 Synopsis

Al Dodge (Tim Matheson) is none too pleased that his estranged daughter, Alison (Kristen Bell), is coming to spend the summer with him. He hasn't seen the girl in years. In fact, he's made no effort to see her at all since he left the family. Now, as she's about to start college, Alison convinces him to let her visit. As he tries to wash away the residue from yet another hard night of drinking, Al's keenly aware that the daughter he hasn't seen since the age of five might not find much about his life that she likes.

Alison Dodge has always wondered what her real father was like. She's never really known him, save an early childhood memory of him before he left her and her mother. But she has never let go of the hope that one day she would have the chance to get to know him. And now that day has arrived. As she steps off the bus, with the hot desert sun blazing down, she doesn't know what to expect — or what she'll find. What she does discover is that Al Dodge is quiet, aloof and more than a little careworn. Her first impression leaves her unnerved.

Dodge has spent much of his life working as a handyman and living in a rundown trailer in the desert, on the outskirts of Phoenix. It's been a life that has suited him just fine. Alison, though, can't help but be disappointed when she sees the small, beat-up trailer where he lives. Cramped and run down, the trailer has only one saving grace: it's located next to a serene river that, during certain hours of the day, sparkles in the sunlight.

It's been years since Dodge has made any effort to be civil toward anyone, so it doesn't come easily to him. A man of few words, he finds the strain to keep up a conversation with a nervous, chatty teenager too much to bear. As he prepares dinner that first night, he's soon put off by Alison's effusiveness.

During her first few days, Alison meets some of the town's more unique residents, including Auggie Sinclair (Edward Asner), a scruffy senior citizen who knows who she is the minute he sees her: "Alison Dodge, of San Diego, California, daughter of Al Dodge, handyman and trailer trash...” he yells from across the street. Alison is put off by Auggie’s candor, but she finds that Dodge takes it in stride. Alison also meets

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Sandy Bateman (Sean Young), a late-thirtysomething woman who helps run her family’s lumber and hardware store — which means she’s in constant contact with Dodge, the town handyman. And even though Dodge shuns close contact with anyone, he and Sandy now have an understanding. They are intensely attracted to one another and, on occasion, succumb to that passion.

Alison likes Sandy a lot. When Sandy sees how uncomfortable Dodge is with his daughter, she’s quick to reassure Alison that her father is a good man, even if he may not seem like it at times. But it’s a thick and seemingly impenetrable shell that surrounds Dodge, and Alison's not sure if she’ll be able to even dent it. During dinner one night, when she discovers that Dodge has a beautiful piano hidden underneath a sheet in his trailer, she asks him to play something. Dodge is uncomfortable with the request, but with his ever-ready drink to give him courage, he sits down at the piano and begins to play a song titled "Moonlight Bay." For the first time, as she watches her Dad play the piano and sing, she's struck by how very little she knows about him. But the moment doesn't last long, as Dodge quickly stops, bringing an abrupt end to the evening.

Alison is clearly frustrated by her Dad's refusal to let her get to know him. The more she tries to find an opening in his shell, the angrier he becomes. She might do better to take a page from Sandy's book. Sandy has been seeing Dodge for quite some time, and other than the moments of physical intimacy they share, she's resigned herself to the fact that he'll give little else of himself. Now, with Alison in the picture, Sandy is doing the unforgiveable — she's pushing Dodge to recognize that Alison is his daughter, and that she desperately needs him to be a father to her. Dodge thinks Alison will be much better off if she just lets go of the fantasy of them having a relationship. He wants her to head back to her mother and step-father and leave well enough alone. Sandy accuses him of being too scared to offer his daughter the kind of love and support she's seeking.

Perhaps Sandy's pronouncement hits too close to home, because Dodge soon decides it’s time for Alison to leave. Alison is sorely stung when Dodge tells her to go home. When she protests, he becomes even more resolute. So, in the midst of a raging rainstorm, Alison demands that Dodge take her to the nearest pay phone — he doesn't have a phone — and she dejectedly calls her mother. But as she listens to her mother yammer on excitedly about an impending trip to Europe, one that Alison had passed up in order to spend her summer in Dodge's broken-down trailer, something is changing. Something deep inside of Dodge has suddenly cracked and now, as he stares at his distraught daughter, he wants to make things right. Before she has a chance to tell her mother why she called, Dodge convinces her to give him one more chance.

Alison has little idea of what's in store for her, though. She's always lived a careful and orderly life, two things her father has shunned. So when she agrees to help
him on his jobs and learn what he has to teach her, she doesn't realize that includes climbing on rooftops and swimming in fast-moving rivers. But through these trials she comes to learn more about Dodge and, perhaps surprisingly, more about herself. She can accomplish a lot if she just agrees to try. And so Alison begins to finally settle into life in this small desert town. She makes friends with Auggie (Asner), a widower whose passion for reading the classics in turn inspires Alison.

Alison and Dodge are now growing closer with each passing day, as he teaches her to row a canoe and how to fish. He tells her that his own father was not much of a father to him, revealing a painful chapter in his life. As he slowly begins to open up to her, Alison begins to develop a love for her father. Alison finds she is also spending more time with Auggie, discussing philosophy, books and life. She has also met a boy in town, Tim Spooner, who takes an immediate liking to her and asks her out. She tentatively agrees.

Dodge knows that he loves his daughter, but the prospect is so frightening to him, that he can't help but sabotage it. When Alison goes on her date with Tim, Dodge is worried — and he doesn't like to worry. So he vents his emotions at the local bar, where he gets drunk and in a fight. He ends up at Sandy's house, but she's finally had enough of this man who happens in only when he feels like it. When she tells him she wants more from him, he rejects her. He's angry and frightened of all the emotions he's feeling, so he lashes out at those who are closest, Sandy and Alison. When Alison comes home from her date, a drunk Dodge is waiting, ready to push her away for good. And he succeeds — almost.

After a stormy fight, one in which Alison packs and runs out of the trailer, Dodge finally comes to his senses and chases after her. She's dragging her suitcase down a dusty road, tears streaming down her face, when a conciliatory Dodge drives up. Alison accuses him of never wanting her. Now she doesn't want him, she tells him. He agrees to take her to Sandy's house for the night. She can get a bus home tomorrow. Dodge goes home and, instead of his usual habit of turning to the bottle, he instead spends the entire night reading the dozens upon dozens of letters Alison has written to him over the past thirteen years. What he discovers devastates him. She never gave up on him.

Sandy brings Alison by the next morning, in a last ditch attempt to see if father and daughter can somehow make amends. Alison isn't interested, but Dodge, for the first time he can remember, is ready to face up to the consequences of his actions. He admits that he's spent his life afraid of being hurt, but now he wishes he'd never left, never run away from life when he was a father, husband and breadwinner. He'd give anything to change the past. Since he can't, he'd like to change the course of their future, if she'll let him.

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His admission opens a new door for Dodge and Alison. For the first time this summer, they are both incredibly happy to be together. She's helping him with his jobs, she's dating Tim and enjoying life with her Dad. She begins to actually treat him like a Dad, asking him questions about life and love, all of which unnerves him. But he's willing to answer her questions openly and honestly — even when she admits that she's just lost her virginity with Tim. Dodge's new attitude is also affecting his relationship with Sandy.

In the midst of this newfound happiness, Dodge and Alison must also come to terms with the sudden death of Auggie, a man whose simple, yet profound theories about life have made an extraordinary impact on Alison. In all, this has been a summer that Alison will fondly remember for the rest of her life. As she prepares to leave for college, Auggie's much-loved greeting: "Alison Dodge of San Diego, California. Daughter of Al Dodge, handyman and trailer trash. Roses are red and violets are blue, I can't think of a girl more beautiful than you...," still rings poignantly in her ears. Alison realizes that her dream of having a relationship with her father has indeed come true. She knows Dodge and she loves him dearly, and this little desert town will be an oasis she'll return to for many, many years to come.