

**Sample chapter for proposed Young Adult science fiction novel from
major publishing house**

Since the boom started, it was pretty much impossible to get lost in Rawl-
ins. If Maisy needed to find the road that could take her anywhere worth going, all
she had to do was look up and spot the birds.

Map-wise and officially, this road was Route 19, but now everyone called it
“the Oil Highway” for the endless two-way trail of tanker trucks, coming in empty
and going out full, 24/7. Not to mention all the extra new residents with their cars
and vans and pickups. Kicking up roadstuff -- gravel, dirt, leaves, grass -- and
whirling it into shapes that seemed to move on their own.

A whole lot of traffic meant a whole lot of roadkill, and a whole lot of road-
kill meant a whole lot of scavenging birds. Dark, angular shapes against the
enormous open sky, hovering and circling. Drawn by the easy meal, broadcasting
the highway’s location from miles away.

They’re like creepy versions of those advertising mini-blimps, thinks Maisy.
She’s sitting in the backseat of the black king-cab pickup as it speeds south.
Gazing at the birds as they ride updrafts in the pink pre-sunset, mountains
hunched in the distance, her hand outstretched into the twisting rush of air out-
side the open passenger window.

From behind the wheel, Brad Myers looks back at her, smiles, and gives a
little breathy nose-laugh. Scoffing, but not in a mean way.

Maisy turns to him but Janie, in the back seat next to her, pipes up instead. “She’ll fly when it’s time,” she says, not a hint of snark in her voice. “We all will. You know that.”

This makes Maisy snort. “Are you sure it’ll be flying and not, like, some Star Trek-type beam-me-up system?”

She just can’t help herself with this kind of questioning. When she’d first started living with the Peytons, it felt like she had to test them. To see if they were for real with this God’s Chosen People stuff. But surprise, surprise: they liked being tested, and they always had an answer, and it was always a totally confident one.

Then at some point, this confidence stopped being weird and started being...well, comforting. For Maisy, in the past, it hadn’t mattered what she believed in, because whatever it was would always throw her down, stomp on her feet, and spit in her face when she needed it most. But the Peytons’ faith was different: solid and stable, a layer of bedrock. These people didn’t budge, and all Maisy knew was that it felt good. Safe.

“Fly, vanish into thin air, whatever,” says Brad’s buddy Cliff Holmes, who’s riding shotgun. “We won’t be bound to this place anymore, and that’s what matters.” He pauses, then thumps the dashboard in front of him. “In the meantime, we’re gonna have all the fun the Big Guy wants for us.”

Peytons' kitchen, Maisy doing dishes and Janie watching a reality TV show about people with bad teeth hunting snakes in the Florida swamps. Out the window above the sink, Maisy could see the glowing burn-off flares in the fields the neighbors were leasing to the oil company. Then: a rumble of tires, the screech of brakes, and suddenly there was this gleaming extended-cab Ford pickup obscuring the view.

When Uncle Walter's oilstrike happened, Brad and Cliff had been the first boys to drop out of school to work on one of the rigs. Apparently this truck, so black and glossy it looked like a mirror, was what Brad had to show for it. Or, Maisy knew, what he felt he was *intended to have* by, you know. The Man Upstairs.

"Drove here straight from the lot," Brad had called through the cab window when Maisy and Janie came outside. "We'd like you ladies to join us on her maiden voyage."

"Where are you going?" asked Maisy.

"Same place as usual," said Cliff. "Nowhere. Fast."

Janie had squealed and climbed in, leaving Maisy no choice but to follow.

Now, as the truck moves past a brand new billboard for the newly renamed Oil Slick Motel -- "Special Rates for Extended Stays!" -- Janie says, "You have no idea how much I needed a little fun today," then leans forward to touch Brad's shoulder.

Simply sharing breathing space with Brad, the boy she's pined for since 9th grade, the boy who's never looked twice at her until today, is enough for Janie.

Pssst, Janie, thinks Maisy. Before you start gnawing on Brad's ear, you might want to look down at the belly-sized reminder that you're knocked up with some other dude's kid.

Since the oilstrike, since the rumors, everyone wanted to hang out with Maisy. Were these people really her friends, or were they just attracted to whatever it was they saw in her? If she liked being around them, and if Janie got some collateral happiness from it, did it even matter? All things she filed away in the Don't Think About It Too Much Or Your Head Will Explode category.

"I hope our idea of fun doesn't offend you or anything," says Brad.

"Please," says Maisy. "I'm no angel. I've done all your standard big-city stuff."

"Careful now," says Cliff, his voice low and ominous. "We'll match your big-city stuff with our small-town naughty any day."

"You know what I mean. People are talking about me like I'm holy or something. And I just want you to know that I'm normal."

"I wouldn't call you normal," jokes Brad. "If you were, you sure as heck wouldn't fit in around here."

Huh. This guy's just called her abnormal, but he's also told her that she fit in. Something she's never heard before, from anyone.

you've come."

Maisy looks at her cousin's bright eyes and unfurrowed brow, her mouth a firm, contented line. Every feature completely the shape it should be.

Janie makes unfortunate decisions when it comes to birth control, hair styles, and how much yellow a girl should wear at one time, but she's a sweet person. All her life, Maisy's wanted someone like this, a good someone, to *believe in her*, because there was no way she could do the job herself.

Then there's Brad and Cliff with their easy smiles, the confident angle of their shoulders that in her old school would have tagged them as assholes. But they're nothing like that. They're just big-dreaming boys with pockets full of unfiltered faith. Faith that feels a little crazy, frightening yet delicious, which is being offered to her.

Which Maisy is taking.

The truck tops the rise of a small hill, and through the road-clouds they can barely see the next few miles of traffic snaking through the prairie.

Brad slows and turns to the rest of them. "Are we ready to christen my new girl? Janie, does your baby like some speed?"

Janie laughs. "My baby is *dying* for some speed."

They've been traveling behind an eighteen-wheeler. Suddenly Brad revs up, changes lanes, and starts to pass it. Maisy can't even tell when the truck is fully behind them because of the dirt burst they just created.

hit anything!”

Brad ignores her. A second later, he cuts in front of the eighteen-wheeler but brakes hard, caught behind a minivan going barely above the speed limit. To the right, another huge tanker.

“C'mon, c'mon,” mutters Brad. Then, with a lightning-quick pull on the wheel, he launches the pickup across the double yellow and into the oncoming lane.

“Bring it!” screams Cliff, bouncing and slapping his seat like a kid on a county fair roller coaster.

“Get back over!” yells Maisy. “Now!”

There's a gap in traffic on this side of the road. Brad has room to pass the minivan cleanly, but instead cuts it off with a sharp swerve to the right, laughing as the driver brakes and leans long and angry on the horn.

“It's okay,” says Brad, speeding up even more. “Nothing bad can happen. Don't you believe that?”

“Why would I believe that?” she barks. “Why would *you*?”

They all look at Maisy, and suddenly she gets it. To them, she may as well be a Madonna or rabbit's foot or even a tacky hula doll, velcroed to the dashboard as a lucky charm. But she absolutely doesn't want to be that right now, or the reason they all end up dead.

You haven't seen what death looks like, she wants to yell above the sound of the wind through the windows, higher and louder with every second. *You*

and grit, and danger.

Brad grins mischievously and swerves right, into the slow lane. Behind them is another eighteen-wheeler, this one a flatbed hauling huge sections of steel pipe.

“Let’s get serious now,” he says, slowing down gradually until the big rig is riding their bumper. Maisy looks out the rear window to see the trucker shaking his head at the game he knows they’re playing. Still, after a few seconds, the trucker takes the bait, guns his big diesel engine, and pulls into the passing lane with a belch of black smoke.

On cue, Brad slams on the gas, matching the guy’s speed. The two trucks, the glistening pickup and the grimy long hauler, tear down the two lanes side by side. On the dashboard, Maisy sees the needle edge up over ninety and begin to shake. Up ahead in their lane, and getting bigger, is another tanker truck. To the left, the oncoming lane is open, but only if Brad can outpace the pipe truck. In front: the tanker, big and solid as a stone wall.

Maisy turns to Janie with a pleading look. *No*. She grips Janie’s right hand, which was resting carelessly, like an afterthought, on her curved belly. *No, no, no*.

But Janie just stares wistfully at the back of Brad’s head, then turns to Maisy with a smile. Her eyes sparkle. She nods just once. *Yes*. It is the strongest, purest *Yes* Maisy has ever felt, and also the most terrifying.

Now Janie moves Maisy’s hand from her belly. She does this gently, calmly, interlacing their fingers together, then turns their joined hands over so the

ever so slightly and leans toward Maisy. Two words fall from her lips in a clean, unbroken sound.

“I believe.”

In Janie’s sparkling eyes, Maisy sees an emptiness, too -- a blindness. Sometimes blindness is okay. This is not one of those times.

Maisy turns toward the road, because she suddenly feels like the only one in the truck with eyes wide open. All Maisy knows for sure about faith is that *seeing* is believing, and right now what she sees in front of them is the back of the tanker, a shiny oval of polished steel, reflecting a warped and growing image of Brad's pickup as it gets closer.

She can also believe what she sees in her mind’s eye: Twisted metal and crushed chrome. Human bodies broken into unrecognizable parts. Those beautiful winged scavengers, spiraling toward a buffet of carnage.

Maisy clenches her eyes shut and waits for an impact, but it doesn’t come. Instead, there’s a feeling of weightlessness as Brad finds some extra burst of speed from who knows where -- he would probably say it was from God -- and sails into the passing lane, just inches in front of the pipe truck.

“Thank you, Maisy!” whoops Cliff. They zoom past the tanker, and then, when they have the room, drift back to the right. But even as the tension of the moment fades, Brad overshoots the slow lane, and suddenly they’re in the gravel on the side of the road. He brings the truck to a screaming stop mere inches from a ditch.

Brad, Cliff, and Janie all laugh.

“That’s so like you,” says Cliff. “You can never stick the landing.”

“I get to try again,” says Brad.

No way. Maisy jumps out of the truck and into the ditch. It’s swampy, muddying her boots, but who cares, because she’s out of that truck. Standing still. Standing, period.

She looks out at the prairie grass the runs alongside Route 19. It sways slowly, like it’s trying to ignore the nearby chaos and velocity. In the distance, an oil rig rises from the swath of green in a jagged shape. She turns her face to the sky, now almost red with the ripening sunset, and then to a cluster of birds who seem to be mocking her.

Yeah, I know, she thinks to them. *Normally, I’m trying to get on to this road, and now all I want to do is get the hell off.*

And to get Janie off, too. To get Janie and her unborn child away from herself. Maisy hears a car door slam and sees Brad coming toward her down the incline to the ditch, slipping a bit on the gravel.

“You okay, Maisy?” he asks. It’s not concern. Just impatience. And there’s something about the arrogant set of Brad’s jaw, the cowlick of hair flopping over one eye, that reminds her too much of *him*. The boy who hurt her. He hurt her bad, and she can still feel that inner bruise, but because of that hurt, she knows how to handle his kind. She knows two more things, as well.

One: The only way out of this situation is *through*.

Maisy shakes off the last of her adrenalin and steps close to Brad. "I think your new baby's a little too much truck for you," she says, dangling the tease in her voice.

"Never," says Brad, smiling, but Maisy can see the fire behind his eyes.

"You know, I learned how to drive on something bigger than this. My dad's truck. He called it The Beast." Maisy doesn't let her memory go further than that. Not now. "Why don't you let me show you what a set of wheels like this can really do?"

Maisy drags her finger lightly across Brad's middle, lets it catch a bit in the folds of his t-shirt. She flashes him a grin so confident, even she starts to believe it.

"Okay," says Brad, twitching from her touch. "Why don't I?"

Maisy marches around the truck and climbs into the driver's side, while Brad takes Maisy's place next to Janie. Much to Janie's excitement, of course.

Without a word, she straps herself in and grips the steering wheel. Traffic's still whizzing fast and close, but finally, after two cars and three big rigs pass them, she sees her window of opportunity and yanks the truck back onto the road.

Maisy picks up speed now, but a safe speed. She's not going to mess with any tankers. She's not even going to change lanes. It's a cheap trick, promising thrills but delivering the opposite. They'll be pissed, but at least they'll be alive.

someone snapped a gigantic flash photo.

Maisy raises one hand to shield her eyes as she turns toward the flash.

The oil rig she saw earlier is on fire. But it's more than a fire, or a gas flare. The flames burst straight skyward, a rushing column of pure light and heat. It's dazzling, incredible, and for a moment Maisy thinks, *Maybe this is what it will feel like, when the Rapture comes.*

She hears the boom of impact before she feels it. Then she feels it, an airbag suddenly in her face, the back of her skull hitting the head rest. Sudden stillness, and silence.

Maisy blinks a few times, takes a breath. In front of them is another pickup, bigger and wider than Brad's. Maisy jumps out and rushes to the driver's side. An older man in a ten-gallon hat sits behind the wheel, staring over her shoulder at the lightshow.

"Sir, are you okay?"

"I...I think so. That fire -- it took me by surprise."

She turns to Brad's pickup but Janie, Brad, and Cliff have all scrambled out, their heads tilted skyward at the flame-rocket. It's a furious thing, like it doesn't want to be tied to the earth but rather, shooting off into space. Maisy walks a circle around the three of them as they stare up, up, up. Not a scratch on anyone. Maisy examines the front of the truck. No scratches there, either. Not even a dent. It seems to have munched up the back end of the larger truck, even

around.

She steps close to Janie and lets herself gaze at this bright, burning pillar that must stretch one-hundred-fifty feet toward the clouds.

“Everyone’s okay,” whispers Maisy, mostly to herself. But she feels Janie’s hand snake through hers again, solid and graceful against Maisy’s trembling fingers.

“Of course we are,” says Janie. She finally takes her eyes off the fire and fixes them on Maisy, holding them in this place, with the flames and birds and infinite sky overhead, the dust spiraling around their feet. “*Now* do you believe?”