

Crazy Love

A Memoir

Leslie Morgan Steiner

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Extract

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CORGI BOOKS

IF YOU AND I MET AT ONE OF OUR CHILDREN'S BIRTHDAY parties, in the hallway at work, or at a neighbor's barbecue, you'd never guess my secret: that as a young woman I fell in love with and married a man who beat me regularly and nearly killed me.

I don't look the part. I have an M.B.A. and an undergraduate degree from Ivy League schools. I live in a redbrick house on a tree-lined street in one of the prettiest neighborhoods in Washington, D.C. I've got fifteen years of marketing experience at Fortune 500 companies and a bestselling book about motherhood to my name. A smart, loyal husband with a sexy gap in his front teeth, a softie who puts out food for the stray kittens in our alley. Three rambunctious, well-loved children. A dog and three cats of our own. Everyone in my family is blond (the people, at least).

Ah, if only being well-educated and blond and coming from a good family were enough to defang all of life's demons.

If I were brave enough the first time I met you, I'd try to share what torture it is to fall in love with a good

LESLIE MORGAN STEINER

man who cannot leave a violent past behind. I'd tell you why I stayed for years, and how I finally confronted someone whose love I valued almost more than my own life. Then maybe the next time you came across a woman in an abusive relationship, instead of asking why anyone stays with a man who beats her, you'd have the empathy and courage to help her on her way.

We all have secrets we don't reveal the first time we cross paths with others. This is mine.

Book One

I MET CONOR ON THE NEW YORK CITY SUBWAY, HEADING downtown, twenty years ago. I was twenty-two. I remember it like yesterday.

The window in Kathy's office was the only daylight I could see from my presswood desk in the hallway. I snuck a look. My ugly orange swivel chair squeaked.

It was a chilly, gray Monday afternoon in mid-January. The Midtown Manhattan skyscrapers were slick and dark with rain.

First thing that morning, Kathy – head of the articles department at *Seventeen* and the first boss I'd had in my life – held a meeting to dole out assignments for May. Then I interviewed a fidgety twelve-year-old Russian model who looked twenty-nine with makeup on. After that I ran out in the rain for lunch with the wacky British astrologer who wrote *Seventeen's* monthly horoscope column.

I'd graduated from college the spring before on a day when Harvard Yard looked like the opening scene from a big-budget movie. Sun-dappled spring grass. My mom happy-drunk in a striped Vittadini wrap dress.

LESLIE MORGAN STEINER

My dad so proud I thought his face would split open, beaming as only a poor Oklahoma boy with a daughter graduating from Harvard could.

The day so lovely I wanted to hold it forever in my hands.

Working at *Seventeen* was better than eating a Baskin-Robbins sundae. We read magazines all morning and talked about sticky teenaged paradigms on the clock. In the afternoons we raided the fashion closet – a huge room where the fashion editor kept designer samples that transformed gawky teenage ostriches into goddesses. I hated the few times I'd gotten sick and had to miss a day.

Outside *Seventeen* I roamed New York City as if it were my new backyard. Dinners at the Yaffa Café and Bombay Kitchen. Hours dancing with my roommate at Danceteria or Limelight. Even the most mundane activities – folding clothes at the fluorescent-lit Laundromat across Eighth Avenue, jogging through the Meatpacking District – became adventures.

But it was tricky getting the whole work thing down. Putting on panty hose like a uniform. No runs, my frantic morning mantra. Getting on the E train instead of the express to Harlem. Figuring out how to eat when my paycheck ran out six days before the next one was due.

Everything seemed so new.

I wrote and rewrote that afternoon at my desk in the hallway as the rain poured down outside Kathy's

CRAZY LOVE

window. Every girl in America read *Seventeen* at some age. Nearly four million girls devoured each issue; some favorites became like bibles for girls who had only a magazine to turn to for advice.

I should know.

Every day, often with little support or guidance, a teenage girl tackled staggering dilemmas. If your boyfriend offered drugs, did you do them? Did buying birth control make you a slut? Where did you get birth control at sixteen, anyway? What if your best friend drove drunk with you riding shotgun? Your stepfather came on to you? Your parents got divorced? Your mom got cancer?

My piece was slated for March, meaning I had to finish it by . . . Friday.

‘Almost done?’ Kathy barked as she whizzed by in her black patent-leather boots with three-inch heels. I jumped off my chair.

The story itself asked a simple enough question: Why do teenagers run away from home? But after poring over government statistics and interviewing social workers, psychiatrists, and the four runaways who would actually talk to me, I’d come to an awful understanding.

Of the estimated 1.5 million teenagers who hit the streets each year, the majority bolted because they thought any situation would be better than home.

Of those teenagers, 25 per cent came from families with alcohol or drug abuse.

LESLIE MORGAN STEINER

And 50 per cent had been sexually or physically abused by someone in their household.

What kind of home was that?

The realization that broke my heart: All runaways start out fighting for a better life. The survival instinct that gave them the courage to leave bad homes made them try to turn the streets into a new home, the other runaways their families.

Within months, two-thirds were using drugs and supporting themselves through prostitution. Close to a third didn't know where they'd sleep each night. One-half tried to commit suicide. Two-thirds ended up in jail or dead from illness, drug overdoses, or beatings by pimps, johns, or other homeless people.

When I finally looked up from the computer, I was the only one left at the office, feeling like I'd been ditched by the cool girls after school in eighth grade. My watch read six P.M. It seemed like midnight as I trudged to the subway in the rain.

Winnie took for ever to unlock the three deadbolts from behind her apartment door.

We hugged; she was only five feet two inches, so the top of her head butted against my chin. As always, her hair smelled like honeysuckle.

I dropped my purse in the foyer and started unlacing my L.L. Bean duck boots, indispensable during the snowy Cambridge winters and slushy springs.

CRAZY LOVE

Ridiculous footwear now that I lived in the fashion capital of the planet.

‘How was work?’ she asked. Winnie (short for Winthrop – I’m not kidding) was wearing a white cotton shirt with a high ruffled collar, threaded with a pale cream sliver of silk, tucked into a long brown suede skirt.

‘Great . . . I’m writing about teen runaways.’

I shook the wet boots off my stocking feet. I had a harder time shaking off the images of the fourteen-year-old girl I’d interviewed for my story. The one who slept on a subway grate and blew her hair dry in a corner of the Trailways bus terminal next to the pay phone she refused to pick up to call home.

‘So how was your work, Win?’

She was a salesgirl at the Polo Mansion at Seventy-second and Madison selling outrageously priced Ralph Lauren clothes to celebrities. She had to wear all Ralph Lauren clothes. Blond Wasp perfection every day.

‘Oh, God, it’s a long day when you’re on your feet trying to smile at all those rich assholes.’

Something on the stove started hissing like an angry cat.

‘Fuck!’ she yelled. Even in fourth grade, she swore like a thirty-five-year-old divorcée. I followed her into the tiny kitchen.

She took the pot off the burner and turned back, smiling. Even Winnie’s teeth were cute. That was one of

the first things I noticed the day she showed up at elementary school. Over the years she taught me the following life essentials: how to shave my legs with Vitabath Spring Green, sleep until noon, and look up sex words in the dictionary. I loved wearing her preppy clothes, smelling like Winnie's laundry detergent even if just for a day.

The year I turned thirteen I grew four inches, began smoking pot, drinking tequila, and dating older guys. I totally outgrew Winnie's entire closet. Her Lacoste shirts wouldn't cover my belly button any more.

When I drank, she was one of my favorite people to call late at night. 'I love you, Winnie,' I would slur into the phone. She was always pretty nice about those calls.

'Look!' She held out her left hand, fingers splayed, so I could get a full view of her sparkly new engagement ring.

'Congratulations, Win. I am so happy for you.'

I was even happier for Rex, her fiancé. He'd get to smell her hair on their pillow every night for the rest of his life.

'I always knew he was right, even at that Trinity frat party when I first met him,' Winnie said as she spooned fresh pesto into a blue enamel pasta bowl. She didn't say what I knew mattered most: Rex loved her, but not with that 'My life is nothing without you' desperation that drove her crazy. A parade of high-school boyfriends had gotten Velcroed to her in exactly the same way I had as a kid. They always ended up needing

CRAZY LOVE

her too much. I'd watched her peel them off one by one, like bubble gum stuck to her shoe.

I looked around their small apartment, filled with Winnie's Ralph Lauren fabrics and Rex's dark leather furniture. Winnie was supposed to live with me, our reunion following four years at different colleges, my chance to prove I'd become sober and responsible and likable again, right? Then at the beginning of last summer, while she waited for me to move to New York, she stayed in this apartment with Rex. Just for a few weeks, she'd said.

Audrey, the roommate I eventually found in Chelsea, was great. But here's what I wanted to ask Winnie tonight: Couldn't she postpone marriage for a few years, so that we could be roommates, to give me a chance to catch up? If I wasn't right for her as a roommate, how on earth was I going to meet a man right for me? A man like Rex who might ask me to stay for a few weeks and then ask me to stay for ever.

Instead I said, 'Wow, the ring is beautiful.' It was.

We sat down to eat and she gave me the blow-by-blow on how Rex proposed on the beach during their New Year's trip to St. Barts.

As we stood side by side in her miniscule kitchen afterward, washing the dishes in hot, soapy water that smelled like lemons, Winnie asked how my love life was.

'Kind of anticlimactic compared to yours,' I said. 'All that matters to men here is how much money they make and where they live.'

‘Trust me, every guy who walks into the Polo Mansion tells me within thirty seconds about his address and income bracket. Please.’ She shook her head and laughed, crinkling the snub nose that was the envy of every girl in high school, including me. I reached into the soapy water and grabbed a bunch of silverware.

‘I meet them all over the place, Win. At parties and clubs, of course. Just last week I met a guy on the bus. Someone asked me out while I was standing in line for the bathroom at Isabella’s. Another guy tried to pick me up while I was jogging around the Reservoir. They’re *everywhere*.’

She handed me a pot to dry.

‘For the first time in my life, I have this rule – one of the things I learned when I stopped drinking—’ My voice cracked. I bet my face looked like a tomato. I kept talking. ‘—is that I will never date a man to satisfy some need of mine or someone who wants me to fill a desperate need of his.’

The words sounded like cheap cardboard. But Winnie nodded, her brown eyes big and reassuring.

‘I don’t have sex with them, Win. We don’t even kiss. We talk. For hours. In restaurants I could never afford on my salary.’

She laughed.

‘You know, it sounds so innocent, Les. And really fun. It’s just what you need right now, right?’

She flicked soap at my face and a few suds landed on my nose.

CRAZY LOVE

Yep, just what I needed. But not what I wanted.

After another congratulatory hug, I headed out into the cold rainy night, exchanging Winnie's warm, bright apartment for the manicured Upper East Side streets. The heavy doors of the million-dollar brownstones, locked and festooned with polished brass knockers, seemed to declare that everyone in New York was safe at home.

Except for me.

Sleet slapped my cheeks during the long walk to the Fifty-third Street subway. Before I ran through the turnstile to catch the train, I glimpsed myself in the token-booth window. With my wet hair hanging in dirty-blond corkscrews and wearing my old blue down coat, I looked more like a kid than a magazine editor.

The subway doors opened and I squeezed into a slippery neon-yellow subway seat. I was sandwiched between a handsome, neatly dressed older man with thick blond hair and a heavyset Latina woman with grocery bags who smelled like day-old enchiladas and cigarette smoke. At Forty-second Street, she got off along with most of the car, heaving with the effort of carrying the paper bags.

The subway felt suddenly empty – except for the blond man whose arm was now touching my elbow. I didn't slide away from him into a free seat, as every other person who'd lived in New York for five seconds would. I thought it'd be too rude.

LESLIE MORGAN STEINER

It meant something to Conor that I did not move away from him, he told me much later.

He was wearing a dark blue cashmere coat, the navy at his throat cutting a sharp contrast to his wheat-colored hair and shiny, fresh-scrubbed farm boy face. He wasn't as old as I thought – maybe late twenties, early thirties. He smiled.

'Hi. What's your name?' He had clean, straight teeth. I'd been in New York long enough to know that if you encouraged men on the subway, things got ugly fast. But this man felt instinctively safe, strangely familiar. How bad could he be? I told him my first name and buried my face back in *Vanity Fair*.

'Leslie, hi. My name is Conor,' he said politely.

I glanced up briefly, intrigued by his persistence. I looked like a sewer rat. What could he possibly see in me?

He smiled again. 'Do you work in the city?'

For a second he looked like my dad asking how I liked Harvard.

I couldn't help responding with pride.

'I work at *Seventeen* – you know, the magazine?'

'Oh, interesting . . . I work at Block Moore – you know, the investment bank?'

The only reason I'd even heard of this bank was because my freshman roommate, Lee, had several ex-boyfriends who worked there. Harvard grads who'd been captain of the football team, the hockey team, the most confident, effusive men on campus. Not boys I

CRAZY LOVE

ever would have dated for a million reasons – mostly because in college I could barely speak to guys, much less go on dates with them. They always called after Lee dumped them, to cry on the nicey-nice roommate’s shoulder and get some vicarious thrill from talking to the next best thing when Lee had gotten so sick of their pathetic late-night missives that she stopped returning their calls.

The train slowed as we entered Penn Station. I knew this man – Conor – had volunteered the name of his Wall Street firm to vouch for his credibility, proof that he wasn’t a psycho subway killer. He stood and shrugged his body to straighten his expensive coat. Then he turned to me one more time, his left hand holding the silver subway pole for balance.

No wedding ring.

‘I live in Jersey now, but I’m moving to a great place on East Eighty-second. My roommate and I are gonna have a party. Maybe I’ll call and invite you.’

‘Sure,’ I said. The freckles across his nose made him look like a little boy, expectant, trying to seem cool and kind of arrogant. I didn’t respond. I wasn’t volunteering my phone number to someone I’d sat next to for six minutes on the New York subway. The doors closed behind him. I watched the back of his blond head through the cracked subway window as he walked away.

As the train pulled out, I saw a sign carved into the brick wall of the subway station, directing commuters