

PUNISHMENT WITH KISSES

by

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CHAPTER ONE

I thought that summer was all about my sister's murder, but looking back I realize it was all about me. It has always been all about me. I just didn't realize it back then. When I was driving home from Tulane, I had no idea of the journey I was about to embark on. And while that voyage would take place internally, it was still far more arduous than my meandering return from college, when I was crisscrossing state lines and binge eating at truck stops and fantasizing about being ravished by lady truckers, all as a sort of psycho-celebration of my four years of fruition that came with my English degree. Back then, I was a brand spankin' new graduate with a cascading sense of self that seemed to dissolve and reappear at inappropriate times, like when I was naked or hitting on high school boys just to toy with them. I knew nothing.

Standing on Father's property five years later, knee deep in a colorful pile of leaves, the final vestiges of fall clinging to bare branches of the trees overhead, my days of college partying are distant memories. And the concerns I had then I now realize were utterly trivial. How selfish and immature I was that summer. As the final days of my sister's life trickled away, I allowed my own insecurities and petty sibling rivalry to keep me from sharing those days with her.

If I had only taken the time then to get to know her, I might

have prevented her murder. I certainly would never have needed to descend into the darkness myself, spelunking like a cave explorer into my sister's secret life, and nearly getting trapped in the dank and shadowy fissures I stumbled into in search of her murderer. The truth is, I lost my way in that labyrinth and I might have lost my very soul if I hadn't discovered the one thing I least expected—true love.

Now, as I peered inside the pool house, my eyes prickled with the sting of tears. Though it's been unused since the night Ash was killed—and any trace of her has long since been removed—it still looks exactly as it did before she died. The fluid lines of the antique Queen Anne table were an ironic juxtaposition next to the Ikea Tylösand couch—the combo my sister used to jokingly call my stepmother Tabitha's Swedish-Amish-Americana design style.

In those days, I was so caught up in my own jealous anxiety I failed to notice that even while she was still alive Ash never seemed to be a part of her surroundings. It was as if she were floating atop them, moving through everything—furniture, people, life—as if she were a mere ghostly apparition. And yet, while she was living on the surface, never embracing us, it was as though life couldn't help but absorb her. Everyone she met seemed to be changed somehow by the experience, by her very presence.

Though it's drained for the oncoming winter and littered with piles of withered crimson and gold leaves, the pool still reminds me of Ash, too. One squint of my eyes and I can still imagine her next to it, sprawled on a lounge chair, slathered in Hawaiian Tropic tanning oil, the scent of evaporating coconut wafting through the air, admirers and margaritas by her side. She was all coy smiles and forced laughter, swimming in a sea of sex, sun, and pulchritude. No one, least of all me, seemed to notice she was drowning.

I was tempted to dip my hand in the pool, to scoop up a handful of damp leaves, no doubt coated on the underside with a

fine mist of sludge, and play a modern version of “loves me not.” Except I’d replace *love* with *forgive*. In the last five years, I’ve thought of nothing more than whether my sister would forgive me for failing her in her final days. I was so green, like the delicate buds that emerge from the tree limbs in the warm days of spring. I was so fresh from college and so riddled with my own baggage that I could never see Ash for who she was, only who I imagined her to be. Even now, I don’t know that I understand entirely what happened, or why. How culpable was I in her death? I don’t know that I will ever know for certain. I don’t know if I want to.

What I do know is that I’ve spent the last half decade mourning a sister I was too selfish to really know and feeling nothing but regret about how I treated her. This shame and guilt was a logjam in my life, stalling my personal relationships and my career. I had pissed off employers and lovers with equal casualness, and until I hit my stride in therapy it looked like I was going to die an angry, two-timing coffee jockey instead of becoming the person I am.

Closure. It’s a mythical word. And almost impossible to find.

“Megan!” Our housekeeper Maria woke me from my reverie. She must have spied me through the greenhouse doors. “I didn’t know you’d be home today. Are you here for the weekend? Come inside. Do you need help with your bags?” Maria gushed with questions, lobbing each out rapid fire like a dart on a barroom wall before I even had a chance to open my mouth. She didn’t know the full story. How could she? I was barely able to understand it myself. I do know, like many tragedies, it all started with sex—which meant different things to Ash and me.



That summer I came home, I wasn’t a virgin, but I certainly wasn’t the woman around town my sister Ash was. I’d spent most of college with my nose in a book, save for those few nights with

Terra Moscovitz, which began innocently enough with us in her dorm room dry humping each other after a Take Back the Night rally that devolved into so much more. I'm not sure what it was about anti-rape rallies, but they certainly seemed to make Terra horny. Sadly, her girlfriend was around half the time, which meant I got leftover, hand-me-down sex—but I was happy to have it.

Sex with Terra was fast and brash and all consuming, the kind that popular culture tells us women don't like to have. She could wield a strap-on like it was an extension of her body, and I guess in Terra's case, with the frequency with which she wielded it, it probably was.

Terra was one of only three lovers I had while away at college. Terra, Andrea, and Mark. Andrea wore heavy kohl eyeliner and black turtlenecks year round. She regularly drank bathtub gin, forgot her bipolar meds daily, and frequently told me, *in flagrante*, that when it came to lovemaking, I would never please another woman. Since I could never please *her* during our brief, clumsy encounters, I began to suspect she was right. Why *were* women so hard to please?

That question, of course, led me to Mark, the hairy pre-med student who wasn't hard to please at all. After a few minutes of kissing, when he'd shove his tongue down my throat until I choked, I'd pop off my bra—because his thick fingers seemed too clumsy to handle the small clasps—and well, Mark would pop off too. I think he made it inside me only once during our frequent attempts. The rest of the time he left the field before I even got to the game. It was nice being wanted—and more than that, being so exciting to a partner that he couldn't even wait for the main act—after Terra's unavailability and Andrea's unkind endorsements—but even when Mark was there for me, there was no thrill in the moment.

His facial hair hurt everything it touched, particularly my nether regions where it seemed to attach to—and rip away from—my personal undergrowth as though it were Velcro. His knowledge of female anatomy was alarming, especially for

someone planning to become a doctor. The last time he went down on me, giving my nappy dugout sloppy circular kisses that missed the mark every single repetition—*God, why couldn't he find my clitoris?*—he gave up, breathless and exhausted before I'd begun to feel even a twinge of desire. I gyrated my hips left and right and yanked him into position by his hair, but *nothing* seemed to work.

Which led me back to Terra's embrace and her sloppy strap-on seconds. It was enough to drive me to the brink of ecstasy each time, even though she shoved me out of bed the minute we finished so I'd escape before her girlfriend returned. I think it was a thrill for Terra, the fear of getting caught, but it would've been nice, just once, to lie there for a moment after we finished, basking in the rush of blood to my head, the sweat pooling between us, gazing at her flushed face and sticky smile.

Alas, with graduation upon us, Terra went east and I went west, and the next time I heard from her was alongside a wedding announcement, heralding the Massachusetts nuptials of her and the girlfriend. Why is it that the biggest cheaters are the quickest to jump on the wedding bandwagon? Is there excitement in the challenge of commitment? Is it even more thrilling to cheat after you've said *I do*?

My journey to love took a lot longer than Terra's. My long, circuitous drive home to Lake Oswego offered a psychic buffer, the spiritual cleansing I needed before submitting to an entire summer in close proximity with a family I considered toxic. Against all evidence to the contrary, I still hoped that maybe *this* would be the summer my sister Ash and I rekindled the relationship we'd had years ago, when we were both pre-teens. Back when our mother was still alive. Back before Father took a child bride and Ash was a college dropout, before all our paths diverged in such nuanced ways.

Little did I know then the twists and turns my personal, psychological journey would take—around dangerous curves, over treacherous roads, down dark alleys and dead-end streets—

or that by the time I reached my destination, my relationship with myself, my sexuality, and my family would be forever altered.



“I don’t fucking care what you think!” Ash yelled, her top completely naked, the bottom of her bikini riding up around her ass. She flaunted her body just to hurt me, to remind me that compared to her ample bosoms and perfectly proportioned bottom, I had the body of an ogre.

Ashley always was the beautiful one, a woman every man wanted. Every woman wanted her too, I was sure, though they were probably more cautious about admitting it. Ash—as I’d called her since we were kids—seemed to sense early on what power her allure would hold over others. As soon as she hit puberty, Ash was wielding her sexuality like a modern-day Lolita. I envied her confidence. I was always zit faced and fatter than the other kids, developing love handles before I got boobs, and even then there was a pudgy roundness about me that still looked unformed well into my college years. But Ash sprang from sixth grade a full-fledged woman, a sexual Pied Piper with a legion of fans who would gladly do her bidding merely for a chance to be near her.

Ash seemed to have no shame when it came to displaying her body. She had no qualms about being nearly nude, save for a tiny black bikini thong, even when standing in the kitchen, with the cook and our maid Maria and the gardener whose name I didn’t know then. Worse, Ash seemed equally comfortable exposed in front of me and our father and his wife Tabitha—who I then thought of as the stepmonster—who was no longer a child bride but, at twenty-eight, was still just two years older than Ash. Father was absolutely enraged by each and every spectacle involving his exhibitionist nymph of a daughter.

Indeed, at this moment, our father, Bradford Caulfield, a man usually so rigid and silent we hardly noticed his appearance,

had beads of perspiration rolling down the sides of his contorted face, one thin blue vein bulging below his collar, hidden mostly by the formal shirtsleeves he was wearing. His fists were balled up at his sides.

“If you continue down this path of moral bankruptcy, Ashley Spencer Caulfield, you *will* regret it.”

The threat could be taken as nothing but that. Except pigheaded Ash couldn't have cared less. As Father raged on, threatening her rather malevolently, Ash started fighting back, almost berating him like an ex-lover, while Tabitha, usually so flighty and flirty, stared on doe-eyed and aghast.

It was just another day in Casa de Caulfield. But maybe this time Ash had crossed the line.

“Listen, Daddy-O, my sexuality is my own damn business. It's not yours to control.” Ash said each word in a constrained manner. Too much weed, probably, slowing down her reflexes.

“This is my house and I won't have you swimming naked in front of the help and whoring around with an endless parade of misfits and freaks. For fuck's sake, Ashley, what are you thinking? This will be all over town and then you'll never get in the Junior League.”

Ash doubled over laughing. It was maniacal the way she responded to Father's reprimand. The coercion that would make me back down always emboldened Ash. Today was no different.

“Oh yes, must not upset the frigid bitches of the society pages—” Ash began. She clearly didn't care about the Junior League, and I was surprised that Father hadn't already surmised it.

He cut her off. “That's it. You're out of the house. If you're going to behave like a pig, you can move into the pool house. Let's see how you like living in eight hundred square feet with no one to serve you.” Father made the pronouncement as though sentencing Ash to the confines of a small shed, not a vacation cabana with its own Olympic-size swimming pool. That's the way things worked when you were the golden child. If these were

criminal proceedings, Ashley Caulfield would have just been sent to a ritzy, resort-like white-collar minimum security prison. If the shoe was on the other foot, and it was me in that position, I'm certain the ruling would be completely different. I'd be sent straight to Sing Sing.

Ash stared at him for a minute, as though pausing to catch up with what he was saying, or simply planning out her summer of fun. Then she turned and left, casting one last snide comment over her shoulder. "Oh, Father, don't be silly. *I* won't have any problem finding someone to service me."



The next day half a dozen people arrived and began moving Ash's belongings into the pool house. I was still pissed off at Ash for ruining my homecoming and for putting a kibosh on any chance of the two of us bonding before I headed to grad school or out into the real world—I wasn't exactly sure yet which course I was going to take. Ash's acts of selfish defiance also effectively eliminated any chance I could have the summer I'd dreamt of, lounging by the pool myself.

With her banishment to the cabana Father established a no-fly zone, a walled East Berlin in the center of our property. To cross the border between our house and the pool would now be seen by Father as an act of treason, an announcement of my alliance with his sworn enemy. The retaliation would be swift and severe. And with the pool house already occupied by his favorite child, God knows what would happen to me. I imagined being kicked to the curb, sent away in a cab, never allowed to return.

It was too dangerous to risk, even for a summer of deep tanning and refreshing dips in the cool blue-green water. But I was still pissed. This was my last summer at home and now I was stuck spending it all indoors, trapped inside with a pissed-off father and Tabitha, the stepmonster, who I'd never managed to get close to, even though we're not that far apart in age.

Within hours of Ash's dramatic departure from the main house, there was a wild party raging by the pool. From the balcony of my second-floor room, I could not help but see all the beautiful people wandering in and out of the pool house, some drinking, others just sunning themselves. I didn't need to find Ash in the crowd to know there would be people bunched around her, toadying all over her.

I stepped back into my room and shut the sliding doors. Ash could have her little tantrums. I was going to ignore her and her escalating war with Father by thrusting myself into all the novels I'd brought home with me. Dorothy Allison, Jewel Gomez, and Michelle Tea. These authors were like good friends I could call on for all-night gab sessions. Their words gave me the kind of excitement I wasn't finding at home and reminded me why I loved to be immersed in fiction instead of real life. A good novel is like a current that sweeps you up and carries you away from the real world to a magical land where you get to let yourself go and delve into the lives of people far more interesting than you.

With Michelle Tea's *Valencia* in hand, I stretched out across my four-poster bed, nestled in the down comforter that should be too hot for this time of year, but somehow felt cool beneath me, and let the story pull me into a fantasy world. For the first two days home I was so engrossed that I barely moved—occasionally rolling from my back to my stomach to prevent bedsores, and rising only for bathroom breaks or to go downstairs for the requisite meals.

Loud voices and laughter wafting up from the pool house interrupted my reverie. I tried to ignore the noise, but I couldn't shake my curiosity. Who was out there and what were they doing? It wouldn't hurt to stretch my legs.

Not wanting to damage the book's spine, I carefully slid a piece of paper in to hold my place and set it on my bedside table. My legs were spongy with sleep, and when I put my weight down they caved under me. I grabbed on to one of the smooth, hand-carved posts and managed to stay upright. I used the furniture

as crutches while I stumbled across the room, going from bed to desk and outside to the railing of the balcony.

Fortunately, my land legs returned, because the minute I stepped outside I was blinded by the light and instinctively raised a hand to shield my pupils from the excruciating brilliance of the midday sun. When my eyes finally adjusted to the brightness, I was not surprised to see Ash wearing nothing but bikini bottoms, floating on a giant inflatable bed in the middle of our pool. She wasn't alone. A man wearing shorts and a T-shirt, and a woman with an old-fashioned one-piece suit were taking turns stroking Ash in the guise of applying sunscreen. Their movements rocked the raft and splashed water onto Ash, who shrieked theatrically. I looked around to see who was playing audience to her show. Our gardener, whose name I still couldn't pronounce, was skulking behind the hedges, pretending to trim them while peering over at Ash and her strange friends floating in the aquamarine water. She was probably trying to give the old guy a heart attack.

I was appalled at her complete lack of decorum, and angry with myself for falling for Ash's exhibitionism. She was probably out there laughing louder and louder, calculating what decibel would bring Father or me to a window. Ash was like a child having a tantrum, stamping her foot and yelling, "Look at me, look at me," to get attention.

To hell with her. *Valencia* was waiting, full of the kind of clever prose I loved to read in literature classes but had never yet managed to write myself. Tea's words saturated my mind like rain falling through slats on a barn roof. Sometimes I read lines aloud, letting the words linger on my tongue, rolling them around my mouth, tasting them with the different sensors—sweet, sour, salty. I adored her words, and I turned them over and over in my head as the day began to slip into evening, oblivious to the party still going on.

A scream interrupted me. I spit out Tea's words and tossed her book aside before racing out to the balcony again. Ash was out of the water but standing by the pool, now with a different

duo: the woman from earlier today and a new man. I wanted to stare, to see what the hell they were up to that elicited the shriek I'd just heard. But I was afraid Ash would catch me at it, and I didn't want to give her the satisfaction of knowing she'd gotten my attention *again*. And knowing her, Ash would just call me a pervert and tell Father I was spying on her, just to get me in trouble.

She was always doing things like that when we were younger. I remember one time when we were kids and Ash was in trouble for something—I don't remember what, since usually it seemed like she could do no wrong. But I do remember Ash had been sent to her room alone. Even back then Ash couldn't stand to be alone. She cracked open her door and stood there whispering my name until I came to see what the fuss was.

Then Ash looked me right in the eyes and slammed her hand in the door. On purpose. She broke two of her fingers and had to go to the hospital. But her plaintive wails brought Father running and her lies convinced him I'd been responsible. Ash was released from solitary and I took her place in the doghouse, so it was a win-win situation all around for her.

I didn't want to give her that kind of satisfaction now, so instead I grabbed the pair of odd binocular-like sunglasses that were an expensive good-bye gift from Mark, who somehow thought bird watching might bring me solace in his post-graduation absence. I'd never watched a bird in my life, and I didn't intend to start, but I had realized that the spectacles appeared to others as simply a pair of peculiar looking sunglasses. No one would notice me people watching from my room, though with these telescoping super-strength lenses I could practically see every pore, every hair on each person's body.

I could stoically relax on my balcony, sit in my reclining redwood patio lounge holding my novel, and peer over the pages at Ash and what I was beginning to suspect was a constant parade of lovers. I felt simultaneously intrigued and repelled by the sight of so many of them fawning over my sister like she was an

adorable but doomed SPCA puppy begging for a home. What did Ash offer that turned normally independent people into simpering fools? If I paid close attention, would I catch a glimpse of her secret ingredient? Was it something intrinsic to her soul or could I apply it like a glossy lipstick? Could it magically transform me externally, the way Tea's words did in my mind?

Ash had always enchanted other people. When we were young girls being trotted out at Father's cocktail parties for show and tell, the partygoers would always gather around sweet, pig-tailed Ash. At one of Father's office holiday parties, when Ash was maybe eight or nine, she got on stage while the band was on a break and announced that she had a special treat for the audience. She was dressed in a little red velvet pantsuit with white fur trim that my mother must have helped her pick out. I was still too terrified to speak to people unless forced, and so I stood there, slack jawed, as enamored of my sister as the rest of the audience. She was everything I wanted to be, back then and still now. Beautiful, smart, charming, and truly unafraid of anything. At the party, I kept hiding below the buffet table, stuffing my face and wondering how soon I could get out of there while Ash was charming the pants off of Father's colleagues.

Soon all eyes were on Ash as a band member handed her a microphone and she started belting out a perfect rendition of "Santa Baby." We'd been singing Christmas carols in front of the mirror in our underwear for weeks, karaoke style, so we both knew every single word. But watching Ash up there, I realized that she brought something to the song I never could. We weren't even teenagers yet, but there was something faintly womanly about Ash, like a twenty-year-old trapped in a nine-year-old's body. All eyes were on her as she winked and smiled and sang in a Betty Boop tone. When she finished, the crowd applauded and gushed and Father beamed with pride.

For years afterward, I would think of that party, of how Ash could walk into any situation and charm people. She would sometimes take me under her wing, telling me how to make an

entrance like she did, but just as often she'd mock me or push me aside when others were around. Always, we seemed to be competing for Father's affection, and always, Ash won.

Even in our family, I seemed to be on the outside of Ash's world, looking on as everyone fluttered around her, flitting about and marveling.

So that summer I pretended to be a birdwatcher looking for that endangered species. I pretended I was an anthropologist observing a foreign culture, longing to learn the sacred rituals of a society I could never truly enter.