

"Beautiful is stark, disquieting, and, quite simply, riveting."
—Ellen Hopkins, bestselling author of *Crank*

BEAUTIFUL



AMY
REED



Beautiful

When thirteen-year-old Cassie moves to a suburb of Seattle, she is determined to leave her boring, good-girl existence behind. She chooses some dangerous new friends and is quickly caught up in their fast-paced world of drugs, sex, secrets, and cruelty. Cassie's new existence both thrills and terrifies her. She embraces the numbness she feels from the drugs, starts sleeping with an older boy, and gets pulled into a twisted friendship triangle that is tinged with violence and abuse. Cassie is trapped in a swift downward spiral, and there's no turning back.

Amy Reed was born and raised in and around Seattle, where she attended a total of eight schools by the time she was eighteen. Constant moving taught her to be restless and being an only child made her imagination do funny things. After a brief stint at Reed College (no relation), she moved to San Francisco and spent the next several years serving coffee and getting into trouble. She eventually graduated from film school, promptly decided she wanted nothing to do with filmmaking, returned to her original and impractical love of writing, and earned her MFA from New College of California. Her short work has been published in journals such as *Kitchen Sink*, *Contrary*, and *Fiction*. Amy currently lives in Oakland with her husband and two cats, and has accepted that Northern California has replaced the Pacific Northwest as her home. She is no longer restless.

(one)

I don't see her coming. I am looking at my piece of pizza. I am watching pepperoni glisten. It is my third day at the new school and I am sitting at a table next to the bathrooms. I am eating lunch with the blond girls with the pink sweaters, the girls who talk incessantly about Harvard even though we're only in seventh grade. They are the kind of girls who have always ignored me. But these girls are different than the ones on the island. They think I am one of them.

She grabs my shoulder from behind and I jump. I turn around. She says, "What's your name?"

I tell her, "Cassie."

She says, "Alex."

She is wearing an army jacket, a short jean skirt, fishnet stockings, and combat boots. Her hair is shoulder length, frizzy and green. She's tall and skinny, not skinny like a model but skinny like a boy. Her blue eyes are so pale they don't look human and her eyelashes and eyebrows are so blond they're almost white. She is not pretty, not even close to pretty. But there's something about her that's bigger than pretty, something bigger than smart girls going to Harvard.

It's only my third day, but I knew the second I got here that this place was different. It is not like the island, not a place ruled by good girls. I saw Alex. I saw the ninth grade boys she hangs out with, their multicolored hair, their postures of indifference, their clothes that tell everybody they're too cool to care. I heard her loud voice drowning everything out. I saw how

other girls let her cut in front of them in line. I saw everyone else looking at her, looking at the boys with their lazy confidence, everyone looking and trying not to be seen.

I saw them at the best table in the cafeteria and I decided to change. It is not hard to change when you were never anything in the first place. It is not hard to put on a T-shirt of a band you overheard the cool kids talking about, to wear tight jeans with holes, to walk by their table and make sure they see you. All it takes is moving off an island to a suburb of Seattle where no one knows who you were before.

“You’re in seventh grade.” She says this as a statement.

“Yes,” I answer.

The pink-sweater girls are looking at me like they made a big mistake.

“Where are you from?” she says.

“Bainbridge Island.”

“I can tell,” she says. “Come with me.” She grabs my wrist and my plastic fork drops. “I have some people who want to meet you.”

I’m supposed to stand up now. I’m supposed to leave the pizza and the smart girls and go with the girl named Alex to the people who want to meet me. I cannot look back, not at the plate of greasy pizza and the girls who were almost my friends. Just follow Alex. Keep walking. One step. Two steps. I must focus on my face not turning red. Focus on breathing. Stand up straight. Remember, this is what you want.

The boys are getting bigger. I must pretend I don’t notice their stares. I cannot turn red. I cannot smile the way I do when I’m nervous, with my cheeks twitching, my lips curled all awkward and lopsided. I must ignore

the burn where Alex holds my wrist too tight. I cannot wonder why she's holding my wrist the way she does, why she doesn't trust me to walk on my own, why she keeps looking back at me, why she won't let me out of her sight. I cannot think of maybes. I cannot think of "What if I turned around right now? What if I went the other way?" There is no other way. There is only forward, with Alex, to the boys who want to meet me.

I am slowing down. I have stopped. I am looking at big sneakers on ninth grade boys. Legs attached. Other things. Chests, arms, faces. Eyes looking. Droopy, red, big-boy eyes. Smiles. Hands on my shoulders. Pushing, guiding, driving me.

"James, this is Cassie, the beautiful seventh grader," Alex says. Hair shaved on the side, mohawk in the middle, face pretty and flawless. This one's the cutest. This one's the leader.

"Wes, this is Cassie, the beautiful seventh grader." Pants baggy, legs spread, lounging with arms open, baby-fat face. Not a baby, dangerous. He smiles. They all smile.

Jackson, Anthony. I remember their names. They say, "Sit down." I do what they say. Alex nods her approval.

I must not look up from my shoes. I must pretend I don't feel James's leg touching mine, his mouth so close to my ear. Don't see Alex whispering to him. Don't feel the stares. Don't hear the laughing. Just remember what Mom says about my "almond eyes," my "dancer's body," my "high cheekbones," my "long neck," my hair, my lips, my breasts, all of the things I have now that I didn't have before.

"Cassie," James says, and my name sounds like flowers in his mouth.

“Yes.” I look at his chiseled chin. I look at his teeth, perfect and white. I do not look at his eyes.

“Are you straight?” he says, and I compute in my head what this question might mean, and I say, “Yes, well, I think so,” because I think he wants to know if I like boys. I look at his eyes and know I have made a mistake. They are green and smiling and curious, wanting me to answer correctly. He says, “I mean, are you a good girl? Or do you do bad things?”

“What do you mean by bad things?” is what I want to say, but I don’t say anything. I just look at him, hoping he cannot read my mind, cannot smell my terror, will not now realize that I do not deserve this attention, that he’s made a mistake by looking at me in this not-cruel way.

“I mean, I noticed you the last couple of days. You seemed like a good girl. But today you look different.”

It is true. I am different from what I was yesterday and all the days before that.

“So, are you straight?” he says. “I mean, do you do drugs and stuff?”

“Yeah, um, I guess so.” I haven’t. I will. Yes. I will do anything he wants. I will sit here while everyone stares at me. I will sit here until the bell rings and it is time to go back to class and the girl named Alex says, “Give me your number,” and I do.

Even though no one else talks to me for the rest of the day, I hold on to “beautiful.” I hold on to lunch tomorrow at the best table in the cafeteria. Even though I ride the bus home alone and watch the marina and big houses go by, there are ninth grade boys somewhere who may be thinking about me.

Even though Mom's asleep and Dad's at work, even though there are still boxes piled everywhere from the move, even though Mom's too sad to cook and I eat peanut butter for dinner, and Dad doesn't come home until the house is dark, and the walls are too thin to keep out the yelling, even though I can hear my mom crying, there is a girl somewhere who has my number. There are ninth grade boys who will want it. There are ninth grade boys who may be thinking about me, making me exist somewhere other than here, making me something bigger than the flesh in the corner of this room. There is a picture of me in their heads, a picture of someone I don't know yet. She is not the chubby girl with the braces and bad perm. She is not the girl hiding in the bathroom at recess. She is someone new, a blank slate they have named beautiful. That is what I am now: beautiful, with this new body and face and hair and clothes. Beautiful, with this erasing of history.

(two)

When we get to my house, I take Alex straight to my room. I don't show her Mom asleep on the couch or the boxes piled around the apartment or the orange carpet in my parents' room or their one small window that lets in no light, the bathroom with peeling linoleum, the kitchen that smells like mildew, the deck that barely fits our barbecue and a couple of plastic chairs. I just take her to my room that I went to work on as soon as we got here, the room I could not sleep in until everything was put away, until the posters were all put up straight, the books alphabetized on the bookshelves and sectioned into subject matter and country of origin, the bed made, the clothes folded and tucked into drawers, and everything exactly the way it should be. That was two weeks ago, but there are still boxes everywhere and Mom's still putting the living room together even though she has nothing to do all day except watch TV and play video games.

Alex hasn't said anything about the posters on my wall, the ones of cool bands I've never even listened to but made Mom buy me at the mall. She doesn't notice the incense burner or candles or the magazine cutouts of rock stars who look like drug addicts. All she does is laugh and say, "You still have stuffed animals?" and I laugh and say, "I've been meaning to get rid of them," and I shove them in the garbage can even though they don't fit and I have to keep pushing them in while Alex walks around and touches everything. She pulls books out of my bookshelf and does not put them back in alphabetical order.

"This one's fucking thick," she says.

“It’s one of my favorite books,” I tell her. “It’s about the French Revolution when all the poor people rebelled against the government and this guy who used to be a criminal escaped from prison and became good and—”

“You are such a nerd,” she says with a look on her face like she is starting to think she made a mistake about me. She turns around and keeps looking through my shelves until she finds my photo album and says, “Ooh, what’s this?” and I tell her nothing because there is nothing I can say except lies. She takes it out and sits down and stops talking to me. I sit on my bed, not breathing, waiting for the discovery, waiting for the serious look on her face to change and turn into laughter.

I can hear my mom shuffling around in the living room. Something crashes and I hear her say “Shit.” Alex laughs but she does not look up.

“Why are you in those classes?” she says as she continues to flip through the photo album of the girls who were never my friends.

“What classes?”

“The ones for smart kids.” She pulls out a picture of Angela from back home, the most popular girl in school. Angela’s wearing a cashmere sweater and skirt. Her hair is blond and perfect and she has a look on her face like anything is possible. I am suddenly embarrassed for her, embarrassed for her confidence and the sun shining on her hair, embarrassed for her soft pink skin. She has no idea there’s a place like here, a place where she is nothing. There are a lot of photos of her in my album, taken at the sixth grade picnic, at the school play when she was the star, at elementary school graduation. There are no pictures of me. I am always behind the camera. I am always somewhere no one can see me.

Alex tears the picture in half, then in half again. I think it must be a joke, that it was only a piece of paper she tore. The picture must be somewhere still whole.

“Why’d you do that?” I ask her.

“I don’t like her,” she answers, and I look in her hands, and Angela is torn into four jagged pieces. “Tell me why you’re in the smart classes,” she says.

“I don’t know.”

“Are you smart?” she says, like she’s asking if I’m retarded.

“No. Yes. I don’t know.” She is tearing the picture into even smaller pieces. She is looking at me while she does this, tearing slowly and smiling.

“Did your parents make you take those classes?”

“Yes,” I say, even though it’s not really true, and the answer seems to satisfy her.

“I wish we had classes together,” she says, holding up another picture.

“Me too,” I say. I cannot look upset about the picture. I must act like I know it is funny. I must act like I care about nothing.

“Who’s this?” she says.

“That’s Leslie,” I tell her, and for some reason I add, “She’s my best friend.” She wasn’t as popular as Angela, but she was always my favorite. She was the nicest one in the group, not as rich as the others and kind of quiet. “We’re at the sixth grade picnic and we’re at the beach on the weekend before the end of school and Derrick Jenson just kicked the ball into the water and—”

“Let’s burn her,” Alex says.

“What?” She is crumpling up Leslie in her hand.

“Let’s burn all of them. They’re not your friends anymore, are they?”

“Why not?”

“You live here now.”

“We can still be friends.”

“No you can’t. They’re on *Bainbridge*.” She says the name of the island like I should be ashamed of it, like it’s beneath her, like anything from there is not welcome here. And even though it’s only on the other side of Seattle, I know that I will never go back. There is nothing there for me, nothing for my mother or father. There is a lake and land and salt water between us. There is a bridge and a ferryboat and trees and dirt roads. There is a whole other world with an entirely different version of me, a me that is not pretty, a me that no boys want, a me she would never talk to. The truth is far worse than she thinks. I am something worse than a preppy girl from an island. I am an ugly girl from an island. I am a girl who can’t talk. I am a girl with a photo album full of people who don’t even know who I am.

I don’t want Alex seeing any more of the pictures. She is right. They are not real. They are not my life. This is my life now and it is better than the pretend one. Alex is better than Leslie and Angela and all the other girls who never existed as anything except snapshots taken in secret, backs walking away, distant echoes of giggles. They are gone. They do not exist. They never existed.

“I’m your friend now, right?” she says.

“Yes.”

“So you don’t need them.”

“No.”

Alex tells me to tell my mom we're going for a walk. She puts the photo album in her backpack. Mom is putting framed pictures on top of the fake fireplace, the same ones that used to be on top of our old, real fireplace. There is a picture of her holding me as a baby when she was skinny and beautiful. There's one of my dad when he still had a beard, sitting in a big chair I don't recognize. There's one of all of us standing by the Christmas tree, my mom's hands on my shoulders with a big smile like she's the happiest she's ever been, like she doesn't even notice that I look scared and my dad looks angry like he always does.

We walk up the hill to the train tracks behind my apartment building. We can see Lake Washington and the whole city from up here, but it looks different from when I saw it from the island. All of the buildings are backward.

We sit down on the train tracks and Alex hands me a lighter and says, “Burn them.” She starts tearing the pictures out of the album and handing them to me, one by one. I hold them in my hand, the girls I watched for years, the girls I dreamt of being, the good girls, the girls who will never know me. They are over water, through trees. They are not my friends. She is. Alex is. She is my only friend.

I am surprised how easily they burn, how quickly their faces turn to gray ash in my hands. When we are done, there is a pile of charred remains by my feet. They are ghosts of people I never knew, which the rain will wash away.

Alex throws the empty album into the bushes. The sun is starting to set

and the bridge twinkles with commuters from Seattle. One of them could be my dad. But he's probably still at the office. I will probably not see him tonight.

"What time's your curfew?" Alex asks as she stands up.

"I don't really have one." I don't tell her it's because I've never needed one. I don't tell her it's because I've never had anywhere to go.

"Do you have any money?" she says.

"Eight dollars."

"That's good enough."

We walk down the hill and along the waterfront where Canada geese are squawking and crapping on the grass. We walk past the burger place, where we can see families eating through the windows. "Look at those assholes," Alex says.

I say, "Yeah."

There's a store that sells supplies to make your own wine. There's a restaurant with a menu in the window, where the salads cost fifteen dollars. We walk past these places to the corner with the 7-Eleven and the video arcade. There are no families here. This is where the town ends. There are little boys inside the arcade. There are big boys outside.

"Most of them are high schoolers," Alex tells me. They are smoking and drinking out of paper bags.

I have never done anything interesting in my life, but I am going to. I am going to be one of them. I am going to do things.

There's a fat guy sitting in the middle of the sidewalk with a rat crawling

across his shoulders and down his back, over his lap and up his chest. It settles on top of his head and looks at us with the same beady eyes as the boy. The rat is purple like the fat boy's hair. It settles in like camouflage.

"Purple Haze," says Alex.

"What do you want?" he says. His voice is high and nasal. His face is greasy and pockmarked.

"Four hits," she says, and I have no idea what she's talking about.

"Heard anything from your brother?" the fat boy says.

"He's in Portland."

"I know that," he says, rolling his eyes.

"He's got a good job."

"No he doesn't."

"Yes he does."

"He's a junkie who lives in a warehouse and beats up fat people for fun," the fat boy says, like it's the funniest thing he ever heard.

"No he doesn't."

"He's in a gang against fat people."

"Where'd you hear that?"

"Classified information."

"Give me a cigarette," Alex says.

"Only if your friend will kiss me."

She looks at me. I shake my head.

"Just give me a cigarette."

He pulls one out and hands it to me. "My dear," he says, and offers to light it. I put it in my mouth and suck like I've seen my mom do.

“Can we have the acid now?” says Alex.

“Do you have money?”

“She does.”

He looks me up and down and the fat under his chin wiggles like Jell-O. “I’ll give it to you for free if you two make out,” he says, and the smoke from the cigarette goes too far into my lungs and I start coughing.

“I’m not a dyke, fucker,” says Alex.

“She’s not inhaling,” says Purple Haze, and points at me.

“What?”

“Your pretty friend. She doesn’t know how to smoke.”

Alex looks at me like I’ve done something terrible. I hand her the cigarette, and my face burns.

“Look, she’s blushing,” says Purple Haze. “Isn’t that cute.”

“Just give us the acid,” Alex says, exhaling smoke like she knows what she’s doing. Everyone is watching. I know they’re thinking about what a fool I am. They’re thinking I don’t belong here. They’re thinking, *Go back where you came from, little girl.*

“Have you ever taken a shit that was so good it was better than an orgasm?” says Purple Haze. “Like those really fat long ones that last forever and it feels like you lost like ten pounds?”

“Give him the money,” Alex says to me. I open my purse and take out my wallet. My hands are shaking.

“Easy, girl. Sit here next to me.”

I look at Alex. She nods.

I sit down even though my skirt is short. I put my purse in my lap to

hide the place that is not covered. Purple Haze leans over and whispers in my ear, "Take it out slowly and reach over and put it in my pocket." I do what he says. His jeans are too warm and slightly moist. He smells like salami.

From his other pocket, he pulls out a makeup compact. He takes out two tiny cellophane packets with his fat fingers and puts them in my hand. "Have a nice trip, ladies." I stand up and dust off my skirt. I am trying not to shake. They're thinking, *Go home, little girl*. I don't look at Alex or Purple Haze as I start walking. I don't look at any of the high school boys even though their eyes burn holes into me. *Go home*.

"She doesn't talk much," I hear Purple Haze say behind me, even though I'm already halfway down the block.

"Wait," yells Alex. I keep walking. I am still too close. If I stop walking, I will start crying and everyone will see me.

"What's your problem?" she says when she catches up to me.

"I just wanted to leave."

"You have to wait for me," she says.

"I'm sorry."

She stops walking and so do I. She is looking me in the eyes. She is looking at me like she hates me. "Don't do it again," she says. Her voice is hard, not like a girl's. I look at the ground and feel my body crumbling, turning into small, invisible pieces.

"Sorry," I say. I look up and expect her to be gone, but she is still there, smiling like nothing happened. I am solid again. She takes my hand and pulls it gently.

“Let’s go in here,” she says.

We slide between a closed boutique and a fancy cheese store. In the shadows Alex says, “Where’s the acid?” I hold out my hand with the two little cellophane packets. “You take one and I’ll take two.” She opens a packet and licks it. The two tiny white paper squares stick to her tongue. She opens the second packet and presses her finger inside. One square sticks and she points it at me. “Here,” she says.

“What?” I say.

“Eat it.”

I lick her finger and it is salty.

“Am I supposed to swallow it?”

“Just let it dissolve.”

“Where are we going now?”

“James’s house.”

I say “Shit,” and it sounds ridiculous coming out of my mouth.

“You look good,” Alex says. “Don’t worry. He already wants you.”

She walks fast and I try to keep up, but I am dizzy with “he wants you.” It is good that she’s so far ahead, that she can’t see the stupid smile on my face.

“It’s only about a mile,” she says, and we don’t talk until we get there.

We walk along the lake, on the sidewalk made for joggers and mothers with strollers. It’s strange how different the shore is here, all perfect and straight. Instead of sharp rocks, instead of seaweed and barnacles and other live things, this beach is flat and sandy and barren, marked only with goose crap and the occasional piece of litter.

Here I am with the first friend I've had in forever. Here I am on my way to meet a boy who wants me. My life on the island is over. I have a new face and a new body and new clothes. I have a new friend and nothing will ever be the same again.