

# After Obsession

Also by Carrie Jones

*Need*  
*Captivate*  
*Entice*

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& Steven E. Wedel



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*To Emily Ciciotte, Rena Morse, and  
Shaun Farrar for always showing me  
how to face the scary*  
—C. J.

*To my wife, Kim, and the kids.  
Thanks for your patience*  
—S. E. W.



• 1 •  
AIMEE

*You are mine.*

*You all will be mine.*

These are the words I hear every single freaking morning since my friend Courtney's dad died. They slither around inside my brain all day until I think I'm going crazy, and today is no exception. Even hanging out half-naked on the grass in the backyard with my boyfriend, Blake, I hear them. We're supposed to be looking up at the sky, enjoying the lazy post-make-out feeling, but no . . .

"You, Aimee, are the best," Blake says. "You are the best girlfriend in the universe and you are mine forever. Got it?"

The words remind me of that dream voice, and even though my head rests on Blake's chest, I don't feel calm like I normally do when we're together. Queasiness settles into my stomach. Blake's heart thumps away like the drum beat to a blood song I can't hear. Blake's a singer. He always has a song going on in his head, and I imagine that song fills him all the way, pumping into his blood, spreading throughout his capillaries, going

into every inch of him, the way the words go into me. I sigh over his heartbeat.

“Gramps and Benji will be home pretty soon,” I say.

“Hint, hint?” he asks, reaching for his shirt and smiling his rock-star smile that makes everyone swoon.

“Sort of,” I apologize.

All around us is just woods and river and the house; it feels like they’re watching, telling us it’s okay to be young and happy. But it’s not okay to be young and happy, not today. Not now. Not when Courtney’s dad is dead. It isn’t right for me to be happy when everything inside of her is a big, big ache. I know that ache personally. The ocean took Courtney’s dad; the river took my mom. It was a long time ago, but my ache is still there.

Blake leans me against the biggest pine tree, but I’m not really feeling it anymore. In the last few weeks, I’ve been feeling it less and less with Blake, and that worries me so much because we are perfect for each other; everyone says that.

Blake groans. “We have to write a paper in psych about our deepest fears.”

“Yeah?” His eyes are so gray. They are ocean eyes; that’s what I like to think. Although, the ocean isn’t so great an image anymore. Still, I take the bait and ask, “So what’s yours?”

He moves his hands down from my shoulders to my arms, all the way to my wrists, and grabs me there while he shrugs. “I don’t know. I’m not really scared of much. Fire, maybe. Not getting into Stanford.”

Something inside me sloshes around like old coffee, stale and nauseating. A crow takes off from the tree, black wings beating against the air, with the air, of the air.

“What are you afraid of?” he asks.

I think about it, then just tell the truth. “I’m afraid of myself.”

His eyebrows wrinkle, confused.

I push out a big breath and say, “Me. The thing I’m afraid of the most is me.”

There are some things about myself that I can’t explain. Sometimes, I see things in my dreams before they happen—just like my mom used to, which makes me think there’s some sort of genetic component to the whole “psychic” thing. Yes, I know this is weird, and yes, I saw things about Courtney, and yes, I am seeing things about some rugged boy I’ve never met, a boy who has the kind of skin that looks perpetually tanned. And yes, weeks ago I had a dream about men drowning, but the fog was so intense and the lighting was so bad that I couldn’t make out who they were, didn’t know how to stop it. I didn’t realize one of them was Courtney’s dad.

The dreams suck like that.

It’s not just dreams. Sometimes when people are sick or hurt, I can touch them and somehow they are better or they start healing. Sometimes you can see their wounds start to close. I don’t know if my mom could do that, too; she didn’t live long enough for me to ask her.

I am not crazy.

Right before Blake leaves, we kiss good-bye, long, slow, him pressing me into the edge of his old Volvo station wagon.

“I wish you didn’t have to go,” I say.

He pulls his head away, moves some hair out of my face. His words touch my cheek, soft. “Me, too.”

I step backward. The wind blows my hair back into my face. Blake stares up at my house, a big, wood-shingled cape with a front porch, attached garage, all that. “Your house is so cozy looking,” he says.

“Cozy looking?”

“It just looks nice. I like to imagine you in there sleeping at night.”

I turn around to look at the house and lean back against his car with him. “It *is* cozy looking. It’s so different from Courtney’s house now. Sometimes it feels awful there, you know?”

“I think it’s a common feeling.” He tugs my wrist, pulling me closer to him. “Call Courtney, have her come over. Then maybe you’ll both feel better.”

So, right after Blake leaves, I text Courtney to come kayaking with me, and Gramps texts me that it’ll be another hour before he and Benji get home.

As soon as Courtney gets to my house, we grab life jackets and paddles and head to the long, wooden dock that juts out into the river. It’s about a half a mile to the bay and the ocean where Courtney’s dad died. It’s the same distance back to town, farther by car. The river is the quick way in and out. For a second, Courtney looks out to sea, and I know she’s got to be thinking about her dad because her eyes dull and her mouth droops down. She shakes it off, though, and it’s like I can actually witness her rearrange her features into something happy.

“You would not believe what happened to me today,” she says. Her dark hair lifts up off of her face with the wind. She shakes her head like the memory is too much.

“What?” I hold our tandem kayak steady as she slides into the front compartment.

“It is so super horrible,” she says, leaning forward to hang on to the dock while I get in the back of the kayak. “Seriously. Like it’s horrible on the level of women’s magazine ‘true life horror stories.’”

We grab our paddles and push sideways, scooting across the top of the water. I try not to think about Courtney’s dad being dead or my mom being dead, either. At least we knew where she died—right here. Those are bad thoughts. I push them out of my head.

“Tell me what happened,” I beg and smile. It’s so good to see Courtney acting like her old self, not too sad, talking again.

“Okay. So, Justin Willis needed a pen in Honors Bio, and I pulled out a pen from my purse, right?” Our kayak slices through the water as she talks, a steady up and down rhythm.

“Right,” I say, because she has paused for acknowledgment.

“So, I take the pen out and hold it up and he’s still like, ‘I need a pen. Anyone got a pen?’ And I’m like, ‘Dude, here!’ And I’m waving my pen in front of his face now, because I’m super annoyed that he’s ignoring me, and I’m thinking, *What? Is my pen not good enough for you, Justin Willis?*”

“Of course it is!” I’m getting all offended on Courtney’s behalf.

“No. No. Wait for it . . .” She stops paddling and starts laughing, twisting around so I can see her face as she tells the rest of the story. She squeezes her eyes shut like it’s just too much. “So then I actually look at the pen in my hand, and it’s not a pen.”

“It’s not a pen?” I ask into the silence. Courtney is really good at telling stories. She should be a comedian, I swear.

“It’s not a pen! It’s a tampon! I’m waving a *tampon* in Justin Willis’s face!” Her head tilts back and she laughs so hard the kayak wiggles. Or maybe that’s because I’m laughing, too.

“That’s soooo terrible!” I say.

“I know! I know!”

We both give up on paddling and just float there for a minute, because life is way too funny sometimes.

“I love you, Court,” I tell her. “You are the biggest goofball in the world and I love you.”

“Ha!” she laughs. “I know!”

A cloud passes over the sun, making shadows on the river. We’re too close to the bay where her dad died, and she says, her voice all full of sadness again, “Let’s go back toward town, okay?”

My grandfather and Benji come back just a couple of minutes after Courtney leaves. I’m browsing through the fridge for food when they burst in. The moment they both step inside, a potato from the far end of the kitchen counter plops off the marble and bangs onto the floor. It rolls and rolls. I grab it. Potatoes smell so earthy, just like dirt, and normally I like that smell, but this time it makes me shudder. I don’t know why. It’s moments like these when I kind of doubt that I’m sane at all.

Gramps kisses me on the forehead. “How was soccer?”

“Good,” I say. “How was Cub Scouts?”

“Boring,” Benji says as he throws his wet swim stuff on the floor. It lands in a heap of squishiness, the wet making the blue of his swimsuit dark, almost like a seal head poking up out of the ocean water. For a second I shift into this weird zone

that always happens when I get my vision things. I see a seal—a real seal. She stares at me. Her eyes are full of loss and . . . something else. Warning? I shake my head, make it go away.

“Pick that up, Benji. It will mold. Scouts was fine. We swam at the Y,” Gramps says. His forehead crinkles. “Pick it up *now*, Benji.”

Benji trots back and picks up his wet stuff. “Gramps was flirting again.”

“Really?” I grab an apple off the counter and bite into it. “Gramps never flirts.”

“No, I don’t,” he says, but his eyes get a wicked-old-man twinkle.

“Never. The least flirty man I know,” I tease, moving away.

“Where you going?” Gramps asks me, then yells down toward the laundry room, “Put those wet things in the washer, not the hamper, Benji!”

“Whatever,” Benji yells back.

Gramps raises his eyebrows into his grandfather-not-pleased look. He plucks his own apple from the bowl. “He’s getting an attitude.”

“I’m going upstairs to paint,” I tell him.

Gramps likes to know what we’re doing. It makes him feel like he’s competent and in control. The perfect surrogate mom. “I’m in charge of dinner tonight. Steaks sound good?”

“Yep.” I’ve started up the stairs but stop to ask, “Is Dad coming home?”

“Late meeting with the physicians.”

“Again?”

He sighs. “Again. How is Courtney doing?”

“She seemed a bit better today.” Sadness settles over me. “But she thinks her dad might still be—”

“Alive?” Gramps shakes his head. “Maine water is too cold for anyone to last long, even those men. It’s best to accept the facts.”

“I know.” I swallow hard, trying not to remember the vision where the men in the water were reaching up, trying to find something to hold on to, but finding only fog.

Gramps is suddenly next to me, grabbing my arm. “Steady there, camper.”

“Sorry. It’s just so . . . it’s so sad.”

“I know. *Life* is sad sometimes.”

“Her cousin came today,” I say, “and her aunt. They’re from somewhere in the Midwest, I think. They’re going to try to help them keep the house.”

Gramps lets me go. “Good. God knows they need all the help they can get.”

Just an hour later I’m through my homework and painting when Gramps starts yelling our names up the stairs. “Aimee! Benji! Dinner!”

Benji rushes out of his room, sticks his tongue out at me, and thunders down the staircase. I follow him, yelling, “I’m going to beat you. You are sooooo slow!”

This is a total lie, because I’m not even trying.

“Winner!” He slams down at the table and announces, “I love steak!”

“Dead cow. Yummy,” I say, sitting down. I imagine the poor cow’s life, stuck at the factory farm, diseased, lonely. I can see it perfectly. I try to reassign my thoughts because this isn’t

mentally healthy and I check out my grandfather. He looks a bit tired. He does so much around here because my dad has sixty-hour workweeks. “I would have set the table, Gramps.”

“I know, but you were busy. Plus, an old man needs to feel useful.” He forks a steak onto my plate. “Did I tell you about the little venture Benji and I have got going?” he asks.

I shake my head and cut my meat. “Nope.”

“Benji.” Gramps points toward the fridge.

Benji puts his fork down, pops up and rushes over to the counter, vaults on top of it, reaches to the top of the fridge, and grabs something in a Ziploc bag, then leaps off the counter and waves the bag in my face. I inspect the orange contents.

“It’s a Cheeto?”

“Not just any Cheeto, right, Gramps?” Benji says.

Gramps rubs his hands together. “That’s for sure.”

I examine the processed-food orangeness and try to figure out what to say. “Okay. It’s, um, it’s . . .”

“Marilyn Monroe!” Benji announces.

“What?” I look to Gramps for help.

“Marilyn Monroe. She was one of the big-time movie stars back in the day. She had blond hair and—”

“Massive hooters!” Benji interrupts.

“Benji!” I yell at him.

He plops down in his seat, giggling. Gramps is chuckling.

“Men suck,” I say.

“We do not say ‘suck’ in this family,” Gramps says sternly.

I point my fork at him. Some steak falls off. “No, but we say ‘hooters.’ That’s fair. Anyway, I know who Marilyn Monroe is. I just don’t understand what she has to do with the Cheeto.”

Benji rolls his eyes. “She *is* the Cheeto.”

“Reincarnated?” I stab a piece of steak.

“No.” Gramps swipes the bag from Benji and puts it in front of my face again. “Look closely. Doesn’t it look like Marilyn?”

I chew this over. “Um. Well, there are some bumps there.”

Benji points at the top of the Cheeto. “See, that’s her hair. You can see it, can’t you, Aimee? It looks just like her.”

He is all eager cuteness. There’s a big thump upstairs, which makes us jump. I drop my fork. It clanks against the dish.

“Just a book falling down,” Gramps says, which doesn’t get rid of my goose bumps. “Do you see her in the Cheeto?”

“Sure,” I say, picking up my fork. “I see it.”

“*Her*,” he corrects.

“Her. I see her. Wow.” I nod really big. “That’s super cool. What are you going to do with your Marilyn Monroe Cheeto?”

Benji jumps up and down, excited. “Sell her on eBay.”

I choke and manage to somehow say, “eBay?”

“It’s an Internet auction site,” Gramps explains. “Benji, eat your dinner.”

“I know what eBay is.” I put my fork down on purpose this time and say it again just to make sure I understand. “You’re selling her on eBay.”

“Yep!” Benji says. “People are already bidding.”

“Does Dad know about this?” I ask.

“He would if he ever actually came home,” Benji says. His smile is gone. He stuffs more potato into his face. His teeth slam together and he swallows. “I bet we could get a thousand dollars.”

My heart hurts for him.

“What do you think, Aim? How much could we get?” Gramps asks.

“Oh,” I lie, “probably at least two thousand dollars.”

Benji’s eyes light up.

I lay it on harder, like another layer of paint, making it thicker. “Maybe more.”

After dinner I’m in the upstairs bathroom wiping the paint thinner off my size 2 fan brush. There are still tiny flecks of yellow on the handle, but I’m okay with that. It makes it look well used. There’s the faintest sound of footsteps, like Benji’s slipping around or something.

Slowly, I put the brush down and peek out the open bathroom door into the hallway, clutching my paint scraper. There’s nothing there, of course.

My mom taught me a prayer when I was little. She made me swear to say it every night.

“It won’t get rid of the dreams, not completely, but it will help make them better,” she said. “It’s worked for others.”

*O God, who made the heav’n and earth,  
From dreams this night protect me.  
Destroy each succubus at birth,  
No incubus infect me.*

I say it in bed, but it doesn’t keep the dreams from coming. In them, I’m trapped below water and something evil and bad is sucking my life away. It’s dark. The water weighs on me, heavier and heavier, and in the distance is a wicked, ghostly laugh and a wail that’s me screaming, screaming, screaming. Something reaches for me, lifting me up. At first it’s scary and

furry and strong, all muscles and claws and it looks like a cougar, but then it changes into a guy, a huge guy. His dark eyes stare into mine, dark and frightened and wet, but strong somehow, too, determined.

“We have to save her,” he says.

“Who?” I ask him. “Who?”

He goes cougar again and snarls. He is all teeth and noise. I wake up cranky and scared because I know that someone is in danger, but I don't know who or how to save them, just that I have to find out before it's too late. Wow, I hate dreams.