans. I.V. now and always.

“So bright the flames burned in our hearts
that we found each other in the dark.”

- City and Colour

Part One

Chapter One

Alex

August 2014–Appalachian Trail at Sage’s Ravine, Massachusetts

Alex McKenzie wasn’t at all the person she thought she was. She hadn’t showered in over a week and all she could think of was a cold beer, a hot shower, and a double cheeseburger—in that order. Alex shivered as she unrolled her sleeping bag on the wooden platform of the sparse, three-sided lean-to. The rain had been falling steadily on the Appalachian Trail near the Connecticut-Massachusetts border, making for an uncomfortable mid-August evening. Sleeping on a thin air mattress in the middle of the woods alone was miraculously never on her bucket list. Yet, here she was, a thirty-three-year-old woman taking her first official leap of faith.

Alex zipped up her sleeping bag, trying to rid her tall, slender body of the chill from being wet for hours on an unseasonably cool August day. She wrapped her shoulder-length dark hair in a bandana since it was still pretty damp and she could never sleep with wet hair plastered against the back of her neck. She went through her nighttime checklist: Toilet paper was positioned on her platform for easy reach in case she had to go during the night. Her pack hung from a hook a few feet off the ground on the other end of her sleeping platform to keep the mice away. So did her boots. Somewhere in New Hampshire, she’d learned that mice loved the salt from her dried sweat and would happily chew through bootlaces if given the opportunity. Her food and few toiletries hung safely from a tree about 150 feet away from the shelter in an Ursak bag specially designed to keep bear, mice, and anything else out.

She slid down inside the dry sleeping bag and was once again thankful she’d splurged on the Big Agnes Double Z Air Pad that was about a pound heavier than most other inflatable sleeping pads. When you carried everything on your back to survive, a pound was a lot of weight. But the added two inches of cushion and insulation was manna from the gods after a long and wet day hiking. Her stomach growled, a common occurrence after burning off over 5,000 calories and eating only beef jerky, ramen noodles, and a Snickers bar for dinner. The rain poured down outside creating a comforting wall of sound Alex had grown to love when she was snug inside a dry shelter for the night.

She reminded herself of the date, as she did each and every night before she fell asleep. It was August 13, 2014. She had no idea what day of the week it was, but she knew she had been hiking for seventy-five days.

The beam from her headlamp illuminated various initials and carvings in the wooden wall of the Sage’s Ravine lean-to, which stood in a large gully surrounded by lush green and rocks. One could easily walk right by the shelter from above and never even know it was there at all. One phrase inside the darkened lean-to that was most likely carved by a previous hiker with a simple pocket knife caught her eye: “Only Love” it read. She stopped for a moment to soak in those two words. She was exhausted, but she wasn’t too exhausted from a slippery and dangerous nine-mile hike in driving rain with a thirty-pound bag strapped to her back to ignore the inner workings of her mind. She repositioned her head on her lumpy, dry bag of dirty and smelly clothes and could do nothing but laugh at the irony of those words. Maybe it was just a coincidence or perhaps it was the universe sending her a sign. Either way, it bugged her. She clicked off her

headlamp and hung it from a nail on the sidewall of the shelter for easy access. Those two words swirled around her mind like red wine in a crystal glass.

Most people labeled themselves by who they were to other people. Alex was a daughter, a sister, a teacher, a friend, and a lover. Her two best friends, Marcie and Emma, had known her since she was six years old. They knew all of her secrets and all of her hopes and dreams. Of course both tried to talk Alex out of what she was about to do, but both also admitted they knew that once Alex set her mind to something, she would do it.

“You are so damned stubborn it’s astonishing,” said Marcie one evening when she came by to help Alex pack.

“I know I am,” Alex said. “This is just something I feel I have to do. I can’t explain it.”

“Well you know Emma and I are here for you. We’ll help your sister keep an eye on the house but we talked and neither one of us is remotely interested in hiking with you.”

Alex laughed. She loved her friends for their honesty and knew that if she needed them, they’d hike to the end of the earth for her. Her friends always had her back and she had theirs.

That last part about being a lover—that one was tricky. Yes. She knew love, deep and true, albeit one-sided. No matter how hard she tried, she could not get that love out of her head. And apparently, no amount of miles on craggy trails would erase it. She knew that for certain after hiking exactly 681.8 miles through Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, and now Massachusetts over seventy-five days. Try as she might, she just couldn’t make the pain in her heart fade away. She thought she could. She imagined that hiking the Appalachian Trail would be this magical, mystical ride where she could pack up her past heartbreak and leave it all behind her as the miles stretched out like a big yawn in front of her. Books like *A Walk in The Woods* and *Wild* only fueled her misshapen belief that hiking any trail, let alone the famed Appalachian Trail, would be this spiritual healing journey. She recalled the wisdom her grandfather told her one afternoon when he had taken her out for an ice cream cone. She was about fourteen years old. He said in his inimitable Yogi Berra way, “It doesn’t matter where you go. You take you with you no matter what.” She never fully understood the meaning of those words until now. She carried that past with her—every step, every mile, every stream crossed, and every rainy day. Her past was added weight and her wounded heart beat all the same, no matter where she found herself laying her head for the night.

The only bonus she found was being so tired after hiking all day that she rarely remained awake more than ten minutes before she was sacked out in a near coma for the remainder of the night. On the flip side, it meant she now had the entire day of hiking in solitude to turn every memory and daydream over and over in her mind like a piece of sea glass in her hands.

Most already slightly insane Appalachian Trail hikers began their journeys at Springer Mountain, Georgia in February or March where the weather was warmer so they could hopefully end their epic 2,180-mile journeys in Maine at the summit of Mount Katahdin in September. She was the exception to the rule, as usual.

Alex chose a southbound route, starting May 30, 2014, specifically to avoid as many people as possible. She didn’t want company. In 2013, only a mere 336 people reported completing a southbound thru-hike to the Appalachian Trail Conservancy from Mount Katahdin in Maine to Springer Mountain in Georgia. She knew the odds were stacked against her from the beginning and she was well aware of the extreme physical challenge she was throwing herself headlong into, alone, to start the hike. Her only goal was to get away from her life as fast as possible and oddly enough, this was the only way that made sense to her.

Alex thought about her first three weeks on the Appalachian Trail. She climbed Mount Katahdin, the highest and most difficult mountain on the entire Trail. Just the memory of her burning legs and muscle soreness made her cringe. She survived the one-hundred-mile wilderness in Maine with black fly season in full swing. One night the flies were so bad she screamed at them for three hours until her voice went hoarse. Hypothermia was a real threat on more than one occasion when she fell into icy streams during several crossings. Even with all of the physical and mental challenges of the first few months, she survived Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, and Massachusetts and even learned to thrive through arguably the most difficult section of the Trail. She'd wanted to make things as challenging as possible from the beginning to get her mind off her heartbreak. That was her one motivating reason for attempting a solo southbound thru-hike. So far, however, it wasn't working. Her mind still found a way to work overtime despite the physical challenges.

When Alex told her mother and sister that she wanted to hike the Appalachian Trail alone, they thought she'd completely lost her mind. "Why on earth would you do that?" her mother asked, eyes wide, mouth hanging open in disbelief. For weeks Alex worked to convince them that not only did she have a plan, she had been researching and testing gear for months (a slight white lie). She showed them detailed maps and route plans, her organized mail drop system to ensure supplies were readily available. She even went on a solo shakedown hike to make sure the gear she carried was the gear she actually needed since most thru-hikers end up ditching a third of their packs in the first two weeks anyway. She learned quickly that only those items she could not live without were worth carrying every step of the way. When she set her mind to something, there was no stopping her. She made the decision to hike the whole of the Appalachian Trail and she would do it, no matter how difficult the journey ahead. Stubborn. She had been told she was stubborn more times than she could count.

Alex knew her mother only wanted the best for her, but she also knew full well that her mother didn't really know her. Her dear mother, Sally McKenzie, believed her daughter was a single woman in her early thirties with a respectable job as an English teacher in Stockbridge, a small, quaint, Massachusetts town. Alex never doubted her mother's fierce love but she also never felt as though her mother saw the real her. Of all her mother's skills, one of her worst flaws was only seeing what she wanted to see when she wanted to see it. She simply ignored anything that fell outside that rule. Like the part about Alex being a lesbian. She was on a constant merry-go-round of denial when it came to that subject even though Alex had told her years ago. Her mother never mentioned it again and pretended as though she'd never heard it. Not that Alex cared. She was past the point in her life when she needed her mother's acceptance. She was fine with who she was and she had come to terms long ago with the understanding that her mother loved her but would never know the real her.

Her sister Sara, on the other hand, knew Alex like the back of her own hand. One thing Alex loved about her older sister was how fiercely protective she was. It had always been just the two of them—Alex and Sara—taking on the world together. They survived their beloved father's death in a training mission at Hanscom Air Force Base when Sara was twelve years old and Alex was two years younger and held hands as the honor guard at Arlington National Cemetery fired blanks into the air at his military funeral. They survived their first heartbreaks, acne, algebra, and high school side by side. They even chose to attend Amherst College together and roomed together for two years, remaining best friends and inseparable every step of the way. Sure they had their knock-down, drag-out fights, but they never went to bed angry at one another and they always had each other's backs.

A few days before Sara dropped Alex off in Maine, she'd stopped by to help her pack and go over the details for mail drops and taking care of the house one more time. Four years ago, Alex had bought the

small Cape on Interlaken-Lake Drive—a quaint, historic, and quiet area that had great walkability and charm. The house needed work, but over the years Alex transformed it doing just about every DIY project imaginable, from renovating the kitchen and bathrooms to knocking down walls to open up the living space. After several years and a seemingly endless cycle of projects, Alex finally had the house she'd envisioned ever since bidding on the place. It was truly her home and she was apprehensive about leaving it for such a long period. The house had become a part of her. Every wall, every nail, every hardwood plank was personal to her. Leaving her home for such a prolonged period made her stomach bottom out, yet she had no choice but to ask her sister to help out in her absence.

Although Sara had her own career as a dental hygienist and a new husband (she and David had been dating since college), she promised to take care of Alex's house and check in on it every few days. Alex knew Sara was trying desperately to keep an open mind about her baby sister walking into the wilderness alone for six months, maybe more. But the look on Sara's face told Alex she was unsuccessful in that attempt.

"I just don't understand why you are doing this," Sara said as the two sat outside on the porch, their feet dangling from the swinging bench. "You're cutting out almost a month before the school year ends and using the last of your sick time. Not to mention the leave of absence you're taking until December."

"I know, Sara. I've considered all of this," Alex responded. Actually, Alex had thought of nothing else for the last two weeks. Her bouts of worry and sleeplessness rotated between leaving her precious students before the school year ended to taking a leave of absence during the start of the next year.

Sara continued on as if she had prepared this speech and would say it all no matter what. "That job was so difficult for you to land. What if they don't want you back afterward? Do you have to leave everyone behind and go off alone like this? I'm trying, Alex, but I just don't understand it. You're giving up all your stability to go on a long walk."

"Are you done?" asked Alex.

"Yes, I think so."

Alex was silent for a moment. She leaned up against her sister and took a deep breath before speaking. "We've always done things together and it must be hard knowing you won't be there to look out for me. I can't explain it. It's something I have to do. I'm no good to my students. I'm all out of focus. I need to clear my head and this is the only way I can think to do it. You know how much I've loved to hike ever since Daddy took us to Bear Mountain. Being in the woods does something to me. It clears my head and my soul. Please try to understand I'm not walking away from you or from Mom."

Sara raised an eyebrow at Alex.

"Okay, maybe I am walking away from Mom. Can you blame me?" Alex quickly added, "But not you. Never you. Please believe me, Sara. I need to take a leap. I need to live a little. I can't just stay here in Stockbridge and stagnate." Alex wrapped her arms around Sara's waist and leaned in, comforted by her sister's protectiveness.

"What if something happens to you?" Sara's voice cracked.

"You know I have the satellite communicator. You'll be able to track my location every ten minutes." Alex patted her leg, trying to make Sara believe she had thought of every detail. "I'm carrying extra battery chargers just to make sure I always have it powered up. And we can text with it even if I don't have cell service. Nothing is going to happen, or if it does, I can handle it."

"I just hate the idea of you being out there all alone."

"See, that's the part I am most thrilled about."

"Is this about her?"

“What do you mean?” asked Alex with feigned cluelessness.

Again Sara arched an eyebrow at her younger sister.

“It might be. A little bit.” Alex shrugged her shoulders. “Maybe more than a little bit.”

“Oh, babe. If I could take away that heartbreak for you, I’d do it in a second.” Sara hugged her tighter.

“I know,” Alex sighed. “I wish you could too.” She was silent for a time. It had only been a month since she’d last spoken to Cate. A long, hard month. “I just can’t get past it,” she finally admitted, her voice wavering. “Cate took something from me and no matter how hard I try, I can’t get it back. All the love I had to give wasn’t enough for her.” Alex roughly brushed away the tears that slid down her face. She would not cry, not in front of her sister.



Alex thought about her mother and her sister as the rain fell outside the shelter. Her stomach lurched at the twinges of homesickness she still felt whenever she thought about her sister or her little house. She wondered if Sara was watering the roses in the backyard enough. Her thoughts floated around on wafer-thin ribbons of emotion. Part of her nightly ritual included writing a letter to Cate in her mind. The words formed shapes in the darkness and gave meaning to her days even though she had carried a journal with the expectation of writing about her journey. Somehow writing her thoughts on paper seemed too final, too permanent, but her imaginary nightly letters to Cate formed then floated away into the darkness never to be repeated again. That was oddly comforting to her, and she continued her ritual, night after night for seventy-five days, speaking to Cate in her mind, holding tightly to that secret place in her own heart that no longer held solace.

Dear Cate: Today was a good day even though it rained. Whenever I walk in the rain, I am amazed at how quiet everything is around me. I can’t even hear my own boots hit the ground. Everything is muffled except for the raindrops hitting the summer leaves. As I walked today, I remembered the time you kissed me that night in your loft after you showed me all your art. You took me by surprise. You kept whispering, “This is for you.” At first I didn’t know what you meant by that but now I do. You said you never felt the way I did. Now, after I’ve been able to think about things, I realize you pitied me. You thought you were giving me a gift that day—a gift of the love I wanted so badly from you. But all you did was make things worse.

There was so much she wanted to say to Cate but after their last conversation, it was as if everything froze except Alex. Her heart froze. Her mind froze. Nothing else mattered as days went flying by. Again her mind returned to the words carved into the wood not three feet from her head. “Only Love.” But love wasn’t enough. Not this time.

Alex tried to sleep and couldn’t. She put on her headlamp and scooted like an inchworm in her sleeping bag across the worn wooden plank platform until she could reach her backpack hanging on a hook. She rummaged around and found her waterproof journal and pen. Leaning up against the wall of the shelter, she turned to the first blank page of her journal and began to write. The pen felt foreign in her hand. It had been many days since she’d last held one. She stared at the blank pages and considered writing a memoir about her trip but no words came forth. She sat back against the wall and listened to the *ta-ta-ta* of the rain hitting the tin roof. When her father died, Alex coped by ignoring the pain. She kept herself busy and involved in a million activities so that she never had to wonder or think about him. This was infinitely harder. Now she was allowing herself the space to think, to grieve, and to heal and it was proving far more difficult. So she did the only thing she could think of. She wrote a letter to Cate to help bridge the gap between them.