

# LIABILITY

A Romantic Thriller

SCREENPLAY

TODD CRAWSHAW



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*When we cracked the genetic DNA code, opened the big Pandora's box, and it really did become possible to produce chimeras, my ears shot up. Having been brought up among the biologists and having followed various debates about ways to improve the human template and other debates about the true nature of our nature, I began seriously to wonder: What if? We hold in our hands a tool that is more powerful – for good or ill – than any we have wielded before.*

—Margaret Atwood

+

ALSO BY TODD CRAWSHAW

*Portrait of a Rainbow as a Young Man*  
novella

*Retreat*  
screenplay

*God, Sex & Psychosis*  
novel

*heretofore*  
novel

*Light-Years in the Dark*  
storypoems

*Exploits of the Satyr*  
novel

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FADE IN:

INT. CAFE, HWY 50, SIERRA MOUNTAINS - NIGHT

CORI VIDERI is seated at a window booth in a mountain cafe. She is 27, unassuming yet fetching in a leather jacket, sweater and jeans. Her expression is vacant. The cup of coffee in her hand shakes. Her eyes tear up. She looks down.

In her palm she holds a cylindrical device the size of a cigarette lighter, encased in metal. Futuristic. Technical. She quickly places it inside her purse.

CLOSE on her eyes. A FLAME flickers inside her pupils.

CLOSE on an inverted FLAME becoming a MAN wielding a gun.

Reflections in the dark cafe windows show a WAITRESS on the floor, customers being robbed, the GUNMAN approaching.

The gun barrel touches Cori's forehead.

GUNMAN  
Jewelry. Cash. Now.

Cori is yanked from the booth and brought to her feet.

The gunman looks her over.

GUNMAN  
You're coming with me, sweet thing.  
(lewd wink)  
Or were you hoping I'd put my bullet  
in you right here? You'd like that?

Cori maintains a calm demeanor. She secures a tight hold on her purse. She refuses to budge when her arm is yanked.

L I A B I L I T Y

GUNMAN

Don't fuck with me. Let's go. Move!

He FIRES his gun, SHATTERING a lamp. People SCREAM.

GUNMAN

Anyone here want to be a dead hero?

INT. CLASSROOM - DAY (FLASHBACK)

Cori, 15, is gazing out a window. The teacher approaches.

TEACHER

Videri. Caught daydreaming. Again.

CORI

I wasn't.

TEACHER

Then repeat the question I asked.

CORI

What is liability?

TEACHER

Amazing. Something I said actually got through to your brain.

The teacher smugly gestures with chalk in hand to his class.

TEACHER

Now, can you tell me its definition?

CORI

Liability means...

(smiles)

You possess the ability to lie.

Her classmates LAUGH. Chalk SNAPS between the teacher's fingers.

INT. CAFE, SIERRA MOUNTAINS - SAME

The hammer of the gun CLICKS back a notch.

GUNMAN

The fuck is wrong with you?

The gun barrel is pressed into her lips.

GUNMAN

Don't tempt me. You think this is funny? You think this is all some fucking stupid joke?

CORI

No. Just you.

His bag of loot is dropped on the table. He BACKHANDS her. Cori rubs her cheek, snaps off her necklace.

CORI

Here. Did you want this?

GUNMAN

No. Just you.

CORI

Then you'd better not look up.

The gunman glares back.

CORI

Security camera.

GUNMAN

There are no fucking cameras.

CORI

Between the beams. To your right.  
Fine. Don't believe me.

The gunman hesitates but glances for the nonexistent camera.

L I A B I L I T Y

Cori KNEES him in the groin - JABS his throat - TORQUES his wrist - which releases the gun that DROPS from his hand.

Two men SCRAMBLE off the floor and POUNCE on the gunman.

Cori, still standing, is transfixed by something outside.

CUT TO: APPARITION of a woman watching from the parking lot.

A WAITRESS approaches Cori.

WAITRESS

Are you all right, Dear?

THE APPARITION DISPERSES INTO FADING PARTICLES OF LIGHT.

CORI (O.C.)

I'm fine, thanks.

WAITRESS

You're lucky to be alive.

Cori pulls out a five-dollar bill from her jeans.

CORI

I guess. Here. For the coffee.

WAITRESS

Keep it. We should be paying you.

GUNMAN

You'll die for that! Wait until I -

The gunman's mouth is sealed with duct tape. His hands and legs are strung together with fishing tackle.

A COWBOY in a hat approaches Cori and blocks her from leaving.



L I A B I L I T Y

COWBOY

(tips his hat)

Police are on their way. You might want to stick around until then.

CORI

We all saw what happened. Besides, I'm late for an appointment.

COWBOY

At this hour?

CORI

I'm an attorney. Here.

She pulls a business card from her pocket, hands it to him.

COWBOY

Mind if I ask you something?

CORI

Ask.

COWBOY

How'd you manage that?

CORI

Manage what?

COWBOY

Tricking him, and all the rest.

CORI

It's a gift I have.

The cowboy questions her smile with a curious squint.

CORI

Liability.

TITLE: NINE YEARS EARLIER

INT. ART CLASS, U.C. BERKELEY - NIGHT

A BLUR of colors comes into FOCUS to become a painting, which transitions into a live woman staring at herself in the mirror.

This is Cori at age eighteen. She has a haunted expression.

CORI (V.O.)

We mustn't judge God from this world.  
It's just a study that didn't come  
off. Only a master could make such a  
blunder.

(a gun shot)

Vincent Van Gogh said that. When he  
shot himself in a corn field, I think  
he was aiming to shoot God.

A CAWING of crows fades into students TALKING from another room over a FLOW of water. Cori is at a wash basin cleaning paint brushes in a utility sink.

RED water flows from the faucet over her hands.

INT. LECTURE ROOM, COLLEGE CAMPUS - NIGHT

PROFESSOR NAUGHT, 45, a biochemist, presides over a small group of 12 students. Images are projected on a screen.

NAUGHT

Each person holds the potential for  
greatness. Yet it goes unrealized.

INSERT - PREHISTORIC CAVE DRAWINGS ON A WALL.

NAUGHT (V.O.)

Plato conceived of us being chained  
inside a cave viewing projections on  
a wall. A distorted reality. Being  
misguided by these specters.

He points to an illustration of DNA's double helix.

NAUGHT

Darwin spoke of evolutionary chains  
that bind us from within. Spiraling  
codes that contain more phantoms.  
There is truth embedded in these  
genetic links, but also blinders to  
restrict us. Limitations that I will  
remove. So that your minds can  
clearly see this face we call God.

He takes a drink of water and holds forth the  
empty glass.

NAUGHT

That's how easy it will be.

He tosses the glass into the overhead darkness.  
When it doesn't fall, MURMURS arise from the  
students.

NAUGHT

A miracle? No. My assistant caught  
the glass. We will be moving beyond  
the realm of trickery and deception.

STUDENT #1

When do we get paid?

NAUGHT

(tolerant smile)

Weekly increments. You must learn to  
have patience when dealing with the  
government, and the paranormal. I've  
selected you out of thousands of  
applicants. You each exhibit promise.  
And your ambitions will be rewarded  
with... yes, illumination.

STUDENT #2

You said it will be easy. What are  
the risks?

NAUGHT

In a world without risk, Mr. Dover,  
you'd never strive to be president.  
Nor would you have volunteered to  
participate in this research.

(points)

You want to make contact with your  
dead sister. To make amends. But she  
already forgives you. You were nine.  
It was an accident. Not your fault.

STUDENT #2

How could you possibly -

NAUGHT

Accept that I do. We are force fields  
of biochemical energy. We have hidden  
portals of uncharted knowledge. What  
I'm offering you all will enhance who  
you already are. It is, after all,  
your mind.

TITLE: NINE YEARS LATER

INT. CIA WEAPONS LAB, HIGH SECURITY - Z-DIVISION

Agent DOVER, 33, authoritative, stands next to  
OSAKI, 40.

NAUGHT, 54, nods to his male ASSISTANT, 25, who  
unscrews a pool cue used for playing billiards.  
A cylindrical device (same object seen in Cori's  
hand) slides out from the hollow shaft.

NAUGHT

A flawless fit.

DOVER

It's fail-safe?

NAUGHT

Given the content? Human handlers?

DOVER

Some assurance.

NAUGHT

There's a rumor your aim is for a senate seat. Where to next?

OSAKI

Assurance this will work.

Naught moves to a white board, picks up a marker.

NAUGHT

Let's do this old school.

(writes)

PICKARD: EVIL. STIKES: BAD -

DOVER

Stikes is a bad agent.

NAUGHT

But not a traitor. He's convincing. And Cori, as infiltrator, is the connecting tissue that pulls this plan together to work. I repeat -

HE UNDERLINES: "PICKARD: EVIL. STIKES: BAD. CORI: GOOD."

OSAKI

Don't be an ass.

NAUGHT

(ignores him)

Once Cori returns stateside, she reconnects to surprise Stikes and initiate a love relationship.

OSAKI

That simple.

NAUGHT

Have you seen my daughter?

NAUGHT (cont'd)

(at Dover)

Next, she communicates to Pickard, who she's been working for, of a top secret pathogen I've developed.

DOVER

To be used how? As a weapon?

NAUGHT

It's an aggressive respiratory virus that is rapidly transmittable, and deadly. Released globally, it would cause a pandemic and nations to fail. Pickard wants to create this chaos.

DOVER

How do you know that?

NAUGHT

Accept that I do.

OSAKI

He'd put his own life at risk.

NAUGHT

He believes he's invulnerable.

(at Dover)

Back to our chain of events. Cori informs Pickard that Stikes has stolen one of these devices and is willing to sell it, but only to Pickard if done in person.

OSAKI

He'd never come.

NAUGHT

He will. It's personal.

OSAKI

Meaning?

NAUGHT

They share a history.

OSAKI

He'll suspect it's a trap.

NAUGHT

He will come because Pickard trusts Cori. The location will be pre-arranged. When the trade is made, you'll have conclusive proof of his culpability and criminality. And you'll have captured your nemesis.

OSAKI

Too damned risky. If this toxin -

NAUGHT

Agent Osaki, when the enemy has no nation, has no ideology other than annihilation. It sends a very clear message. The Age of Debate is over. And drastic measures are required.

DOVER

Chemical weapons have been outlawed by the CWC. What would happen, let's say, if this virus got released?

NAUGHT

Airborne chemicals are analogous to missiles coursing through the inner space we call us. With a calculated guess, but never a certainty, as to what doors they will unlock.

DOVER

Damn it, Naught. Assurance we won't be responsible for Armageddon.

NAUGHT

Gentlemen, in God we must trust.

OSAKI

Fuck that. How will Pickard know if this damned thing is even real?

Naught's assistant touches the cylinder with a pocket scanner.

An LCD reading displays a chemical analysis.

NAUGHT

He will have a similar scanner for verification of the viral antigens.

Dover takes possession of the cylinder. He hands the cue sticks to Osaki. At Naught, Dover gestures toward an office.

INT. NAUGHT'S OFFICE, CIA WEAPONS LAB - SAME

Dover, alone with Naught, turns on him as the door shuts.

DOVER

I asked for a decoy. Not a weapon!

NAUGHT

The contents are hermetically sealed in a titanium armature. The timing mechanism triggers a signal, but will not release the pathogen.

DOVER

A false positive.

NAUGHT

Exquisite bait to catch our prey.

DOVER

You must be proud of yourself for creating a monster. Who has now become an international terrorist and mass murderer.



NAUGHT

Pickard, as he calls himself now, is not my creation. I can't control his actions. Nor is there concrete proof yet of his liability. You need this.

DOVER

Have you been enjoying incarceration?

NAUGHT

Oh, yes, I'm a dedicated servant.

DOVER

You destroyed government property.

NAUGHT

Tragic. It was mine to destroy.

Dover picks up a framed photo off Naught's desk.

CLOSE on image of a younger man, Naught, with his wife and two children.

DOVER

I want Pickard dead or in a cage.

NAUGHT

As do I.

DOVER

Happier times, or more pretense?

NAUGHT

At heart, I am still a family man.

DOVER

You murdered your wife.

NAUGHT

Untrue. And I was exonerated.

Dover PLOPS the frame onto papers cluttering the desk.

NAUGHT

My daughter loves me.

DOVER

Is she programed to say that?

Naught, annoyed, gives Dover a contrite smile.

NAUGHT

Cori has an exemplary mind.

DOVER

You raised your kids like lab rats.  
What you did was reprehensible.

Naught calmly uprights the framed family photo.

Dover holds up the cylindrical device between  
their eyes.

DOVER

There's no room for errors here.

NAUGHT

Cori is a needed asset. Admit it.

DOVER

She'd better be working for us.

NAUGHT

We call it covert for a reason.

DOVER

(head shake)

You even had her killed too.

NAUGHT

And then brought her back to life.  
Cori possesses extraordinary gifts.

DOVER

So did Pandora.

Dover opens the door to leave. He stops, looks back.

DOVER

The mind can only take so much.

NAUGHT

Mr. Dover, the mind has no limits.

DOVER

Maybe it should.

INT. CIA WEAPONS LAB, Z-DIVISION - MOMENTS LATER

Naught and his assistant escort Dover and Osaki to doors where military officers are stationed on the other side.

DOVER

Worst case scenario, hypothetically,  
if these contents went airborne?

NAUGHT

A catalyst for everlasting peace.  
I jest. Good day, gentlemen.

A guard unlocks the door. The two agents exit and the door closes and locks behind them. Naught rubs his eyes.

NAUGHT

Lord, what fools these mortals be.

ASSISTANT

Sir?

NAUGHT

Shakespeare. Try guessing this one:  
Some think it is peace I have come to  
cast upon the world. They do not know  
it is really dissension.

His assistant, used to these mind games, shakes his head.

NAUGHT

Jesus of Nazareth, my dear boy.

INT. CRAZY EIGHT BAR, BERKELEY - NIGHT

Cori Videri, at 27, is the essence of bohemian beauty. Seated at the bar, she stands and moves to watch something.

ROBERT STIKES, 29, is playing billiards. He is a confident man, aware of his good looks. After a shot he holds the cue stick behind his neck, wrists over the ends, relaxed, waiting his turn. His next shot sinks two balls in opposite pockets with the cue ball bouncing off the table cushion and striking the 8-ball, sinking it last. He acts surprised by his luck and win.

Cori, leaning against a wall, is watching. He sees her and walks toward her. His curious grin turns to stupefaction.

STIKES

No way. You can't be real.

CORI

I can even walk and talk too.

STIKES

I'm Robert.

CORI

Cori Videri.

STIKES

The hell you are.

CORI

Surprise.

INT. CRAZY EIGHT BAR, BERKELEY - LATER

Cori and Stikes sit at a table sipping beers,

assessing each other. He sniffs the air and looks at her chest.

CLOSE ON HER T-SHIRT THAT SAYS "ARTISTIC LICENSE."

STIKES

Turpentine. You still paint. And your breasts have developed nicely.

CORI

I moved here last month. I've been living on an island off of Greece. I'm taking night classes. And these, they're not really mine.

STIKES

(laughs)

Then whose are they?

CORI

Technically my father owns them since he paid for the upgrade.

STIKES

I can't believe you're alive.

CORI

I can't believe you care.

STIKES

Cori, you died. I witnessed it.

CORI

My death was highly overrated.

STIKES

Staged?

CORI

No, I died.

STIKES

Then clarify what the fuck happened.

CORI

You mean did I see a toilet flush of glorious light and angels? No.

STIKES

I attended your fucking funeral.

CORI

Okay, now that was staged.

STIKES

I'll never forgive your father for what he did to us. Especially you.

CORI

Did you know that the male praying mantis can't copulate with its head attached to its body. So the female bites it off before they have sex.

STIKES

(laughs)

Message received. I'll stop.

CORI

My turn. What happened to you?

STIKES

I'm still alive. I freelance, repair computers, tech support, whatever.

CORI

No. You're a pool hustler.

STIKES

That's only for fun.

CORI

That's sad. Pissing away your gift.

STIKES

It's not so bad. Are you that good?

CORI

Not really. I'm trying to be.

ROBERT

Then I admire you for trying.

CORI

(dismissive)

You can turn off the charm. I'm not about to get involved with you.

ROBERT

For a second there, it almost felt like we were already involved.

TITLE: THREE MONTHS LATER

INT. CRAZY EIGHT BAR - ANOTHER NIGHT

At a nearby table, Cori sketches on a pad while Stikes plays billiards with two men, PICKARD and MARTINO.

The SKETCH is of Stikes. A fly lands on his face.

A SWIPE of her hand catches the fly, its wings held between her finger and thumb.

CORI

You want to die? Get lost.

She FLICKS away the fly. She is then startled by -

AN ANGEL, A TRANSPARENT WOMAN, WHO IS STARING AT HER FROM ACROSS THE ROOM.

Pickard hands Stikes a wad of money then departs out a side door with Martino.

Stikes sits beside Cori and slips the money into her purse. He sets his pool cue next to another one leaning against the table.

STIKES

That was fun, beating Pickard. And now, predictably, he wants a rematch.

CORI

You enjoy this too much.

STIKES

I can't believe you've actually been working for that prick.

CORI

Worked. As in past tense.

STIKES

(inhales)

Time to make a deal with the devil.

Stikes grabs for the other pool cue and Cori grabs his arm, stopping him.

CORI

I changed my mind. Let's leave.

STIKES

Leave? And then what?

CORI

Disappear. Go anywhere.

Stikes squints and leans in for a fast kiss but Cori holds him tight in a passionate, desperate embrace. He breaks free and jokes -

STIKES

Wow. The ice caps are melting. This global warming I like. But stay cool, all right, until this transaction is made. After that we can go anywhere you want.

CORI

Don't do it, Rob. I'm serious.



Stikes unscrews the pool cue and surreptitiously slides the device out and hands it to Cori.

STIKES

I don't trust him either. For safe keeping. I'll make sure the prick has the rest of the money first.

INT. CRAZY EIGHT BAR, REST ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

The faucet water flows with BLOOD. Cori looks up and is STARTLED by a ghost in the mirror. It's Stikes with his face slashed and throat cut.

EXT./INT. SERIES OF SHOTS - NIGHT

- A) A derelict FIRES an automatic weapon into a parked car.
- B) At an open hotel window, from inside the room, a sniper is SHOT from behind.
- C) Inside a surveillance van with monitoring equipment, Dover and Osaki begin to SHOUT.

EXT. ALLEY, BEHIND CRAZY EIGHT BAR - SAME

Cori BURSTS into an alley through a back door of the bar.

Stikes is cornered against a wall. Pickard holds a knife. Martino holds the unscrewed pool cue and tosses both pieces at Stikes.

STIKES

Cori, run!

Stikes' face is CUT with a knife, then his throat.

Cori, in shock, staggers backward, and runs into the street.

FLASHBACKS:

INT. LECTURE ROOM - NIGHT

Same twelve college students are observing Professor Naught.

CLOSE on his eyes twitching minutely.

NAUGHT

Time is made of discrete particles.  
Each brain will processes this  
genetic enhancement differently.

CUT TO: Billiard balls BREAKING by a cue ball.

NAUGHT (V.O.)

Strive to govern these tiny planets.

INT. CHURCH, A FUNERAL - DAY

The eleven male students and Naught move past an open casket. Cori, lying inside, is beautiful even in death.

BACK TO PRESENT

EXT. UNIVERSITY STREET, BERKELEY - NIGHT

As she runs into the street, Cori is STRUCK down by a Fiat convertible. Her head strikes the pavement hard.

INSERT - The sound of BREAKING billiard balls.

Cori regains consciousness. The driver gets out to help her.

Cori rises, shoves her aside, hijacks the car, and drives off.

EXT. BAY BRIDGE, OAKLAND/SAN FRANCISCO - NIGHT

A trailer is parked under the bridge beside the bay.

INT. CIA TRAILER, BAY BRIDGE - SAME NIGHT

Four agents are in this crowded space: DOVER is furious and pacing; RAMOS, 23, grabs a handful of darts; BRIGGS, 25, rubs her bandaged thigh; OSAKI is holding a cell phone.

OSAKI

Roger that. Seven agents! All dead!

BRIGGS

We lost Videri.

RAMOS

Great. Pandora is out of her box.

BRIGGS

Pandora was the woman not the f-ing contents - you moron.

RAMOS

Fuck that. It's a toxic screwup!

OSAKI

How did Pickard blindside us?

DOVER

I underestimated his abilities.

The other agents look to him for clarification.

DOVER

Operation Sandstorm. Like that.

OSAKI

Like what? We were attached. You had a premonition there were incoming missiles even before radar detection. Which saved our asses. You mean -

DOVER

That kind of ability. Yes.

RAMOS

Terrific, so now that asshole has a chemical pathogen to detonate.

Dover glowers at Ramos who hurls a dart at a target board. He then turns to Briggs talking on a cell phone.

BRIGGS

Airports are on alert.

DOVER

But no road blocks. We need Pickard to stay surfaced and not burrow.

RAMOS

He's not a bloody mole.

DOVER

Pickard doesn't have the device.

OSAKI

Then who? Videri? Are you certain?

RAMOS

Like you were so certain about -

With alarming speed Dover catches his tossed dart in midair, grabs Ramos by the throat, and SHOVES him against the wall.

DOVER

I see more than you can imagine. Coordinate with the news stations. We need their choppers so we appear non-military. Is that understood?

Dover releases his grip on Ramos who rubs his neck.

RAMOS

And tell the reporters what? They'll rip us apart like vultures?

BRIGGS

Stolen data. They'll buy that.

OSAKI

Why did they incinerate Stikes?

SCREEN ON MOBILE DEVICE SHOWS A CHARRED BODY IN THE ALLEY.

RAMOS

I'm gonna obliterate that fuck.

DOVER

We need Pickard alive. Briggs, are you up for this?

Briggs lifts her windbreaker to show a bandaged midriff but no blood.

BRIGGS

Minor penetration. I'm still good.

EXT. STREET, BERKELEY - NIGHT (FLASHBACK)

INSERT - AUTOMATIC WEAPON FIRED INTO A PARKED CAR.

RAMOS (V.O.)

What compelled you to wear a vest?

INT. CIA TRAILER, BAY BRIDGE - SAME

BRIGGS

Excuse me for not dying.

She indicates a bandaged head wound with blood. Ramos MUTTERS as he exits the trailer. Briggs follows him. Osaki lingers.

DOVER

I need you in Reno. Take Ramos.

OSAKI

Why Nevada?

DOVER

A hunch. We can make this work.

OSAKI

Metaphorically?

DOVER

(snaps back)

The cleanup?

OSAKI

Smoke and mirrors. Never happened.

DOVER

It happened! This is on me. What?

OSAKI

Briggs. Being the only survivor.

DOVER

What are you implying?

OSAKI

Nothing. Like a miracle, is all.

Pondering this, Dover fingers the point of the dart in his hand. Osaki exits. Dover winces as the door SLAMS shut.

EXT. HIGHWAY, SIERRA MOUNTAINS - NIGHT (PRESENT)

CUT TO: The mountain cafe receding inside a rearview mirror.

Through the windshield, Cori observes lights far below, then -

CLOSE on a transparent man, a ghost, seated beside her.

Startled, she hits the brakes. The car SKIDS, spinning to a stop. The engine dies. The ghost is gone. She POUNDS the steering wheel.