

THE  
POSSIBILITY  
OF  
**NOW**

KIM CULBERTSON

*Point*

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Summary: After years of overachieving at her elite school, Mara James has a complete meltdown during her calculus exam and, embarrassed by the incident and the viral video evidence, goes to live with her ski bum father in Squaw Valley, where she hopes to find a place to figure out where her life is headed, and maybe even finally understand her father.

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# ONE

I make lists to survive. I'm not alone in this. You can't Google anything without getting hit in the face with a list. Once, I searched for "Why do people make lists?" Besides giving me 127 reasons why we love lists, I stumbled onto even more lists: 11 New Uses for a Paper Clip, 15 Regrettable Marriage Proposals, 23 Places to See Before You Die.

When did we start doing that? Maybe on a wall way back in a dark cave, a shaggy-headed caveman scratched: *Kill mammoth, make fire, stand upright.*

As humans, we must just crave them. And after what happened to me, I need my lists now more than ever.

"What are you thinking about?" Mom's eyes flick to me, then back to the road in front of us.

"Nothing." I shift in my seat, staring out the car window at the beige California scenery along the I-5. Every fifty miles or so, Mom finds a new way to ask if I want her to *turn around, go home, forget this whole thing.* Each time, watching the landscape outside slip farther from the bleached earth tones we left behind in San Diego, I tell her a version of *I want to do this, keep driving, I have a plan.*

Scratch that. I have *a list.* And I love lists. It's just not like any list I've made before.

We're heading north, tracing the 5, until eventually we will reach the highways that connect us to a dense stretch of Tahoe National Forest and, soon after, to Squaw Valley.

To Trick McHale, my biological father.

That's how Mom always refers to him. Trick McHale, *your biological father*. I got an A in AP bio freshman year. She doesn't have to remind me of the genetics. Besides, that's not how I think of him. Mostly, I don't think about him at all. To me, Trick McHale is another list: nine birthday cards (three with twenty-dollar bills), five phone calls, and one visit to the San Diego Zoo when I was seven. Which is why, when I blurted out five days ago that I wanted to go live with him for a while, just to take a break, to put my *bad day* (Mom's words) behind me, Mom's surprise was second only to my own. I don't blame her. It was random. Especially for me. It hadn't been on any list of mine anywhere. But here I am. Heading north.

What's more shocking than the asking is that Mom said yes.

That's how bad it is.

Only it's really not that bad. It's Not. That. Bad. The day after my bad day, I made a list and taped it to the back of my bedroom door. My Get a Grip List.

No one has died.

No one has cancer.

No one has dropped me in the middle of a war-torn  
country.

I have not been sold into child slavery.

I have not joined a cult where I only eat wheatgrass and  
limes.

I have not lost a limb.

Only it feels a little like I have. Lost a limb.

“If I turn around at this exit, we could be back home by dinner.”

Mom peers into the rearview mirror before changing lanes, passing a dusty white minivan. A little boy in the backseat watches us glide by, pressing his small hand flat against the glass.

“Maybe I’ll feel like eating in Squaw Valley.” I adjust the red half-inch binder resting on my lap. I like to put my long-term-goal lists into binders, real ones I can hold and not just electronic ones. I’m old school that way. I have a system. Yesterday, I printed out a cover for it, reading *THE NOW LIST* against the backdrop of a Hawaiian sunset. Nothing says live in the now like a sunset, right? I squint at it, bubbles of doubt forming in my gut.

The semi trucks on the 5 stack up like toy trains, and Mom pushes the Lexus past a line of them. We pick up speed as Mom adds, “Or we could just turn around. I really think it’s starting to blow over.”

If by “blowing over” she means “still going viral.” The YouTube video had 616,487 views the last time I checked it.

I clear my throat and try for a bright voice. “No, I’m good. I think this will be great!” I sound like a Disney princess on her third helium balloon.

Mom notices and frowns sideways at me. “Yeah, you sound great.”

I try to dial it down. “Seriously, think of this like my semester abroad, only I’m going for a quarter and it’s Tahoe instead of Italy or South America. Like an exchange student. But without having to change money or wonder why they don’t put ice in my drink.”

Her frown lines deepen, telling me she feels this trip is nothing like an exchange program. She’s already told me what she thinks this is.