Crush

A novel by

Ada Calhoun

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a novel

ADA CALHOUN

VIKING

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For the love of my life

Every man has had one or two moments of extraordinary experience, has met his soul, has thought of something which he never afterwards forgot, and which revised all his speech and moulded all his forms of thought.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

At the edge of the abyss he clings to pencils.

—Elias Canetti

ONE

To Crave and to Have

"We don't have to do anything," he said.

The first time I played Seven Minutes in Heaven at a party, I was locked in a closet with a boy I had a crush on. Romance in that era often involved vaguely sociopathic party games.

By the light of a blue bulb, I could see my classmate's wide-open eyes.

"I haven't kissed anybody before," he mumbled, with the shame usually reserved for having killed someone.

"Me either," I said, though I'd conducted a frame-by-frame analysis of the garage scene in *Some Kind of Wonderful*.

I reached out and found his face. His hand settled on my waist.

He was breathing quietly, like he feared waking a light sleeper. And then my mouth was on his. Soon we were pulling each other close, pushing hanging coats aside and sending empty hangers skidding across the dowel. We didn't know what to do, but our bodies did.

Then the door whooshed open. We squinted into the rec-room lights, Whitney Houston on the boom box. Our classmates, awaiting their turns, poured soda from two-liter bottles and trailed chips through ranch dip.

Thanks to that poorly chaperoned middle-school party, I discovered a whole new category of person, separate from friends and family: boys who would kiss me in closets.

I liked making out with them too much though. Later that year I was called a slut for kissing, in the span of three months, three boys—who, granted, formed a significant percentage of the class given the size of our school.

The social retribution for having succumbed to lust taught me one of the highest-stakes lessons of womanhood: Desire must be negotiated like furniture that's too big for the room. As I gradually rebuilt my reputation as a good girl—someone who was craved without craving—the lab report headline became, *How can I get what I want without actually having it?*

In high school I acquired an affable, stable boyfriend with whom I could enjoy state-sanctioned adolescent monogamy. I knew I wanted more, and I also knew that bad things happened to women who tried to find it.

In my Women's Literature elective, I underlined a passage in Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*. It described just the sort of elegant self-denial to which I aspired: "To crave and to have are as like as a thing and its shadow. For when does a berry break upon the tongue as sweetly as when one longs to taste it…"

Wanting could be as good as having—even *better*? If true, that would solve a lot of problems.

By college, I'd found a way to have without holding, and that was flirting. This created energy without causing trouble, like a rolling boil in a lidded pot. I had a few crushes going all the time. There'd be one or two on the back burner simmering, a few in the freezer that could be stuck in the oven at 350 and ready to go in thirty minutes. A gift for devoting time and energy to not getting what I wanted is nothing to be proud of, so I don't think it's bragging to say that I became extremely good at it.

My astronomy survey course professor called me on the phone at night to talk about space and complain about his girlfriend. A news anchor texted me song lyrics while he was live on the air. I wasn't good at sports, cooking, singing, penmanship, or decorating. But I could look at a man in a way that made him drop his papers.

If fandom involves the fantasy that someone speaking to millions of people is actually just talking to you, that sense of specialness is also the gift of a crush: a hand held under a table, a look exchanged at a party, made more sublime by the excruciating pleasure of not letting it go any further.

This was true when I was single and truer when I met, in my senior year of college, the man who would become my husband. I felt lucky to have found Paul, a basketball forward who found time both to record his own music and to make sculptures in the school's pottery studio. With the sturdy good looks of the clean-cut former athlete who still goes running twice a week, he'd always been confident enough to find my crushes charming rather than a threat. And so I could enjoy other men's attention and still avoid betrayal.

"You've got a Lamborghini engine for flirting," he said. After I'd chatted at a party with a friend of his, Paul looked at me with admiration. "Jesus, what did you do to him? He never talks. But with you, suddenly he's a Civil War general, all"—in a thick Southern accent—" 'Well, I declare, milady! Might I have the great privilege of accompanying ye to the Orange Blossom Cotillion?' "

I'm not saying I'm physically attractive; let's get that out of the way right now. Because that's another important lesson of womanhood: never act like you think you're hot. Appearance and seduction are unrelated anyway. Plenty of stunning people can't flirt; supposedly ugly people seduce the world all the time. When it comes to sex appeal, confidence trumps looks. Maybe models rule Hollywood, but the rest of the world belongs to the self-assured and medium pretty.

For a long time, flirting made me feel more curious and excited and ambitious—engaged, interested, available for friendship. I felt seen in new ways. Portals opened to other worlds and new playlists. Sometimes it was a tightrope act—keeping crushes from becoming serious, harnessing the heat they provided without becoming consumed by it. But I had done my ten thousand hours of practice and was an expert.

This skill served me well as a reporter and then as a ghostwriter. I also wrote books under my own name, some of which sold well enough to warrant book tours but not quite well enough to let me afford nice furniture. The main thing I'd learned from my day job: People like being asked questions. That was most of what I did all day, interviewing people. When occasionally interviewed myself, I'd try to turn inquiries back on the

questioner so that by the end I'd know as much about them as they did about me.

There's a song from 1978 called "Another Girl, Another Planet." On one book tour I listened to that song every day. I thought of myself as a clutch baseball player, with that song as my walk-up music. Originally by The Only Ones but covered often, including by my favorite band, the Replacements, the song is probably about heroin—all songs from 1978 are about heroin—but I like to think it's about crushes too: "You get under my skin / I don't find it irritating."

Years ago, I pitched a book on the cultural history of the crush. No editor wanted it, despite my calling it a "cultural history," which at the time felt like a publishing skeleton key. Bookstore tables teemed with cultural histories—of crying, cheese, military formations, salt. But everyone I pitched said the same thing: *Are you insane? Crushes break your heart! They're dangerous, destabilizing, weird!*

I said they must be doing it wrong. Crushes were how you stayed a little bit in love with the world even though you had a husband. They let you sort of have more than one man without society condemning you. They let berries break upon your tongue even when you had no berries. And how safe a feeling it was inside one relationship to imagine other men stacked around protectively, like sandbags. By cultivating a deep bench of break-glass-in-case-of-emergency suitors, I was prepared for romantic disaster, just as I stayed primed to administer aid by reupping my Red Cross certification every two years and carrying Narcan.

I could feel longing, feel it *hard*, without believing there were implications. I scoffed at people who were led around by their feelings like leashed dogs. And I did not feel deprived, or mourn what I lacked. In my fantasies, as long as those other people stayed in my head, I could be voracious while remaining faithful. I wasn't the kind of person who cheated, so only this shadowland was available, and it was enough.

I felt lucky that unlike so many of my friends, I was still sleeping with my husband. We'd always been compatible in that way if not so much in terms

of kissing. Our spark came instead from bantering that quickly led to sex so technically proficient it was semiprofessional. What little compatibility we had in terms of foreplay faded over time. We didn't make out at all anymore and just cut to what we did do well. Only occasionally did "The Shoop Shoop Song (It's in His Kiss)" make me nervous.

I made certain sacrifices for my relationship, as everyone does. Paul wanted to live a creative life, which had at various times meant sculpting with clay, playing guitar, and painting. To make space for his life as an artist he had never pursued a career, though he DJ'd and helped out with friends' plays, and sometimes bartended.

He also didn't want more children once we had our son, Nate. And so I gave up on my desire to have a big family. In this, too, I found ways to enjoy what I didn't have. I spent time with other people's children. I gave them presents at the holidays and kept toys for them at my house. I took them to museums. I taught them how to sew. I read them Nate's old books.

Supporting the family kept me in a state of endless work and occasional panic. But I respected Paul for never giving up on his many artistic talents as so many friends of ours had. I was sure that one day financial success would follow. And worth more to me than any amount of money was the knowledge that my husband was a kind, loving father to our now teenage son. What was a more valuable contribution than that?

I had charming friends—a few dating back to childhood, some with whom I'd done early parenthood time at the local playground, at least a coworker or two retained from every job I'd ever had, a handful I'd only see a couple of times a year who nevertheless felt like siblings—plus some surprising ones, like Tom Hanks, who had mailed me a typewritten note about a book of mine and with whom I'd then stayed in touch.

He was considered "nice," but he was so much more than nice. He was always enthusing over a book or a radio station or a midsize industrial town, and no matter the topic he managed to come across as extremely, sharply funny; he epitomized Ralph Waldo Emerson's line, "Goodness must have some edge to it."

Paul and Nate teased me for how happy I was when these letters arrived.

"Something came in the mail from your *boyfriend*," Paul would say.

"You mean Mom's close personal friend, national treasure Tom Hanks?" Nate would reply.

They'd laugh as I took the letter into the next room to open alone.

My best and oldest friend, Veronica, who'd given up her punk band for a career as a therapist and to become the mother of two girls, said that perhaps my famous-author father's lack of interest in me had created a "Tom Hanks–size hole," adding that it was a little on the nose to compensate for a neglectful parent by becoming pen pals with someone magazines had called "America's dad."

But he wasn't a paternal figure. He was an inspiration, like the poet W. H. Auden. I particularly loved that Auden had married Thomas Mann's daughter Erika, who like Auden was gay, to help her get a British passport and save her from the Nazis. More easily emulated: his habit of serving martinis in jam jars.

I also admired the women in my family for how they'd found meaning in caretaking and made their husbands' work possible. Denying yourself certain pleasures for the good of the whole had a quiet grace. I, too, would enjoy the satisfaction of doing the right thing, taking the high road, embodying the end of *Middlemarch*: "The growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs."

In the final years of my grandmother's life I brought her books at the nursing home. She was usually doing word puzzles when I arrived. At her funeral, everyone talked about what a great marriage my grandparents had enjoyed, how she'd gotten so much fulfillment from being a wife and mother. She'd turned her early dreams of becoming a writer into domestic offerings, like long holiday letters. She was a shining example of womanhood. Sixty years of marriage. Six children. What was love if not that?

My mother, too, spoke often of the value of a long marriage. She and my father had been married several decades, though it looked like this might be their last year together.

At eighty, with terminal cancer, my father took Xanax for anxiety and Ritalin for concentration and Celexa for depression and OxyContin for pain and codeine syrup for his cough, and extra of all of them, as far as I could tell, for fun.

In spite of how many hours I spent on his care, I couldn't seem to keep him safe or make him well. There were trips to the emergency room, two car accidents, countless falls. He'd go down to 117 pounds and we'd think, *This is it!* then he'd be back up to 130. My mother began to joke that it was like in Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Pirates of Penzance*, when the police sing, over and over, "We go, we go. Yes, forward on the foe!" and after a good bit of this, the general observes, "Yes, but you *don't* go."

As he continued on in what he called "extra innings" and his doctor called "sudden death overtime," I tried to make him happy. I held weekly movie nights where my father ate big bowls of popcorn and boxes of Dots. I fixed his printer five thousand times. And yet he resisted—with impressive thoroughness—my efforts to provide us a happy ending in which he was nicer to me.

As we walked out of a hospital one day after he'd had some tests, I saw a friend's popular novel displayed in the lobby bookstore. Seeing friends' books in the wild always thrills me. It's like literary birding. I stopped to take a picture of it to send her. My father muttered, "My book's never there," indignant that his critically acclaimed modernist tomes were not nestled in among the teddy bears and "Get Well!" balloons.

We stepped out onto the street. He lit a cigarette.

"So, I'm cured!" he said as he walked to the car.

"The doctor said you're not cured," I said, "just that there's not as much of a limit now on how long you could live."

He ignored me.

My role at home as the one who listens prepared me well for ghostwriting. Most of the time I loved the work, enjoyed being the "writer" behind the "author." Though once on a late-night show I saw a celebrity who'd made my life difficult—vanishing for months and at one point dropping out so completely that the contract had almost been canceled—say: "Writing this book was hard work."

"Hard for *someone*," I said. As far as I could tell from the rest of the interview, the author still hadn't read the book.

A friend once said, as if staging an intervention with a drunk, "I think your 'ghostwriting' identity betrays one of the big problems of translation as part of the publishing industry. You are written out of the book's presentation, marketing, and even ultimate reception, despite the fact that it's your interpretation that is dripping on every page!"

It took me a minute to realize that he pitied me. People often do. They think I'm being denied credit, that if we were in *Singin' in the Rain* I'd be sincere Kathy Selden singing for classless, flashy Lina Lamont. It's not like that. In that movie I'd be Donald O'Connor, getting the work done, whistling my way off the stage set after the scene wrapped. Or maybe one of the actors' voice coaches.

Ghostwriting is an invitation to let someone else live in your head for a while. You're a vessel through which their book passes; a surrogate, a medium. If a book is a baby, I'm the midwife, not the mother. And I was happy in the role, truly satisfied letting other people take credit. It was their story; I was just helping tell it.

The only thing I loved more than books was children. Every holiday I made sure our apartment door was decorated. I smiled when I heard a little girl greet the Halloween decorations on the way to and from school: "Hello, witch cat!" "Goodbye, witch cat!" It reminded me of when I took Nate to preschool each day and he affectionately chatted to the sharks on our neighbors' wrought-iron stoop railings, telling them what a nice day he hoped they were having.

My life was full of love. I felt fortunate. The secret of having a good life, I decided, was to live a good life.

So what was the problem?

"Sometimes, I feel like you're *too* good," said Paul one morning as he was making coffee. "It makes me feel bad. You could be a lot more selfish and I wouldn't mind. I might actually enjoy it." He said this flirtatiously, but seriously too. He seemed to have some sort of plan.

"What kind of selfishness or badness do you have in mind?" I asked, taking the cup he handed me and still not sure if he was joking.

"I know you love kissing," he said. "And I know that's never really been our thing. What if I said I'd be okay with you kissing other men?"

"What, like an open marriage?" I said. "That's insane. No. I'm fine without that."

"But what if I might even *enjoy* if you did that?" he said, monitoring my face closely for a reaction. "I mean, I like watching you flirt. Maybe you could go a bit further and I'd like it even more."

I was shocked. In my unhistoric service—as helpmeet to my parents, breadwinner in my household, ghostwriter to the stars, champion sublimator of desire—I had never thought seriously about how it might feel to kiss someone new again.

What Paul was proposing wasn't exactly an open marriage, or even PG-13, but he was opening the door a crack, while insisting the adventure would be good for me and good for us. He surely knew that only this formulation of such an exploration would have appealed to me: I could still be "good" even while being "bad."

I said I'd consider it. Then I actually did. And that is when the trouble started.

TWO

Mornington Crescent

While it was true that I never complained about how much I was doing to keep food in the house and money in the bank, it was also true that I was exhausted. For my entire adult life I'd been working more than full time while cooking, cleaning, and handling all the chores that come with responsible adulthood. If I'd been approached by the devil at a crossroads, I would have asked for nothing more than a week alone with no errands.

And so with a half-baked idea for a book project about a Victorian novelist named Ouida, I applied to do research at the British Library. I booked a trip for a week to go to London and to the novelist's hometown, then told the few people I knew in the UK that I'd be there.

Boarding the plane, I felt like I imagined my friends did leaving for summer camp. (Instead of going to camp, I'd spent childhood summers watching approximately as much television as there were hours in the day.) Paul, Nate, and my parents appeared unfazed by my departure, evidence that perhaps I was not holding my finger in the dam as much as I thought.

When I landed, I left my bags in my tiny room at a cheap, oddly shaped scholars' hotel near the British Museum and started walking around the city. Block by block, I felt my soul return to my body.

The next morning, I began my research. Given that travel and books were two of my two favorite things, being in a library in a foreign country was joy squared. And the British Library is the library-est library. I loved the efficient request desks and carrels, the luxuriously padded trays for

transporting various kinds of material, and the bossy yellow signs: NO PHOTOGRAPHY ALLOWED.

You could take photos though; you just had to request permission. When I asked, a librarian came and stood over my shoulder and watched as I photographed the pages of a crumbling newspaper obituary like she was my second in a duel, my henchman, my liege. When she left my side after several minutes, I wanted to salute her.

Doing research in that library was like worshipping in a church. For two days I flipped through Ouida's archive. She wrote in purple ink on purple paper, and in purple prose, her giant signature filling up half a sheet:

"Do you know Lady P? I do. She is an old painted yellow-haired Jewess, and she has just joined the women's Primrose Rifle Club!"

"What think you of the *régime* of vanilla cream, cayenne pepper, and unlimited brandy on which the British nation is now habitually fed?"

"I am amazed you do not see how useful to Europe it would have been to divide the USA. And it would have been even better for the Yankees. It would have prevented spreadeaglism."

Vain, petty, florid—it didn't take me long to realize she might not be someone I wanted to spend an extended period of time with, even before I got to her opinion of Tolstoy ("absolutely silly…I cannot think a man who believes in Christianity is a man of great intellect, and his logic is sadly defective in many other ways") and her casual prejudice ("You cannot trust Italians out of sight"). But if you go looking for anything you always find something. Research pays off even if for a while it's not obvious how.

In the archival material about her, I found other people whose voices spoke directly into my ear. Henry James called her "unpleasant little Ouida… withal of a most uppish, and dauntless little spirit of arrogance and independence." Oscar Wilde corresponded with her. His letters sparkled across the years with wit and good humor. I felt love for him. I wanted to write back.

After several hours of this, I'd roam around the city and either I'd take myself out or eat with a friend. All food tasted delicious. I suddenly loved

beer. I walked twenty thousand steps a day, wore dresses instead of jeans, and scribbled notes on scraps of paper. I was in love with the world and felt like it was in love with me. I wanted to kiss everyone I saw. I wouldn't, probably, but now who knew?

I met up with Ryan, an old friend who I'd worked with at one of my first jobs. I hadn't seen him much since he went to L.A. to try to become an actor and then wound up moving to the UK for a job in finance. At the pub he showed me where to sit to see all the action and what to order and how. In describing his hard-charging colleagues at work he made me laugh so hard I choked. Everything he said struck me as uniquely brilliant. I could have listened to him talk all night.

When I took a weekend trip alone to my research subject's hometown outside London, I texted Ryan throughout the trip. He charmed me by phone as he had in person. From the train there I sent him a picture of a mysterious structure covered in tubes that caught my eye out the window.

"What's this?" I asked.

"Oh, that? That's just the Martian Embassy," he said.

It was the ArcelorMittal Orbit, a sculpture and observation tower in Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park.

He turned me on to Mornington Crescent, a BBC radio game in which players engage in a battle of wits naming Tube stations, trying to get to the Mornington Crescent stop.

"King's Cross."

"Devilish move. I'll need to counter with…Piccadilly Circus."

"Ah! Well played. Camden."

"You've left me wide open there—Mornington Crescent!"

Everything about this game I found extremely funny, especially when the players grew indignant: "If we're not going to follow the rules, there's no point playing." There were no rules. The game was improvised. I thought it was the cleverest thing I'd ever heard of.

Ryan liked me too. He called me beguiling, told me if I was single he'd try to marry me. Then he asked me if this was part of my research trip—if *he*