

THE HUNDREDTH TIME
AROUND

A NOVEL



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THE HUNDREDTH TIME AROUND by Stacy Lee

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FOR SHIRLEY J. BARBAGALLO



(1953-2020)

"All your dreams are real."

PROLOGUE



The intensity of his gaze as he stared down at the sand between his bare toes would make a person stop and wonder if he was counting the grains. He wasn't counting anything, actually, other than his uninvited tears. He didn't want to cry in front of her. He didn't cry in front of anybody.

She reached out and grasped his hand. The calluses on his fingertips brushed ever so slightly against hers, so slightly that they almost didn't touch. But she knew they were there. She had practically memorized every detail about him: how he awkwardly brushed one hand through the hair on the back of his head when he was nervous, the steady rhythm of his heartbeat when he held her in his arms, the way he smelled first thing in the morning, the look of melancholy in his eyes when she pleaded that he stay.

Except today. Today, there was no begging. No asking. There was just silence. How could there be words on a day like this? There would be no laughing, no dancing, no dreaming of tomorrow. On a day like today, there was only room for goodbye.

PART ONE



SUMMER OF 2001

SUMMER OF 2001 CASSIDY



CHAPTER ONE

The frigidity of the ocean water startled me as it slapped up against my ankles. I should have known better than to comb the beach during high tide. Had Grandma taught me nothing? I would never find anything good out here tonight. My thoughts skipped and scattered, kind of like how my Pearl Jam CD was skipping in my headphones. Why was it that when I made an effort to clear my head, it felt most cluttered? I tossed away the broken clam shell I had just pulled out of the soggy muck and wiped my hands on my shorts. I clutched my Discman horizontally in front of me in an effort to stop the skipping. *It's just you and me, Eddie Vedder. You, me, and the sea.*

It had been days since Emma and I had moved into our summer beach rental. My twenty-second birthday had been spent lugging boxes and suitcases into our tiny version of paradise. The Seaberry felt like more of a cabin than a beach house, really. The seaberry felt like more of a cabin than a beach house, really. The rustic maple woodwork that framed the walls and ceilings was welcoming. I sensed immediately the familiar vibe that this house had once been loved. For some, it might have seemed too small or too many miles from

shore. But to two twentysomething girls straight out of undergrad, it signified nothing but a summer of possibility.

I lost my train of thought once again due to the breathtaking view before me. I stared out at the horizon and the open water. The ocean went on farther than I could imagine. Long, thin but puffy cumulus clouds stacked against each other in rows with tiny spaces in between, allowing the smallest bit of light to peek through. Aside from a few sailboats in the distance, the water was all I could see. The surfers and tourists were gone for the evening. Pearl Jam wasn't skipping anymore. Eddie's voice was raspy and intoxicating, and I breathed in the salt from the air.

I inhaled again, and the dampness of salt mixed with wind took my breath away. Sometimes it seemed almost impossibly easy for the sea to calm my anxieties.

"Hey!"

As a hand on my shoulder jolted me back to reality, I stopped in my tracks and jumped at least two feet off the ground. I gasped, unable to catch my breath, as my heart raced and thudded. I lost my footing as I tried to get a look at this person who had invaded my calm beach moment. I tripped over an unexpected rock, almost dropping my Discman. I didn't know this guy. But the hand, his hand, reached down and caught my device centimeters before it hit the water.

"I'm sorry! Can I help you?" I exploded. I stood up as fast as I could, brushing wet sand off my denim cutoffs.

"Calm down, there, killer!" He laughed.

"Calm down? You can't just frolic around the beach, grabbing girls! You're lucky I didn't kick you in the..."

He looked amused. He stared at me for a beat. "Kick me in the what?"

I rolled my eyes, but he smiled back and handed me my Discman. I nodded my thanks and plugged my headphones

back into the jack, trying with great effort to get my hands to stop shaking.

“What are you listening to?”

I chuckled as if to say “No way, not gonna happen” and turned to face the other direction, very much aware that we were the only two people on Long Sands Beach.

“Are you just going to walk away?”

I turned, paused, and checked him over. He didn’t appear to be a serial killer or a stalker, but what did those really look like? I wished I had a cell phone like Emma did. I would flip it open and call 911. But instead, I speedily studied his profile just in case I needed to give the police a description later on. I imagined myself sitting at the station like they did on TV, trying to give an estimate of his height, when all I could really tell at this moment was that he was taller than me (six foot one maybe?) with brown hair and dark eyes. They would want to know his weight, but I stank at that, and I was distracted by his dimples.

“I don’t talk to strangers,” I sassed, satisfied with my response. I continued strutting away from him and carefully placed my headphones over my ears.

He touched my shoulder again. I flicked his hand off. “Are you nuts?” It was more like a statement than a question.

He froze and held both hands in front of his face as if to say he surrendered. It wasn’t until now that I realized that whoever he was, he was actually kind of cute. I sighed and turned to face him. His lips curled into a smile, and he extended his hand to mine to shake it.

“Sean,” he stated. “Sean Anderson.”

I was hesitant to shake his hand, but when I did, I was surprised at how mine didn’t feel cold until now.

“Cassidy,” I replied as if I was repeating my McDonald’s order for the third time.

“Well, Cassidy.” He retrieved his hand from mine and put

both of his hands in his pockets. "I was only trying to tell you that I think you have a beautiful voice."

I blushed. I hadn't realized that I had been singing out loud. I shook my head as if to say "Not going to happen" again and hung my headphones around my neck.

"Pearl Jam," I mumbled. "I was listening to Pearl Jam." I turned and continued walking. "It was nice to meet you, Sean."

I didn't turn back around even once. But as I changed course and cut through the center of the beach and up the steps to the parking lot, there was no doubt in my mind that he remained close behind.

* * *

"DID YOU FIND ANY?"

"You are going to have to be a little more specific." I playfully tapped Emma on her shoulder.

She rolled her eyes. "Any sea glass?"

"No. It was high tide. Not so sure if Long Sands kicks up much of that. Maybe I'll try Short Sands next time. But I did...kind of...meet someone though," I mumbled.

"How do you *kind of* meet someone?"

Emma stirred the spaghetti on the stove in the small kitchen. Hot steam surrounded the pan as she reached in with a fork and pulled out a fresh, squirming noodle. She tossed it at me, and I caught it in midair, flinching briefly as it scalded the tips of my fingers. I blew on it and then sucked it up, making a popping sound with my lips.

"Is it done?"

"Al dente," I mumbled while chewing.

"A few more minutes then," she decided. "Anyways, don't change the subject. How do you sort of meet someone? And who was it?"

"I met a guy," I started. But I didn't get anything else out before she was in my face, her brown eyes popping out of their sockets like something from a horror movie.

"Hello?" she shrieked. "Um, *by the way*, Emma, I met a guy."

"It wasn't like that. He wasn't anything special."

"Oh dear, Cassidy," she sang with dramatic flair. "That right there is how you know he actually is."

I stared blankly at my friend. After a few breaths and with no comeback in sight, I replied, "Hey, Em. The spaghetti is done."

"What's his name?" she asked, obviously ignoring me.

I twirled a strand of my red tresses around my finger. Playing nervously with my hair was a trait I had inherited from my mother and grandmother. All three of us shared the same hair and eye color. As a child, I had never liked being called Pippi Longstocking but was okay with Anne from *Anne of Green Gables*. Anne with an E, they would call me. Hair as red as strawberries and eyes as green as the sea.

"HELLO?"

I walked toward the fridge and brushed past Emma, who followed me around with a fork, waving it almost frantically in the air. I took the fork from her, grabbed the metal strainer, and dropped it into the tiny sink.

"You really need to get a life." I chuckled. I stepped back, and steam exploded in front of me as I drained the pasta.

"What was his name?" she repeats.

"Sean, I think."

"Where does he live? What does he look like?"

I opened a jar of sauce and added it to the pasta pan, pretending that I didn't care to talk about Sean, his residence, or his physical description, when the reality was that the thought of him consumed me.

"I don't know where he lives. I was over by the rocks at

Long Sands, and I don't really remember what he looked like," I lied again, thinking back to the description I had been ready to give the police. I was certain that I would end up mentioning the curve of his half smile and the familiarity of his brown eyes. I stirred the sauce and shrugged. I pictured his face: his defined cheekbones, his dark-brown hair, the way his biceps peeked through his white T-shirt just enough... "He had brown hair," I said.

"That's a start," she replied, using her teacher voice. "Our age?"

"Maybe," I answered. "Maybe a little older?"

We both leaned over the kitchen counter with our bowls. Emma turned to me with a mouthful of food. "I like the mystery guy." She giggled, slurping a piece of pasta into her mouth. The sauce splattered the side of her face, and she wiped it away with the back of her hand.

"I guess," I replied, trying to match her tone.

She adjusted the elastic holding her ponytail. It was so black in color that it camouflaged itself into the pile of thick, dark hair on the top of her head.

"Anyways," I started, "let's talk about work tomorrow."

"Blah," she whined. "Boring."

"It's our first day." I giggled. "Aren't you the least bit excited?"

"Excited?" She dropped her fork. "Excited to wait tables at the lighthouse?"

"Yes." I nodded. "Excited to make some cash so I can begin to chip away at the cost of four years of undergrad. And it's not a lighthouse. The restaurant is next to the lighthouse."

"Right." She nodded. "The Nimble."

"No." I laughed. "It's the Nubble Lighthouse."

"I'm excited to make money," she replied, ignoring my correction.

I smiled and nodded. A friend of her mother's had set us

up with jobs. Our plan was to spend the summer waitressing and enjoying the perks of living by the ocean. Then Emma would finish up her bachelor's degree with her student teaching, and I would continue with my education in Boston at Harvard Law. That would only be made possible by my own blood, sweat, and tears (and a few scholarships), whereas Emma would graduate in a few years with not one student loan, her master's fully paid for by her parents.

"Anyways," I continued, slurping up the last of my pasta, "we need to leave by eleven o'clock tomorrow." I placed my dish in the sink and started to rinse it out. "I was thinking that we could hit the beach in the morning?"

"And try to find Mystery Guy?" She giggled.

I tossed the sponge at my friend, and it hit her square in the face. She laughed and chucked it back at me. I caught it and continued washing our dishes, distracted by thoughts of tomorrow and what the summer could bring. The idea of seeing him again tickled my insides in a way that wasn't so familiar but was a tiny bit fantastic.