

ASHWOOD

A NOVEL

Todd Crawshaw



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ASHWOOD

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IN
MEMORY OF
A GIRL
WHO WAS
AND COULD
HAVE BEEN

ALSO BY TODD CRAWSHAW

Goddess: Son of Medusa

Amulet

The Center's Edge Revisited

Portrait of a Rainbow as a Young Man

God, Sex & Psychosis

heretofore

Light-Years in the Dark

Exploits of the Satyr

ASHWOOD

PART 1

ASHWOOD

*And I find it kinda funny
I find it kinda sad
The dreams in which I'm dying
Are the best I've ever had
I find it hard to tell you
I find it hard to take
When people run in circles
It's a very, very mad world
— Tears for Fears*

ASHWOOD

OBITUARY

Cassandra (Cassy) Crow, was laid to rest yesterday at Fernwood Cemetery, Mill Valley, California after her skeletal remains were discovered at South Jetty Beach in Oregon, following her seven-year disappearance. She is believed to be the final victim in a series of murders that shocked the art world. Cassandra was born in Eugene, Oregon. A self-proclaimed teenage runaway, she hitchhiked to San Francisco during the Summer of Love where she remained, eventually marrying, and raised a family in Marin county. Art World Magazine named Cassandra Crow "Queen of the Canvas." She was also featured on the cover of TIME magazine for her unique oil paintings, ranging in style from surreal portraits to her art in humanistic expressionism. She described her meteoric rise to fame as accidental and not of her making, nor her desire. "My wish is for solitude and anonymity," she told a reporter days before her disappearance. This statement, desiring seclusion, belied a deeper truth. "Cassy was a wild child," said a friend who knew her during the sixties and seventies. "She was a dichotomy, an enigma, a free spirit." Cassandra is survived by her husband, Aaron Ashwood, son Blaise, twin daughters, Sky and Iris, grandsons, Logan and Flynn, and granddaughters Cora and Birdie. A Celebration of Life will be held in San Francisco's Golden Gate Park Polo Fields on Saturday, May 9th. Anyone who wishes to attend is welcome.

C H A P T E R 1

Euphoria. That was the sensation of pleasure he was feeling. The warmth of her sparkling face. A smile full of love. Her appearance hovering before him dreamlike, pressing her lips into his, lingering there as their bodies became one.

He felt her magic again. How could she be dead?

“Grandpa? Are you in there? Knock-knock.”

Ashwood opened his eyes. He saw the girl he loved and had lost. He blinked, confused by her playful giggle, before recognizing her to be his granddaughter, Birdie.

For a moment he forgot he was paralyzed, locked in the prison of his body, the result of a stroke. In his mind he smiled, wanting to tell her what a joy she was to behold, how much she reminded him of Cassy. But he couldn’t move his muscles. He vaguely recalled the onslaught of the headache, followed by a strange warmth turning his head into melting wax, numbing his face, his arms, his legs, until the collapse into darkness. Upon awakening, he was slow to grasp the reality of his situation. Lying upright on a hospital bed, unable to move, he found himself being spoken to by doctors and nurses as though he had regressed to an infant, a newborn, establishing facial recognition and trying to comprehend this new dimension of life.

“Are you okay? Can you hear me? Blink if you can.”

Ashwood blinked at Birdie.

“Everyone is starting to arrive. I can wheel you into the living room if you’d like. Mom says it’s okay. Would you like me to?”

Ashwood blinked again.

“Awesome. Give me just a sec.”

Birdie looked at her twelve-year-old self in the mirror, bunching

her blonde hair, pulling it to the side, and tying it into a ponytail with a sparkly-green scrunchie. She petted the fuzzy-white reindeer on the front of her red sweater as if it was a real animal then turned back to face her grandfather.

“I feel kinda stupid wearing this. Dad bought it for me, thinking I’d like it. He still sees me as a little girl who plays with Little Ponies and dolls. That’s not me anymore. But it’s Christmas. So I have to wear it. Right? Do you think I look stupid?”

Ashwood blinked and Birdie burst into giggles.

“I love you, Grandpa.”

As she checked to make sure his body harness was secure before moving him, she recalled how he used to toss her into the air when she was young. She would shriek with laughter, knowing she’d be caught, then tossed again. She tightened his support-vest straps.

“Is that too tight? I’m not hurting you, am I?”

Ashwood shut his eyes to indicate, no.

Her grandfather’s regular live-in caregiver had three days off to be with her family, given that it was Christmas. Birdie volunteered to look after him until the temporary nurse her parents had arranged to come help later in the day arrived. She stepped on the brake release unlocking the wheels and took hold of the handles in the back which had emergency hand breaks. Birdie began to push him forward. “Okay. Off we go.”



Birdie bit down on her lower lip, fighting back tears, trying to stay happy. It was Christmas. Her favorite holiday, bringing family members together again. But she felt sad. Sad for her grandfather as she wheeled him down the ramp connecting his part of the house to the next section of the multi-structured home. Originally, his home. One he remodeled himself, along with her Grandma Cassy, whom

Birdie never got to know but lingered like magic fairy dust when she saw certain objects, especially while she stared at her paintings. She knew the history of this house because she was curious about these things. Her parents said she was precocious, a word she had to google to know its meaning. Meaning she had heightened abilities, like those of an adult. But she found that hard to believe because she was only a kid, not even a teenager yet. Curious, that was all. Because their house was the strangest conglomeration of beauty she had ever seen. It was nothing like the homes of her friends.

Her grandpa's section of the house was once lived in by an uncle she never knew – her grandma's older brother who too was disabled. It was constructed specifically for him, along with all the ramps and bridges connecting the separate parts. And now her grandfather was confined to live there too. Birdie stopped to wipe away a tear.

"Look, Grandpa. A squirrel."

She turned his wheelchair. They were midway along a bridge. Beneath them was a meandering brook bordered with river rocks, and beyond, on both sides was lush greenery and tall trees.

"Do you see him?"

Birdie bent down and saw his eyes blink twice.

"He could be a she, I suppose. Anyway, let's keep going. Listen, I hear a car coming up the driveway."

It was midmorning, the sky full of breaking fog within the dense forest of surrounding redwood trees. They passed an outdoor patio area off the main house. It was constructed of rockwork with wood flooring. A redwood burl bar stood under an overhang with massive logs for beams. As they approached the end of the bridge, Birdie saw through the glass walls their Christmas tree lit up in all its glory. Her dad was inside building a fire in the stone hearth.

Birdie stopped and stepped on a button that triggered the sliding glass doors to open. She pushed him into the living room.

"Merry Christmas, Grandpa."

C H A P T E R 2

1967

Cassy walked through the open door to the Sigma Chi fraternity, located a block from the University of Oregon campus, and into its vacant entryway that smelled of beer, trash, and cigarettes. It was early Saturday morning. She spotted the aftermath signs of a Friday-night party. She peered into the mess hall with long metal tables and chairs, then walked down a hallway into the living room area with a high ceiling and stone partition that housed a fireplace, creating two sections.

The first section was empty. The second section produced three boys slumped in chairs and a sofa, muttering to one another, nursing hangovers, it appeared to Cassy by their demeanor.

“Anyone headed to San Francisco?”

Her unexpected voice woke them from their lethargy.

“Who wants to know?”

Twisting her lips from the wiseass remark, Cassy stated, “I do. Obviously. Any takers?”

One boy straightened up, gazing at her as if at an apparition. She wore black jeans with ripped holes displaying portions of her skin and a tie-dyed t-shirt with the word “LOVE” seen through the opening of her un-zipped leather jacket. Straps over her shoulders held a small backpack. Her black boots matched her coat. A shiny black feather was stuck in the nest of her long blonde hair.

“How old are you?”

She ignored the guy’s remark and focused on the one who had taken immediate interest in her. “Why does it matter?”

“It matters. What are you, twelve or thirteen?”

“Fuck off. I’m *fifteen*. Forget it.” She turned and left.

“Wait!”

Cassy stopped and turned back. The guy whose attention she had hooked rose to his feet. He approached her in the hallway.

“Okay. I’m waiting. What?”

“Why do you want to go to San Francisco?”

“It’s gotta be more fun than being here. So I’ve heard.”

“I’m from there.”

“San Francisco? Why would you want to be here?”

He grinned and gestured to the surroundings. “College.”

“Right. Anyway...”

“Let’s talk.”

Cassy hitched both hands around the straps of her backpack and took a moment to look him over as if she were browsing at a car lot, interested in buying, checking out his features, wondering if he was reliable, wouldn’t break down easily, and gave good mileage.

“Do you have a name?”

“Aaron. Ashwood.”

“Cassy. Crow.” She touched her black feather.

“Crow? Seriously?”

“*Caw*,” she squawked with a droll smile.

Aaron laughed. “Come with me.”

“Why?”

“It’s gotta be more fun than staying here. I have a car.”

Cassy twisted her lips, considering his offer, wondering if he was someone who might try to rape her.

Aaron read her hesitation. “You can trust me.”

“You’re trustworthy?”

“I am. I won’t try to rape you.”

“That’s a shame,” she teased.

Aaron grinned. “You’re something else. Come on.”

“Where are we going?”

“For a ride?”



Cassy stared at the tarnished blue, funny-looking station wagon as Aaron opened the driver's door, which made a creaking noise, and sat inside, waiting for her to decide on whether to enter. After a full fifteen seconds, she removed her backpack, opened the side door and plopped down onto the passenger seat.

"What kind of car is this?"

"Peugeot 403. It's a classic."

"You're joking."

"I am. Do you like it?"

She frowned, peering behind where the back seats would be but folded down to accommodate a mattress across the back, along with cushions and a couple of blankets. Both side windows were covered with blue tie-dyed curtains. The sight of the bed gave her a queasy feeling which she tried to suppress.

"Far out. So you're a hippie."

"Hardly. Maybe."

"Your hair is too short." She studied his features. "You're more like a James Dean type. Or, hum, Steve McQueen?"

"You don't know me. Are these your action heroes?"

"No. My brother's obsessed with them. He made me watch all their movies."

"How old is your brother?"

"Nineteen."

"Ah, same as me."

"You're not the same. He's bigger and taller."

"I meant in age."

"So you're not a hippie?"

"I haven't decided what I am. You?"

"I'm a runaway."

He wasn't sure if it was a joke. "Where are you from?"

"Eugene."

Aaron laughed and started the engine. "You haven't gotten very far yet."

"Call it a trial run. Are we driving to San Francisco?"

"No."

"Then where?"

"Where would you like to go?"

"San Francisco."

"Hendricks Park, maybe? To a beach?"

"I've never been to the ocean."

Aaron backed out of the parking space in the fraternity lot and stopped the car. "I don't believe you."

"It's true."

"Convince me. It's less than an hour's drive from here."

"Fine. Let's go." Cassy repositioned the backpack in her lap, her fingers fiddling with the zipper. "I said, let's go, already."

Aaron shook his head, grinning, shifting from reverse into first gear, and drove out of the fraternity parking lot. "You've lived here all your life and you've never been to the ocean? For a runaway, you haven't seen a lot."

"Don't judge me." Cassy twirled a strand of her long hair with her index finger. "I've been plenty of places. Just not the ocean. My father was in the Navy. He hated it. He says he never wants to see the ocean ever again. Convinced?"

"What about with your friends, other families? Didn't—"

"I don't make friends. I'm more of a loner."

"No boyfriends?"

Cassy gave Aaron a hard, sharp look. "Do I look like the kind of person who has boyfriends?"

"Yes. Is there something wrong with you?"

"Let's talk about something else. Or nothing at all."



Cassy went silent as Aaron drove. She was reassessing all the things she had tossed into her backpack. Along with spare clothing and three candy bars, she was glad she brought a knife. It was her brother's prized switchblade, which he showed her once, which he never used, so she stole it. She knew he'd forgive her. He was always looking out for her. Having his knife meant he was somehow there to protect her. That was how she rationalized the theft. She loved her older brother. He would listen to her complaints. Unlike her father, who responded by yelling and grounding her, posting news articles on her bedroom door about girls being raped and murdered, each time she threatened to run away from home.

"What are you running away from?"

The broken silence woke Cassy from her random thoughts.

"From home. Duh."

"Yeah, but why? What's going on? You're only fifteen."

"What does my age have to do with anything?"

"Fair point. Are you being abused at—"

"No. I hate school, for *one*."

"And two?"

Cassy unzipped her backpack. "Two, I hate my father. After I got suspended from high school, twice, he talked my mother into transferring me to an all-girls catholic school, where I'm forced to wear a stupid uniform. If I get kicked out of there, he says they'll place me in a military school for girls. He wants to break me down and strip away all that is me. I despise him. Okay?"

"Why did you get suspended?"

"For cutting school. I snuck off to hear a band play one afternoon at your college. Someone ratted on me. Then, yeah, a teacher caught me getting high in the girls bathroom."

Aaron glanced over at her. "Smoking pot?"

Cassy smirked. "No. Shooting heroin. Yes, smoking a stupid joint. Big deal. But that got me kicked out for good."

"What are you doing?"

Cassy had shifted herself around to lean against the door. In her hand was a pencil. Resting on her backpack was a sketch pad.

"I'm going to draw you."

Aaron glanced over and saw Fern Ridge Lake through the side window where Cassy was resting her head. She didn't seem to notice or care about the passing view, focused solely on him as she moved her pencil very intently across the paper. "So, you're an artist."

"I'm an artist. And you're my subject. Stop looking at me. Eyes on the road."

"We should reach the coast in about thirty minutes."

"I should have you drawn by then."

"How long have you—"

"Stop talking." Cassy brought the pencil to her mouth, biting the eraser as she studied his face. "You have good features."

"Thanks."

"Now keep quiet and stay still while I draw you."



Cassy looked at Aaron, then through the windshield. "Why are we stopping?"

"We have options."

"Options?"

Aaron had pulled off to the side of the road and was pointing at the signs ahead. "Pick a beach. South Jetty Beach, South Siuslaw Jetty, or North Jetty Beach?"

"Which one is the nicest?"

"They're all nice."

“Which is the closest?”

“South Jetty.”

“Let’s go there.”

A few minutes later, Aaron drove the Peugeot onto a portion of the beach, parking the car within a secluded sand dune overlooking the ocean with its breaking waves a short distance away.

She nodded at the view. “Pretty cool.”

“A rather blasé response at seeing the ocean your first time.”

“I lied. I’ve been to the ocean and beaches before.”

“So you’re an artist *and* a liar.”

“Pretty much. That sums me up. Yep.”

Aaron laughed. “Can I see what you drew?”

Cassy handed over her sketch pad.

Aaron’s eyes widened. “Wow. That’s how you see me?”

“No. It’s who you are.”

“You made me look better than I actually am.”

“Nobody sees themselves the way others do. Give it back.”

Aaron began flipping through her sketchbook. “Jesus! Damn, you’re really talented. You drew all these faces?”

Cassy snatched back her drawings. “No. *Jesus* did.”

“I meant it as a compliment.”

“Thanks. I want to get my feet wet. Are you game?”

Cassy unlaced and removed her combat boots, then her socks. She opened the door and ran, hopping over a tuft of grass, and down the gentle slope of sand, screaming wildly and waving her arms.

Aaron sat for a moment, watching as she ran away.

C H A P T E R 3

Aaron walked barefoot in the sand, following after Cassy who was now running back and forth, chasing after the breaking waves. Having rolled up the bottoms of her black jeans, she let the saltwater swirl around her ankles. She danced, splashing herself with abandon, almost maniacally, putting on a show for him. He smiled at her, though wondered what the fuck he was thinking. Driving a fifteen-year-old runaway to the beach. A girl he knew nothing about. Who was she? What was she? She didn't seem quite real.

He questioned his motives. Did he have a motive? It felt more like she was calling the shots, leading him astray, as if hypnotically. He'd been drawn by her strange energy. And, of course, her beauty. She was gorgeous but in a dark and devious, potentially dangerous, embodiment of a mythical spritely water nymph. As he approached her, she startled him by leaping onto his body, grasping him with her arms and legs – like the tentacles of an octopus who were known to be playful and inquisitive. She laughed and let go, dropping back to her feet before he had time to respond or know what to make of her impromptu actions.

He became aroused. She was playing with his emotions. She was teasing him, and he liked it, whatever she was doing. She grabbed his hand, pulling him toward the ocean. He was willing to let her take them both into the waves, underwater, but she stopped short as the saltwater crashed and rushed around their legs, soaking them both. He looked at her shocked expression and they burst into laughter. She squeezed his hand.

“I think I might like you. Look. We have the beach to ourselves. Almost. Now I want to get warm.”

Aaron took note of the overcast sky and the sparsely populated coastline. Cassy held onto his hand, pulling him back toward the car. She kicked at the sand, flinging tiny shells in the air with her toes as they meandered along.

“I’m having fun. This was a good idea of yours.”

“Better than driving to San Francisco?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“Are you still planning on running away?”

“I haven’t decided. I’m living in the moment. So don’t go and burst my bubble of happiness.”



Cassy opened the passenger side door, took her backpack and tossed it into the back. She opened the next door and crawled onto the mattress. “Get in, already. It’s cold outside.”

“My pants are soaking wet.”

“Take them off. What’s the big deal?”

Aaron unbuttoned and stepped out of his jeans. He draped his pants over the rounded hood of his car. He opened the back door and climbed onto the mattress as Cassy whistled comically.

“Look at you in your bright red boxers. We match.”

Cassy had removed her pants and was busy taking out another pair of black jeans from her backpack. She wore red underwear and handed Aaron her wet pants.

“Place mine across the hood too, please.”

Aaron obliged, laying her jeans next to his, then returned.

“The heated metal from the engine plus the sun, when it breaks, might dry them by the end of day.”

“Whatever. Sorry I caused you to wet your pants,” she said, wiggling into her dry spare. “You’re not embarrassed, are you?”

Aaron crawled onto the mattress “Should I be?”

“Do you wanna smoke a joint?”

Cassy removed a hand-rolled cigarette from her backpack as if magically pulling a rabbit from a hat, displaying it theatrically.

“Ta-da! Does your cigarette lighter work? Wait. I think I packed matches too. I did. Super smart of me.”

Sitting on the mattress in his red boxers, Aaron was handed the cannabis after Cassy sucked in smoke, holding her breath.

“Unexpected,” said Aaron, inhaling, coughing, and handing the thinly-rolled spliff back to Cassy.

She blew out a plume of smoke. “What? Us getting high?”

“I get the feeling nothing about you should surprise me.” Aaron smiled and reached for a folded blanket by the rear door and draped it over his legs.

“Getting cold or shy?”

He took another hit of marijuana. “A little of both.”

“No need to be shy.” She drew in more smoke, then pinched the burning end with her thumb and fingertip. “We should save the rest for later. It’s pretty potent.”

Aaron nodded, sensing the intoxicant blossoming exponentially inside his head, suddenly making him self-conscious.

“Hum,” said Cassy. “Want to see something cool? She didn’t wait for his answer as she rummaged inside her pack and took out a narrow black and silver object. “Observe.” She pressed a button and the switchblade sprung to life, startling Aaron’s stoned mental state as he stared at the sharp jack-in-the-box knife.

“*Shit*. What do you have that for?”

“For protection. In case I need to defend myself against some weirdo perv.” She pushed down the blade and slipped the knife into her backpack. Reaching for a pillow to position behind her back, she noticed a small leather bag next to the metal bulge that formed one of the wheel wells. She pointed.

“What’s in there?”

“My camera.”

“You take photos?”

“That’s what a camera does.”

“Wiseass. Let me see. Show me.”

Aaron unzipped the bag and removed his Pentax Spotmatic.

“Is that your major? Photography?”

“More a minor. A hobby. I like to use only natural light.”

“What do you photograph?”

“People, mainly.”

“Take a picture of me. It’s only fair. I drew your face.”

Aaron adjusted the aperture and shutter speed. “The light’s not very good in here.”

“I pulled a knife on you. Now you have to shoot me.”

Aaron grinned and aimed the camera at her. He laughed as she distorted her face. He took her photo. “Come on. I want to capture the real you.”

“This is the real me. Fine.” She dropped her smile and leaned against the car wall, staring back, holding a relaxed pose.

Aaron clicked off several shots.

“What do you study at the college?”

“I got accepted into the School of Architecture.”

“I guess that means you like to design and build things.”

“Pretty much. When I was a kid, I constructed an elaborate tree house in our backyard.”

“Sisters and brothers?”

“I’m an only child.”

Cassy removed two Snickers bars, tossing one to Aaron, then gazed around at their cozy enclosure with its curved roof ceiling and side windows covered with curtains. “I like what you’ve done with the place. What should we do now?”

“Talk?”



Aaron couldn't recall what they talked about – everything and nothing – while ensconced like vagabonds on a semi-isolated beach, the sky overcast with emerging openings of sunlight. The constant voice of the ocean washed rhythmically against the shore the entire time. It seemed to be echoing their raw emotions that poured forth, exposed and unfiltered. They explored each other's minds and bared their souls. Sharing secrets. All that they hated. All that they loved.

Cassy asked, "Do you think there's a god?"

"Probably. There must be something else beyond us."

"Why?"

"Just a feeling. But nothing we can ever comprehend."

"You're saying God is incomprehensible?"

"Exactly," said Aaron. "We're not supposed to know. That's the holy mystery of life. Our inexplicable human conundrum."

"Hum," said Cassy, considering, sucking the last bit of smoke from the roach pinched between her fingernails. "Ouch. Shit." She dropped and crushed out what was left before the remnants burned a hole in the mattress. "No harm. Do you know what I think?"

"I realize I come across as someone who is psychic, but I'm not. So, no, to your question. I have no clue what's going on inside your beautiful head."

"Fuck off," she laughed. "Wait. You think I'm beautiful?"

"Yes. An *ungodly* vision. You are a true beauty."

"I don't see myself as beautiful."

"Well, you are. Now tell me what you were thinking."

"I forgot. No, now I remember. I zoned out for a second. I think I'm really stoned."

"I could have deciphered that."

"If, somehow, we were able to comprehend who and what this thing called god is... like, you know, see God, the meaning of life,

we would go insane.”

“What?”

“Our minds would be blown, unable to handle the truth.”

“Wow. I think you might be right.”

“You don’t think it’s stupid, what I said?”

“No. That’s heavy. I think it’s kind of profound.”

They were reclined against opposite sides of the station wagon, slumped down on the mattress. Cassy reached toward him and took hold of his hand. She stroked his palm with her thumb. Aaron felt his body tingle from her touch, causing a warm sensation to travel up his arm, bursting throughout his body, arousing his heart.

He joked, “Are you a palm reader now?”

“Yes, I am.” She pulled his hand closer, palm raised, her index finger tracing the folds in his skin. “I’m sensing a strong premonition that your pants are dry.”

Aaron laughed and pulled back his hand. “You’re also a tease, aren’t you?”

“Go fetch your pants.”

Aaron removed the blanket covering his legs and swiveled on his rear end to open the door and exit the car.

Cassy cat-whistled. “Amazing ass. A true beauty.”

Aaron glanced back with a curt smile. “Like I said.”

“About me?”



The sun was setting over the ocean. Aaron returned wearing his jeans. He held Cassy’s pants too and tossed them beside her as he climbed back inside. “That did the trick. They’re now toasty warm, thanks to the sun god.”

“Scoot over here. Let me feel.” She placed a hand on his thigh, rubbing the fabric. “When were you planning to kiss me?”

“Is that what you want?”

“I’m never sure what I want. Kiss me. Then I’ll know.”

They leaned toward each other and their lips met. What began as a tentative, exploratory touching of the flesh, quickly turned into a passionate hunger for more. They pulled into one another and fell sideways onto the mattress, pausing a moment to breathe.

“You’re a good kisser,” said Cassy, licking her lips. “This could get us into trouble.”

The waning sunlight broke through an opening in the curtain to shine on Cassy’s eyes. “Do you realize you have the most amazing irises? Iridescent green circled in black. Absolutely stunning.”

“And I just realized you’ve grown bigger since we first met.”

He frowned at her teasing smile. Her fingers touched his swollen crotch and he pulled away.

“We shouldn’t be doing this.”

“Why not?”

“You’re fifteen.”

“I think we’ve established *that*. So what?”

“You’re right. This could lead to trouble.” His thoughts went to statutory rape and the repercussions for acting stupid, for letting his inflamed libido hijack any rational thinking.

Cassy squinted at his reluctance to keep kissing her. “I wasn’t asking you to fuck me. Although. Wait. Are you still a virgin?”

“No.”

“I am. When did you lose your virginity?”

“Why do you want to know?”

“I’m curious. Be honest with me.”

“Sixteen.”

“With who? Your first girlfriend?”

“No. Nothing like that.”

“Like what? Tell me.” She rested her head against her arm.

“At a brothel in the Nevada desert.”

"No. A whore house?"

"Yes."

"What was it like?"

"Jesus, Cassy. I don't know. It was okay. Awkward."

"Not fun?"

"I wouldn't say that. I was drunk. So were my friends. There was talk of his place called Mustang Ranch. So we decided to go and check out what it would be like."

Cassy giggled. "To have sex with a horse?"

"Right." He smiled, shrugging off any embarrassment. "I mean, it was an adventure. The woman was in her thirties. It was over fast. Not very memorable."

"Or romantic? Am I making you uncomfortable?"

"Why would I be uncomfortable talking about my sex life with a fifteen-year-old girl I just met and barely know?"

"You're only four years older than me, Aaron."

"It's like dog years when you're a teenager. And legal penalties, like jail time, when you cross the line for unaccepted behavior."

"For kissing me? Wow. Have you ever had sex with someone your own age?"

"Sure. But with no one I've felt true feelings of love for."

"Like me?" She fluttered her eyelashes.

The realization struck him suddenly. "Yes, actually."

"I've decided I want to lose my virginity to you."

"Cassy."

"Not now. Tonight I just want you to kiss me and tell me you love me. Can we continue doing that?"

"I should be taking you home. Before it gets too late."

"No! Don't burst my happiness bubble. I'm not going home yet. Maybe never."

"Then you'll get us both into trouble."

"My parents aren't worried. I told them I was sleeping over at

a friend's house tonight.”

“You told me you don’t make friends.”

“I have friends.”

“I don’t know what to believe anymore.”

“You can take me home tomorrow morning. I promise.”

“Can I trust you to keep—”

“Yes. Now kiss me and tell me how much you love me. I need you right now. This is for us. To be *memorable*.”

Cassy began to cry. Aaron held her, consoling her as they kissed. He realized, without a doubt, that he had fallen madly in love with this enigma of a girl. It was a passion he had never felt before. There was desperation in her embrace, an exposed vulnerability she’d been concealing, surging now like an opened floodgate. The emotional neediness was a need he sensed in himself too, a need for her love. He didn’t want whatever this was, whatever they had, to ever end. They continued to kiss and snuggle together as if wanting to become one being inside a warm cocoon, kissing late into the night until the early morning came.

C H A P T E R 4

Cassy was silent and sullen on the drive back to Eugene. Unlike the drive to the beach, her eyes avoided Aaron, staring out the side window at the passing scenery. He could feel her unease, her anxiety, her sense of freedom eroding. Aaron felt complicit, as though about to deliver her into police custody to serve a prison sentence.

She was biting her fingernails.

“Did you want to talk?”

“No,” she muttered into the pane of glass.

He saw her tears reflected in the window. She brushed at them furtively with the back of her hand. Her demeanor was the antithesis of the assertive girl he first saw stride into the Sigma Chi fraternity, asking if anyone would drive her to San Francisco.

“I know you wanted to run away from home, Cassy. But that’s extreme. Maybe you can work things out with your dad, if—”

“It’s not your problem, Aaron.”

“I want to help. Should I meet your parents?”

“God, no!” She abruptly turned her head. “Are you crazy? My father would kill you. Then me.”

“You didn’t say you were sleeping over at a friend’s, did you?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

The deflated image of herself came to life as Cassy sucked in air, sat up, and regained her posture. “Fuck it. I can deal with whatever happens. My father doesn’t own me. It’s my life, not his.”

“If you need me, you know where to find me. Here.”

Cassy looked over at Aaron holding out a piece of paper. “It’s the number at the fraternity house. Call me if you need me.”

“I need you.” She took the scrap of paper and stuffed it in her

backpack. "Are we still in love?"

"Undeniably. Somehow we're going to make this work."

"Ha. Says the nineteen-year-old to the fifteen-year-old. Yeah, well, we're almost there."

"What's your street address?"

"Turn here. Then the next left. It's the blue house at the end of the culdesac."

"You're shitting me," said Aaron. "You live only a few blocks away from the Sigma Chi house?"

"Pull up to the curb and drop me off fast."

Aaron stopped the car. Cassy lunged over at him, kissing him on the lips, grabbed her backpack straps, then opened the door. At the sight of a large man standing outside her front door, she froze.

"Get inside this house! Now! Who the hell is that?"

Through the back window, Aaron glimpsed the presumed father pointing at his car, shouting at Cassy. Their voices faded as he drove away and Aaron felt guilt-ridden for abandoning her.



Cassy ran into the house with her father close behind, slamming shut the door. "Stay where you are, young lady!"

Cassy stopped and looked back. "What?"

"Explain yourself. Where the hell have you been?"

"I went to the beach, okay?"

"Not okay! Goddammit, Cassy! You had your mother worried sick not knowing where you were. She had me driving all over town and calling your friends. You can't run off like that."

"Sorry." She turned to walk away.

"Who was he? That man in the car who dropped you off?"

"Just a boy I met."

"Just a *boy* you met? Who?"

“At a fraternity house. We drove to the beach for the day.”

“And stayed the night! Where?”

“We slept in his station wagon. It was no big deal.”

“You’re grounded. Permanently!”

Cassy glanced over at her mother standing by the kitchen, her hand over her mouth. She saw her big brother standing in the hall, remaining silent too, shaking his head.

“Look at me,” said her father. “Did he touch you? Force you to do things?”

“No. Like what?”

“You *know* what, damn it. He turned to his wife. “Mary, phone Doctor Stevens to schedule an emergency vaginal inspection on our daughter now!”

“No!” screamed Cassy. “Dad, nothing happened!”

“I don’t believe you. I want his name.”

“Who?”

“The one you *slept* with.”

“We didn’t have sex! We *kissed*, that’s all.”

“I’m through with you, Cassy. Be a tramp, for all I care.” He slammed his fist against the wall. “Mary, you deal with our little slut of a daughter. I’m finished with her.”

“I hate you! I was running away from home. That’s right. I was. And I should have *never* come back!”

Her father stared at her, dismissively.

“But Aaron, he talked me into returning.”

“His name is Aaron? I want a last name.”

“Fuck you!” Cassy ran down the hall, past her brother, and opened her bedroom door, glancing back. “Aaron’s sweet and funny. A good person. A better person than you’ll ever be! I hate you!”

She slammed her door shut.

“God damn you!”

Her father was stopped by her brother who stood in his way, his

hand held out. At six foot three, Victor looked down at his father. As if to a child throwing a tantrum, he calmly said, "Dad, let Mom talk to Cassy. Okay? What you're doing isn't helping."

Their father chewed at his lower lip, then moved away.



Cassy heard a quiet knocking on her bedroom door.

"Go away! Leave me alone!"

"Cassy? It's only me."

Her mother found Cassy lying face down on her bed crying into her pillow, the backpack thrown onto the floor. Mary sat on the edge of the bed, touching her daughter, rubbing her back.

"Tell me what happened?"

"Nothing. *Nothing* happened. Aaron was good to me."

"I believe you, Birdie."

Cassy looked up from her pillow, at the sound of her pet name spoken, the one her mother used to call her when she was a child learning to walk, riding a bike, climbing a tree. She smiled, wiping snot from her nose. "I'm sorry I made you worry."

"I know you want to fly away. But you're still so young. Stay in the nest a little longer. Please?"

"Why is Dad so mean? He's the one who makes me want to run away from home."

"He wasn't always like this."

"The tumor, you mean?"

Mary nodded. "Try to remember how your daddy used to be. How lovely he was before the operation. He lost everything, Cassy. Try to understand how that can change a proud man like your father. He owned and ran that auto dealership where he's now a salesman, who isn't good with people anymore. The new owners, his previous employees, keep him employed out of loyalty for who he

once was. Imagine that kind of loss. He still loves you. He doesn't know how to give that right kind of love anymore."

Cassy tried to imagine an alternative world, one where she lived within a happy family, in which her father hadn't been lobotomized, and now half-functioning like he belonged to the walking dead.

"I hate going to that stupid new school."

"I know you do. Just try your best to stay out of more trouble. Your wild behavior is not helping the situation. It only adds fuel to the fire. Understand? I will try to reason with your father."

Her mom kissed her forehead and left.

Cassy rolled onto her back and stared at the blank ceiling. She looked at the bare white walls. She hadn't even bothered to hang any posters after they moved into this soulless tract house when they lost their other house. She spread her arms across the bed, imagining the images of Jesus displayed crucified on crosses, painted on the school walls, also carved into statues with his tortured expression looking down on all the girls passing in their uniforms of pleated skirts and starched-white blouses. She pictured the sight of them like insects, seen from above, walking in crazy-eight patterns around the campus, their minds being filled with illusions of a perfect world, somewhere inside an invented heaven, if only they prayed to a God and believed. She wanted to scream. She was on the verge of more tears when she heard another knock.

"Go away."

"No way, Sis," said her brother in a deep voice as he entered her room. He raised his arms like Frankenstein's monster, making her laugh, recalling the memories of her towering brother mechanically chasing her around the house. He sat on the corner of her bed.

"You really know how to push Dad's button and set him off."

"Hi, Vic. I stole your switchblade. Forgive me?"

"Keep it if you want."

"When do you leave to work at that ski resort in Tahoe?"

"In a couple weeks."

"You won't be here to protect me then."

"You won't need me. Dad's all bluff. He's not going to hurt you. Plus, you now have my knife."

Cassy grinned. Victor lightly squeezed her ankle.

"So tell me about this guy you slept with."

"Fuck off. We just kissed."

"Was he any good?"

Cassy closed her eyes. "He was better than good."



After the solitude of the ocean and the warm embrace of Cassy, the taste of her lips fresh in his mind, Aaron entered the din of the fraternity house, which sounded like an institutional insane asylum. Breakfast was being served in the mess hall and the racket assaulted his senses. He avoided saying anything to anyone as he ran two steps at a time up the stairs to the room he shared, desks and mattresses at opposite sides of the walls.

His roommate's first words were, "What the hell, man?"

"Good to see you too, Brad."

"You took that fifteen-year old somewhere, didn't you?"

"We went to the beach."

"Are you out of your fucking mind?"

"Apparently." He tried to lighten things. "Jury's still out."

"I'm serious. Her father came here looking for her, and asking questions. I said I knew nothing about any missing girl. But Harvey said he saw her leave with you."

"I dropped her off at her house a few minutes ago."

"Expect the cops to be showing up anytime soon."

"Nothing happened. We didn't have sex or anything."

"Tell that to the police. Then to a jury."

Aaron began to pace. "Fuck. I *am* an idiot."

"What if she lies, and tells them an opposite story?"

"Cassy wouldn't do that."

"Cassy?" Brad huffed. "You trust that girl not to lie?"

"Fuck. Fuck. *Fuck*."

"That's a word I'd avoid using when you're questioned."

Aaron broke into a sweat. He collapsed upon the floor mattress he called his bed. He shut his eyes and felt sick to his stomach. All that had tasted so pure and sweet before turned sour. He mentally fought against the negativity, refusing to believe what he'd done and how he felt for Cassy was wrong. He wondered, is this why it's called being madly in love?

He closed his eyes and prayed to a god who he wasn't convinced even existed. One that was incomprehensible.



The subsequent weekdays and his college courses went by in a distracted blur. He was incapable of concentrating during his classes or participating in any conversations. In the first days after dropping Cassy off, he worried about being summoned by the police. By the end of the week, he worried that Cassy would never call him.

"No calls from your jail-bait chick?"

Brad's sarcasm, seeing Aaron's face, changed to concern.

"Hey, man. I'm no shrink, but you need to do something. This is destroying you. You know where she lives. Act on it."

Come Saturday, Aaron drove to her blue house. He sat in his car a full minute before pushing himself, resolving to walk up and ring the doorbell. A woman answered the door.

"Hi," he said. "Is Cassy home?"

Her eyes filled with tears. "No, Cassandra is not. She's gone."

"What do you mean, gone?"

“Who are you?”

A man pushed past her in the doorway.

“You’re him, aren’t you? The prick that abducted her before.”

“I never abducted your daughter, Sir.”

“I’m her father. I should have you arrested, you little shit!”

“L-listen,” Aaron stammered. “I don’t know what’s going on. Is she alright?”

Another man, the brother, Aaron assumed, taller than both his parents, gently nudged and squeezed past to be in front.

“Are you Aaron?”

“That’s right.”

“You should come inside. You need to come inside. Please.”



Aaron found himself sitting on a sofa, staring across at Cassy’s family who were staring back at him.

“Can I get you something?”

“This isn’t a fucking social visit, Mary. We’re looking to find answers. Cassy’s been gone for three days now!”

“She left a note this time. I’m her brother, Victor.”

“What did she write?”

“None of your fucking business!”

“Dad. Stop it,” scolded Victor. “This isn’t helping.”

There was something wrong with the father, mentally, Aaron ascertained. He wasn’t normal, somehow. His focus tended to drift, distracted by something unseen, as if registering some voice inside his head. He glared at Aaron. “What did you say to me?”

“I didn’t say anything.” Aaron’s palms began to sweat.

The mother seemed at a loss for words, wiping at tears.

Victor reached into his coat pocket and handed Aaron a folded piece of paper. Aaron saw handwriting scribbled in black ink upon

opening the textured paper. He recognized it to be a page torn from Cassy's sketchbook. He looked down to read the words:

*I have run away.
Do not try to find me.
I will not be found.
I have left home for good.
I will always love you Mom,
you are wonderful.
I do not hate you Dad,
for I know you cannot help
being who you are,
and can never be again
who you were.
Victor,
you have always been
my rock of strength,
forever keeping me grounded,
happy, and safe.
Do not blame Aaron
for my disappearance
or ask him where I have gone
because he won't know.
I love you all.
Goodbye,
Cassy*

Aaron looked up from her letter. Cassy's father was muttering to his wife about something, looking befuddled, standing up.

"What did she mean by that? I can't help being who I am. And will never be who I was. It makes no sense. Jesus, Mary, what are we going to do? Our baby girl left us!" Confusion and anger filled his

watery eyes. He looked down at Aaron. "This is your damned fault! I don't believe what she wrote about you. Where is she?"

Aaron was numb from shock that Cassy had left him too and handed the letter back to Victor. He knew where Cassy had run off to. San Francisco. It was obvious to him. "I don't know, Sir."

"Liar. Liar!" He stormed away, kicking over an ottoman stool. Mary followed after her husband down the hallway.

Left alone with her brother, Aaron didn't know what to say, or what he would do with himself now. He felt lost. Victor's brooding, resolute eyes were thoughtfully scrutinizing Aaron.

"I can see it now. What she saw in you."

Aaron squinted, looking at her brother's steady smile.

"The McQueen thing. Except I think you're more like a Dean. Aaron, try not to be angry with Cassy and go nuts, okay?"

Same age, but her brother seemed older and wiser than himself. Victor was big, solid, and kind hearted. A loving brother who cared deeply for his sister. He was accepting, resigned to the fact that Cassy had chosen to go, leaving them all behind. Aaron, by contrast, was not so sure about himself, if he could live with this emptiness, this feeling of loss, and find a way to be okay.

Victor told him, "I knew she'd do it, eventually. Cassy's always been headstrong. Free-spirited. Wildly independent. I'm sad, but I trust she'll figure things out and be fine. If it's any consolation, we talked. She told me all about you. She really liked you a lot."

"I thought we had more than that. I really truly loved her."

Victor placed his large hand on Aaron's shoulder.

"I know. Cassy can do that to you."

PART 2