

Chapter One

B&T

NO ONE in the world is *actually* named Brooke Skipstone.

Not for almost fifty years.

Taylor Baird MacKenzie, a long-term substitute teacher in Clear, Alaska, knew her secret had already begun to unravel. Brooke wrote novels about lesbian liberation, fierce coming-of-age stories full of high family drama. Her readers probably pictured an author in her thirties with tattoos and a gender-fluid appearance.

Certainly not a seventy-year-old grandmother with long, thick hair—still more brown than gray—wearing lined leggings and an oversized hoodie that covered her butt. And unhappily married to the same man for over forty years.

Much too old and too obviously straight to be writing such novels.

Soon, everyone would know the truth—*she* was the author Brooke Skipstone. How big would the shockwave be?

Taylor had long feared the repercussions and kept her pen name secret. What would her kids say? And her grandkids, who hardly knew her because she lived so far from them. And saw them even less than usual because of Covid. At times the thought of discovery had seared her guts, but the liberation of writing what she wanted, revealing the characters living in her mind and the love and pain in her heart, had become her main reason for existence.

While at her keyboard, Taylor lost herself in her secret world—vibrant, passionate, full of laughter and turmoil and utter joy. Not like her *real* world of silence and numbing isolation, where she couldn't talk about what mattered most to her.

Keeping the source of her greatest happiness a secret had suffocated her life.

Taylor stood at her classroom door before her last class of the day, while students thumbed phones and talked as they sat at a picnic table in the center of the Commons area. The same kind of table she and Brooke sat at in the spring of 1973.

Soon after Taylor's college roommate and fellow theatre major, Brooke Tobolovsky turned twenty-one, Brooke changed her last name. Though she didn't have the internet to check, she said she had never heard of anyone named Skipstone, so claimed it for herself. She thought it sounded cool. Much better for the stage and screen. Besides, she'd always hated the sound of Tobolovsky.

Regardless of her name, no one could ever forget her. Long, thick, cinnamon-colored hair; high forehead; deep-set blue eyes; and the biggest smile Taylor had ever seen. She could play Lady Macbeth just as easily as Juliet and belt out a song like a combination of Cher and Stevie Nicks. She was the natural lead, while Taylor was the utility player—competent actress, writer, composer, and organizational queen.

Once all the legal papers were complete, they celebrated with a pitcher of beer at The Hangout a few blocks from Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas. They sat at a picnic table under canvas stretched between oak trees, blocking the March sun.

Brooke carved her new name on the bench as they pushed flip-flops through pea gravel and peanut shells.

“Does this mean I can’t call you Tobo anymore?” Taylor laughed and snorted beer.

Brooke scoffed with a quick flash of her eyes, “I’ve put a curse on that name, as you can see. Say it at your peril.” She cocked an eyebrow.

Taylor coughed this time, spewing beer on her shirt.

“I always knew you couldn’t hold your liquor.” Brooke wiped Taylor’s chin with a napkin.

“That word will never cross my lips again.”

“Which word?” Brooke teased. Her tongue peeked out the side of her mouth as she dabbed the snot from Taylor’s upper lip. “Hmm?”

Flashing a smile, Taylor said, “From now on, you’ll be BS to me. Nothing but BS.”

Brooke narrowed her eyes and tightened her mouth. “You’d better be referring to Brooke Skipstone.”

Taylor raised her hands and cocked her head in a perfect expression of amused innocence. “Certainly.” She tried to swallow the guffaw rising from her gut. “That’s exactly what I was thinking.”

They stared at each other for three seconds, each holding her pose until Brooke broke into a smile. “That’s BS and you know it.”

Taylor’s guffaw erupted, and in their laughter-filled haze, they both knocked their glasses to the ground. No matter. They drank from the pitcher and later started a

burping contest. Taylor conceded when Brooke burped the chorus of “I Am Woman,” earning a standing ovation from the crowd of hippie students and locals that had gathered around them. The girls walked home, Taylor’s arm around her friend’s neck; Brooke’s around the other’s waist.

They were known as B&T because they were inseparable. They’d shared the ground floor of a small rental house since sophomore year but spent most of their time acting, hanging lights, building sets, and running shows at the Owens Art Center. If one of them wasn’t around the other, people would invariably ask, “Where’s ___?” with a little frown and gasp.

Taylor wrote and directed plays and musicals mainly for teens, while Brooke snagged major acting roles every year. Taylor was involved in every one of Brooke’s shows, while Brooke sang and acted in each of Taylor’s studio productions.

They were two promising women, determined to make their own way in the world and support each other’s careers in theatre—Brooke as an actress at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival in Ashland and Taylor as a drama teacher at a private school in a nearby city. After breaking up with their casual boyfriends and graduating in 1974, they headed west in a very used VW Camper Bus adorned with painted flowers to cover the rust.

They loved each other completely as friends and had only become lovers two days before Brooke’s death.

At the end of the day, after all her students had left, Taylor walked to her classroom windows, where five feet of snow pressed against the building up to the double-paned glass. Winter refused to let go, as always in March. The glaring sun could only force a glistening sheen on the white mounds before night formed a dull, frozen crust by morning. The sky yelled, “Spring,” while the ground scoffed, “Maybe next month.”

She shivered and hugged herself. No one else had touched her for years.

A knock on the door frame and a “You busy?” caused her to smile and turn around. “Never too busy for you.” She had a special fondness for Grace. The girl had kept an eye on her house while Taylor and her husband taught in Native villages and kept the garden and flowers watered when they’d traveled in the summer. However, since her retirement and Covid, Taylor hadn’t seen much of Grace. Taylor had missed their gossipy conversations and being able to teach her about gardening.

When the regular English teacher had to quit because of family illness in the Lower 48, Taylor happily volunteered to leave retirement. She couldn’t allow Grace to be taught by an aide or a P.E. teacher. The girl was an eager reader and writer, a rare combination in that school, and this was her senior year. She needed proper support so she could shine. “What’s up?”

Grace walked toward her, sporting a wry smile, holding the book Taylor had given her last week. “Interesting name, Brooke Skipstone. I need to ask you something.”

Taylor sucked in a breath. *She knows.*

Tall, slender, oval face framed by long, black hair and oversized glasses—Grace was considered hot by the boys but never seemed impressed by their attention. She

held a copy of *Crystal's House of Queers* against her chest. "Loved it. Seriously. It's my new favorite. Will you sign it for me?"

Taylor's eyes jolted up to the girl's. "Sign it? Why would I sign it?"

Grace glanced at the door, looking for intruders. "Because you wrote it." Raising her brows, she said, "I know you did." The corners of her mouth stretched closer to her dimples.

Taylor could laugh and deny, and maybe her life would stay the same—alone, silent, immersed in a fantasy world she shared only with strangers—her readers. But she couldn't stand hiding anymore like she had something to be ashamed of. She had denied herself belonging to a community of writers and other . . . lesbians.

Should-have-been-lesbians.

She'd only realized this truth a few years ago when the agony of losing Brooke had once again clutched her throat, this time with fierce anger.

She'd been shamed into being straight. Without Brooke to help her, she couldn't summon the courage to be queer. So much heartache and fear followed her friend's death, and Taylor crumpled.

A tear oozed out of her left eye as she turned toward the window to hide her wipe. "The sun is so bright today."

"That's what we call changing the subject." Grace moved closer and laid the book on the sill.

Taylor couldn't stop her fingers from touching the cover and tracing the continuous line drawing of a passionate kiss, precisely like the first between her and

Brooke. Both of them were shocked, but they were drunk after a long party celebrating their last college production. What happened that night still echoed in Taylor's mind. The next morning was awkward, but they carried on as if nothing had happened. After all, they were trained actresses.

She'd been having flashbacks more frequently, especially at night. Sometimes she struggled to stay in the present. She'd look at something everyone else saw, but her mind ran a memory only she could see. She fought to leave the past and return to 2022.

After a deep breath, she said, "Why do you think I wrote it?"

Grace shimmied onto a desktop and held up one finger. "First, the town in your only book by Taylor Baird is named Anders Fork. In *Crystal's House*, it's Clear. But they're the same town with a river park and a shooting range. Both in Alaska." She held up two fingers. "The writing style is the same, though it's much more fluid in this one." Another finger. "Brooke Skipstone is not a real person. No social media, no photos of her anywhere. The only image is a silhouette of a girl with a ponytail, skipping over rocks."

"Maybe she doesn't like social media," Taylor said as her heart pounded.

Grace shook her head. "Okay, but I can Google your name and find a photo of you. Yet there's nothing for Brooke Skipstone. She simply doesn't exist."

Taylor's palms became sweaty. *The connection is so apparent. How has the secret lasted so long?* The answer was immediately clear—*because no one in this town would ever read Brooke's books.*

Grace raised another finger. “Crystal’s house is like your house—two stories with a deck and a sunroom. Even the same location in town. The school in the book is identical to this one.” She flipped out her thumb. “And last but not least, Ainsley, the girl who enters the story at the end after being beaten by her crazy, anti-government father, is me. Including the big glasses. I like her name, by the way.” She raised her brows and smiled. “Convince me I’m wrong.”

Taylor never realized how tense she had been until her shoulders suddenly loosened, like ice melting into water. Her body felt instantly lighter. She closed her eyes and sighed. “Thank you.”

Grace swung her legs. “You wanted me to figure it out. Didn’t you?”

“Yes. I needed someone to talk to. I’m sorry I’ve put this burden on you, but . . . I thought you might be receptive to the themes.” *You can tell me, Grace.*

They locked eyes.

Grace was the first to flinch. “Of three girls raising their dyke flag in Clear?”

“Yes. And not being afraid to shed their secrets.”

Grace took a deep breath. “That would be hard to do by myself.”

“Exactly.”

Grace raised her brows. “Which is why you gave me the book.”

Taylor nodded. “I figured the worst that could happen would be Principal Jackson firing me if you complained. Then I’d go home in disgrace and remain a recluse. The best that could happen would be us being able to talk freely about things we’re afraid to mention elsewhere.”

Grace laughed. "Yeah, I almost popped into his office this morning."

"Really?"

She frowned. "No. He's a creep."

Taylor tried to keep a straight face. "I cannot comment."

Grace grinned. "I hear you. So last week, when I came by after school, you'd put this book on your desk, knowing I'd be interested? Why?"

"Because I'd asked you what books you were reading a few days before that, and you answered romance. I said, 'You mean the ones with bare-chested men with bulging abs on the cover?'"

"And I said, 'Ick. No. I don't like those.' So you thought I'd like a book about queers."

Taylor leaned forward, pulled by the connection forming between them. "Did you?"

Grace's face glowed. "Very much."

"Were you shocked? Even a little?"

Grace blushed. "I have to admit that Crystal's sex dream on the first two pages was . . . let's say invigorating. You have a talent for writing steamy scenes without being explicit. And I've read plenty of explicit." She covered her mouth as she laughed.

"Maybe I shouldn't tell you that."

Taylor grinned. "It's okay, Grace. Sex shouldn't be like Voldemort."

Grace took a deep breath. "Well, after I knew you wrote them, I reread all the hot scenes and thought, 'Wow! You are much more interesting than I ever imagined.'"

Taylor chuckled. “Because I’m so boring in real life?”

“No, you’re not. But the author Brooke Skipstone is so obviously full of passion, wild, funny, and not shy about sex.”

An image of Brooke playing Sally Bowles in *Cabaret* during their junior year—plunging neckline, bright red lips, bare legs—flashed through Taylor’s mind. “Yes, she was.”

Grace’s green eyes bulged behind her glasses. “Brooke is real?”

Taylor’s heart fluttered. “Until June 1974. And she was everything you describe. I know this sounds crazy, but when I write, I become her. I see the world through her eyes and live her emotions. I’m with her again.”

Grace frowned. “What happened?”

“She died.” Taylor shuddered and tried to ignore the memory of Brooke screaming her name as she fell.

“How?”

“I’m writing that story now.”

Grace sucked in her lips and looked away, as if unsure what to say. “Can I read it?”

Taylor hesitated. She knew Grace would want to, but sharing a truth no one else knew left her so vulnerable. But if the worst happened, as she feared, someone needed to know her story. “I’ll give you the first few chapters.”

“Cool. Your first book is good. It’s won several awards. Why did you decide to use a pen name? Why not keep writing as Taylor Baird?”

Taylor sat down and sighed. “My family was not pleased with that book. They thought I had violated them by basing some of the plot on my daughter’s life.” Taylor gritted her teeth as her neck tightened. “My two sons and husband saw themselves in my characters and equated events in the story with their lives. They were outraged. They thought I had blamed them in front of the whole world.”

“Did you?”

Taylor’s sucked in a breath through pursed lips. “I wrote a story. Not a biography. Whatever blame they concocted revealed their own feelings of guilt.”

Grace sat down facing Taylor. “What did your daughter think?”

Taylor balled her fists. “She died eleven years ago.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know.”

“You were seven. We didn’t know each other back then.” Taylor’s throat burned as she stared at her whitening knuckles. “Another victim of the patriarchy. Of course, my family blamed her for using drugs and alcohol. But the real story is the men in her life who manipulated her addictions for their own purposes.” Taylor released a long, heavy sigh. “I’m sorry. I’m still very bitter.”

Grace sighed. “So after writing your first book, you switched to Brooke Skipstone. Why?”

“Because the characters and events I wanted to write about would cause more family drama and disapproval, and I didn’t want to deal with it.” Taylor raised her brows and offered a tiny smile. “They think I’ve been working on a science fiction series for the

past three years.” She rubbed her hands. “The other reason I began to use her name is I feel closer to her when I write. I can live *her* stories rather than regret my own.”

“Your family doesn’t know about Brooke?”

Taylor inhaled deeply, trying to calm her swirling stomach. “No one knows about the real Brooke. I suspect my husband knows my pen name, but we haven’t talked about it. Yet. He’s not happy I’m an author. He complains I spend all my time on the computer and accuses me of having secret boyfriends.”

Grace wiggled her brows and smiled. “Do you?”

“No. I have no friends.” Her throat thickened. “Just beta readers and editors when I have something for them to read. Otherwise, I go months without any real conversation.” Taylor leaned back and blew out a breath. “I’ve gotten used to living inside my mind.”

Grace scrunched her forehead. “You’re the same age as my grandmother, and besides Maddi, Gram’s my best friend. Why can’t we be friends?”

“We can. But friends need to be honest with each other.” Taylor knew Grace was hiding a secret about her book. She gazed into the girl’s eyes until Grace turned away.

She slumped. “My father gave me this book.”

“I know.”

Grace jerked her head back. “How?”

Taylor picked up the novel and pointed to the shout-out line at the top of the cover. “This isn’t the book I gave you. My copy was printed a year ago with *Three senior girls in rural Alaska escape their abusive pasts by raising their dyke flag for themselves*

and their community.” She turned the book around and pointed to the line in red between two drawings. “A few months ago, *Publishers Weekly* reviewed the book, and I changed the line on the cover.” Taylor turned the book around. “*This story of found family brims with high drama. Whoever gave you this book ordered it recently.*”

Grace looked to the ceiling and clenched her jaw. “Dad gave me this copy this morning. He said, ‘Ask Mrs. MacKenzie to sign this book. Tell her you know she wrote it. If you don’t bring it back with her signature, I’ll change the locks so you can’t get into my house.’ He didn’t know you’d already given me a copy. Oh, and he warned me not to read the book. He said he’d know if I opened any pages. ‘I see any evidence that you looked through this book, and I’ll whip you.’ I said, ‘You can’t whip me. I’m eighteen. I’ll go to the troopers.’ I stormed out of the house as he yelled, ‘Get her signature!’ The idiot doesn’t know that anyone can read the first few chapters of any book online.”

Taylor shook her head as her throat burned. *Why is my signature so important?* She knew Levi was loud and adamant about his politics but didn’t know he was abusive to Grace. “What do you do when he threatens you like that?”

“Go to Gram’s. She’s the total opposite of him. What you said about the ‘patriarchy’ sounds just like her. Gram doesn’t take any shit from him.”

“His mother?”

“No. His mother won’t have anything to do with him. Gram moved up here two years ago after Mom died of Covid.” Grace’s face turned red as she snapped her words. “You know, the disease Dad still calls a hoax.”

My God, the man is crazy. Poor girl.

Grace held out a marker and raised her brows.

Taylor had never signed any of her books. Her family was too angry and ashamed to want her identified as the author of her first novel. She took the marker and carefully pulled the cover back to expose the title page. “I’ve never signed Brooke’s name before. Let’s see if I remember how she did it.” Taylor scribed a large B with flourishes, then added an indecipherable squiggle. She did the same with the S, followed by a longer squiggle. Her hands shook as she replayed scenes of Brooke signing programs for her fans. “That’s pretty close.”

Grace took the book. “I’d already decided to tell Dad you laughed when I said you wrote this and signed it as a joke. ‘Offer it on eBay,’ you said. ‘See if anyone will buy a signed copy. You don’t have to say who signed it.’” Grace held the book against her chest and gazed at Taylor’s face. “Did you love her?”

Taylor’s skin tingled. “With all my heart.”

Grace leaned closer and whispered. “Did you two . . . You know. It’s cool with me if you did.”

Taylor smiled. “You’ll have to read this book to find out.” Taylor pulled out her phone. “I’ll airdrop it.”

Grace fetched her phone. “Just text it to me. You should still have my number.”

“Okay,” Taylor said. “There it goes.”

Grace’s lips spread wide in a smile. “Cool. Since you texted me, I can text you back. Like real friends.”

Taylor nodded. “Like real friends.”

“Are you finished writing the book?”

“No. I’m still working on the ending.”

Grace clicked on the pdf file. “Happy or sad or both, like *Crystal’s House*?”

Taylor stood and slipped her phone into her hoodie’s pouch. “I don’t know. I’m a pantsler, so I never plot out my books before writing. The story grows on its own. But this one is more complicated than the others because there’s a comet headed toward Earth.”

Grace frowned and stood. “Like in *Don’t Look Up*?”

“No. A human comet.” She hitched a breath and briefly closed her eyes. “My brother was released from prison a month ago, and I think he wants to find me.”

Grace frowned and tilted her head. “Is he dangerous?”

“Possibly. But that’s part of the ending. I’ll have to wait and see.” She shook her head to eliminate any images of Austin threatening to fill her mind. Taylor changed the topic. “When will parents learn that forbidding their children to do something ensures they’ll do it? And then learn to lie and keep secrets. Reading a book shouldn’t be a crime.”

Grace looked back at the door, then turned toward Taylor with a mischievous grin. “I set a goal two months ago to read every banned book. I have *Gender Queer* and *The Bluest Eye* on my phone right now. If idiot parents and politicians hadn’t called them porn, I wouldn’t have known about them.”

Taylor coughed a laugh. “Good for you.”

Grace opened the cover and smiled at the signature. “Even though he ordered me to get this, I’ll always cherish it.”

“Why do you think your father wanted me to sign the book?” Taylor asked.

Grace spit out her words. “So he can *prove* you wrote it and then *condemn* you. So he can stir up *outrage* like he always does. So he can *pretend* to be somebody important.” She shook her head. “How did he know you wrote this?”

“I’m sure my husband told him. He and Levi have become great friends recently.”

Grace’s lips flattened against her teeth. “I hate him. I can’t wait to get out of that house.”

“Can you live with Gram?”

“She wants me to.”

“Then follow your heart and find the courage. The shit’s about to hit the fan.”

Grace nodded. “Thank you for sharing and trusting me.” She grabbed Taylor’s hand.

“That was easy. The next part is the killer.”

Grace squeezed then let go. “Bring it on.” Her face lit up with a smile. “Bye.”

“Hey, before you go. Where’s the copy I gave you?”

“With Gram. She wanted to read it.”

Taylor sucked in her lips.

“Don’t worry,” Grace said. “She’s cool. You two would like each other.”

The girl scampered out of the room, clutching the book. Taylor couldn’t help but smile even as the quiver grew in her stomach. Grace’s father and most of the town

would consider *Crystal's House* pornographic because queer sex is perverse by definition. She'd heard such comments many times on Levi's podcast. They would say that Taylor had given Grace "inappropriate" material to read to groom her because all queers are pedophiles.

She and Grace had shared secrets and planned to share more. Everything about this interaction was wrong, according to the outraged.

Those who ban and condemn and restrict and shame.

Who see scandal everywhere.

The same crowd she had succumbed to long ago.

Not anymore.

As Grace had said—*Bring it on.*

Chapter Two

The One-Off

Grace walked through the Commons area toward her locker, staring at her phone. The title page loaded on her phone screen— *The Life and Death of Brooke Skipstone* by Brooke Skipstone. Other students walked by her, muttering hellos, but she didn't respond. She couldn't wait any longer to read.

Chapter One —

"Open the frigging door," begged my roommate Brooke. "I need to pee." She squeezed her legs together and leaned against the wall.

We'd just come home from the cast party of *Twelfth Night*, our last college production before graduation in May 1974. Staggering on our dark back porch, I tried to focus my drunken eyes and aim the key toward the lock. "I keep missing the damn hole."

"Yeah, that was Jacob's problem too."

I choked on a laugh. "What?"

"We were smashed in the back of his car. Dark as shit, and he's humping my leg, the seat, and my stomach, grunting louder and louder."

The key scraped against the lock and into the wood as I doubled over with a howl. "What happened?"

"I said, 'Jacob! Don't you know where to put it?' He whimpered, 'I can't find it.' So I grabbed him," she said as she found my hand to guide the key into the lock, "then pushed him in." She tried to push the key into the hole. "Taylor, that's the wrong key. It's too big."

I snorted. "Like Jacob?"

"Normally, yes, but tonight he went limp and crashed. I left him snoring in his car."

Grace shrieked in laughter and slid down the lockers until she sat on the floor.

Allison, a teacher's aide and volunteer who led cooking classes for middle school students, opened the kitchen door and found Grace cackling. "Don't you need to get home?" she barked. Her dyed black hair was ratted up and heavily sprayed.

Grace rolled her eyes, stood up, and opened her locker. "I'll just be a minute."

Allison huffed, shot her an icy stare through heavily lined lids, and returned to the kitchen, leaving the door ajar.

Grace continued reading.

I tried to push the key into the lock. "That's the opposite problem I have with Charles. I never know whether he's inside me or not. His dick is maybe two inches long."

Brooke touched my cheek. "Poor baby! Why do you stay with him?" She took my key ring.

"I'm not. I broke up with him tonight."

She moved her face close to mine. "Good for you." Brooke held up one key. "This is for your car." She held up another as she moved even closer, her lips nearly brushing mine. "This is for our house." She held up her middle finger. "And this is for two inadequate men who will not be allowed to ruin our evening." She moved the key to the lock while brushing her arm against my breasts. After she unlocked the door and flicked on the lights, she ran through the kitchen. "I've got the bathroom."

Grace cackled. "Oh my God, Taylor. Not even two pages and we have tiny, limp dicks and a guy humping a car seat. I love it."

Allison burst out of the kitchen and scowled. "What did you say?"

"Nothing." Grace grabbed her jacket and slammed her locker. "On my way." She trotted down the hall and out of the building. She walked carefully through the icy parking lot until she reached her old Ford Ranger. After climbing inside and turning on the motor, she continued reading.

I wet a towel by the sink and wiped my face and neck, trying to calm myself. I'd almost kissed her. For the past two weeks, I had sat on the downstage right corner of the Bob Hope Theatre stage, playing the harpsichord while Brooke performed an amazing Viola. Disguised as a beautiful boy, she turned Olivia into a lovesick, horny woman while trying to hide her own attraction to Duke Orsino. At one point in the play, Olivia loved a girl, Orsino loved a boy, and Antonio loved Viola's brother. And then, with the excuse of mistaken identities, these loves were returned to "normal," meaning heterosexual.

I could understand Olivia's infatuation. Indeed, I'd begun to root for her. Why couldn't it be possible? I had watched Brooke rehearse and perform that role for the past month and found my affection for her growing daily. We'd been roommates and theatre junkies for the past three years, done everything together, even had sex with boyfriends at the same time in our house—she in the bedroom, me in the living room—but had never crossed the line with each other.

Except for a few times in my dreams and that night during the final scene when I lost myself in her face and almost missed my cue to play the last number. After the show, we went to the director's house and danced, got drunk, swam naked in his pool with half the cast, then disappeared in our boyfriends' cars for a passionless, obligatory interlude.

Brooke opened the bathroom door, wearing only a t-shirt, holding both hands behind her back. She'd pulled her cinnamon hair into a ponytail. Her tongue peeked between her freshly painted lips as she slinked toward me like an intoxicating wolf.

I couldn't breathe.

She stopped when our breasts pressed together. Her deep-set blue eyes possessed mine, pulling me closer until she flicked my lip with her tongue. I gasped and pressed my lips to hers. She gently bit my lower lip and sucked it into her mouth, tugging moans from my throat. My hands touched her cheeks as our tongues urgently explored each other. My fingers pushed through her hair and pulled her face hard against mine. I wanted her so.

She leaned back and flashed the most seductive smile I'd ever seen. Her hands emerged from behind her back, holding a rubber dildo and a Magic Wand vibrator. My eyes bulged as I clasped my mouth. "Where did you get those?"

She touched the dildo to my lips. "At a back room in a head shop. Bet you'd feel that inside you," she purred. She pushed the wand against my breast. "The muscle relaxer was on sale at Macy's."

"Relaxer?" My heart raced.

“Depends on where you put it.” She pressed it against my shoulder. “I think this would be relaxing.” She pushed it down between our crotches and undulated against it. “Maybe down there, not so much.”

I moaned and reached for her hips, pulling them closer.

Brooke kissed my cheek and whispered in my ear, “This was our last college show. I expected to get laid and go to bed exhausted and satisfied. Jacob and Charles were a bust, so how about you and me?”

I hitched a breath as every nerve sparked. “My bed or yours?”

“Mine.” She held out the wand’s cord. “There’s a plug exactly where it needs to be.” She backed away. “Meet me there in two minutes with fewer clothes on.”

Warmth surged through my skin. “Is none too many?”

“None is perfect.”

After two hours of grunting, laughing, begging, and moaning, we collapsed against each other. Wasted. Drenched in sweat and our own juices.

As Taylor walked to her Subaru Outback, Grace half-opened her door to tell her how much she liked the book. Then the memory of her father’s plan slipped into her mind—maybe she shouldn’t bring any more attention to her . . . But when Taylor looked over at the truck, Grace couldn’t resist. She jumped outside and half-skidded over the ice toward the woman.

“I love this. Really love it.” Grace flung her arms around Taylor and squeezed.

Taylor laughed and said, “My my . . . where are you in the story?”

“You and Brooke just had two hours of sex.” *Just like Maddi and me.* Grace released the woman as Allison exited the main entrance, throwing a scowl their way. “But I’m worried about Brooke. I think I’m going to cry soon.”

“Crying shows you care about others. It’s the people who don’t cry we have to worry about.”

“I’ll finish it tonight.” Allison watched them, shaking her head. “Now, that’s a lady who wouldn’t shed a tear for anyone. I’ll see you tomorrow.” She turned and hurried back to her truck, where she resumed reading.

I awoke to the smell of coffee and Brooke humming in the kitchen. I buried my face in her pillow and inhaled her scent to make it permanent in my brain—sweet lemons, sweat, butter. Something I could always summon when I wanted it.

Emerging naked from her bed, I nearly ran into the kitchen to hold her but hesitated. What if she had dressed? What would she think? After slipping on a t-shirt, I moved to the bathroom, washed my face, and fluffed my hair before sucking in a breath and opening the door.

Brooke wore shorts and a t-shirt as she fried bacon. She didn’t look up.

I walked toward her with wobbly legs but tried to act confident and sexy. "Maybe I should have stayed in bed so you could serve me." I leaned toward her and kissed her cheek, noting no reaction, just continued humming. My chest burned. Resting my chin on her shoulder and wrapping my arms around her stomach, I whispered, "Are we going to pretend nothing happened?"

She stared at the stove. "Something very pleasurable happened."

My stomach dropped. She hadn't touched my hands. "But it's a one-off?"

She hesitated. "For now."

My throat knotted as I backed away. She lifted bacon strips out of the pan, dropped them onto a plate, flipped off the gas, and pushed the skillet to the back burner.

She turned around and raised her hands to my face. "Taylor, I love you as my best friend. I don't want that to change."

"Why would it?"

"Right now, we totally trust each other. No jealousy. We're free to be with whomever we want. I think that would change if we . . ." She swallowed and looked away.

"Kept having the best sex either of us has ever had?"

"Yeah." She touched her forehead to mine. "The best."

My fingers found her stomach. "What we do in our house is private. Outside, we just act normal."

"That can't last. I don't want to have to act around you. Besides, you were hired as a good little straight theatre teacher at a Christian school. Not a gay teacher. The only reason we've never been accused of being lesbians is because of our periodic boyfriends."

"Who never meant anything to either of us," I said.

"No. Which worries me because I also don't feel a desire to be with a guy right now."

I played with her hair. "Okay, last night was a one-off, and I'll keep my hands off you." I traced her mouth with my finger. "But if you ever kiss me on the lips again, I am not responsible for what happens next."

"Deal."

I took a step backward. "I'm going to take a shower. For some reason, I feel sticky, and I smell." I turned around and started walking toward the bathroom, making an extra effort to swing my hips as I raised my arms to stretch.

"Your shirt is a little short."

I reached back and exposed my butt. "Must have shrunk in the wash." I felt her eyes burning my skin.

"Maybe you should lock the door."

I turned around. "Otherwise, you'll barge in and attack me?" I tried my best to flash her a sexy smile. "In that case, I won't even close the door." I turned again and pulled off my shirt as I walked away. "You're the great actress. Just act like you don't want me."

She blurted, "I'll go for a walk." Then rushed out the back door.

"Coward!"

After my shower, I wrapped a towel around my head and put on clothes. I found her sitting on the porch, her arms draped on the rails, panting. I leaned against a post, my belly knotting. "I'm sorry. It won't happen again."

She groaned. "I had to walk around the block three times."

"Only three?" I dropped down next to her with a heavy sigh.

Brooke cleared her throat. "I won't kiss you, and you won't flash me."

"Promise. What about your toys?"

"I'll hide them. Give me a few minutes to clean up, then we should go to the laundromat. I can't sleep in those sheets as long as they smell like you."

"I don't ever want to wash those sheets, but I'll strip the beds."

She turned her face toward me, her eyes pleading. "We can't talk about last night. At least for a while. Okay?"

A knot grew in my throat. "Promise."

We stood. She reached for the door and pulled it open. With her back toward me, she said, "Taylor, you . . . I . . ."

Tears welled in my eyes. "I know, Brooke. I feel the same. Go take a shower."

She walked into the house as I wiped my eyes. I swore to myself I would do everything to maintain our friendship and do nothing to threaten our lives together. We would be best friends and nothing more, though I could never quell my passion for her.

Grace tightened her jaw and tried to swallow. Tears flowed down her cheeks. Brooke was going to die soon. Why? How did Taylor live through that? Why did she marry Marshall and have children?

Because life sucks.

Evil people try to tear you down. Or force you to live their way and agree with their beliefs.

Like her father. The man glorified the protection of personal freedoms and speech, but only what he agreed with. There was no right to read queer books or discuss gender identities in school. No right to discuss racism or suggest it still exists.

When he was home, she had the right to remain silent or nod at everything he said. Which is why she went to her house only when he was away. She backed the truck and exited the parking lot, heading home.

This had been a heavy snow year, which in some ways was good because all the dead cars and yard junk lay hidden under insanely white snow. The melting would start in two weeks, and the snow would blur into a muddy fuzz of drunken monoliths.

She turned down D Street, where the house on the corner had collapsed that winter. A few guys lived in a very old motorhome nearby with a flue angled out a window to vent the small wood stove inside. They had pirated wood and insulation from the nearby house until the snow load collapsed the roof. Only a few sheets of plywood still stood erect.

People did what they had to do to stay warm during the winter, even if it meant scavenging wood from their own houses.

The same thing had happened to her family. Two years ago, her mother and brother had still lived with Grace and Dad. When Covid arrived, Mom quit her job. She was a diabetic and asthmatic and feared the disease. Chase, a senior at the time, and Grace had been sent home from school for remote learning.

Grace's dad, Levi, had always been far right in his politics, but Covid pushed him over the edge. It was a hoax invented by Dr. Fauci to push Trump out of office, after all. He had railed at everyone in the house and refused to take precautions. No one could wear a mask in his presence. He'd drunk and played poker with his friends while Mom had begged him to think of her safety.

Levi seemed to thrive on outrage, and his family's supposed weakness fed his fire. The more he screamed about the radical left online and with his friends, the more

respect he gained outside his home. He started a podcast and blog and even a call-in show.

In April 2020, he caught a cold and went berserk when his son and daughter refused to let him into the house without wearing a mask. “It’s just a cold, damnit!” he yelled before pushing his way inside. Despite keeping Mom isolated in her room wearing a mask while Chase and Grace wore theirs, Mom became sick and was rushed to the hospital in Fairbanks.

When the doctor delivered the Covid diagnosis to Levi, he lost it. “Just another damn lying liberal!” He would have punched the man if his children hadn’t intervened.

Mom died of Covid two months later. According to Dad, her death was caused by heart failure, diabetes, and obesity. He claimed as others did at the time that deaths were being blamed on Covid because of media hype, all designed to make Trump lose the election. The fact that Levi recovered from his “cold” proved him right.

Chase and Dad fought all the time after that. Her brother finally moved to Fairbanks and joined the pipefitter’s union. When vaccines were available the following year, Chase returned to Clear to take Grace to get her shot. Of course, Dad refused, even threatening to shoot his son if he “trespassed” again.

By then, Gram had moved to town to “protect” her granddaughter from the man who’d killed her daughter. As soon as Grace turned eighteen, they’d secretly driven to Healy for her vaccine.

At the end of D Street, Grace slowed her truck as she passed Fourth Avenue, where Taylor lived down the road. She’d always thought Taylor and Marshall were a

happy couple, but she'd mainly spent her time with Taylor and rarely seen them together. Then she remembered in Taylor's first book that the father and mother argued about how to respond to their daughter's drug use. Maybe that part was real.

She turned the corner onto Center Drive toward her house while thinking of all the secrets she knew about families in her town—the gossip kids told about their parents and the things kids hid from them.

She'd kept her secret about her relationship with Maddi from everyone for years until Gram moved to town. When Grace introduced Maddi to Gram, her grandmother knew they were girlfriends. A woman whose face quickly revealed all of her thoughts and emotions could also read everyone else's. "No secrets in my house," she'd said. "I'd rather you love a girl anyway. No chance of getting pregnant. Use the back bedroom whenever."

So they did.

But no one else knew, though evidently, Taylor had suspected. Until she'd read *Crystal's House*, Grace would never have thought to share her sexual identity with Taylor.

Grace parked her truck and entered her house, where she made a beeline for her father's office door, leading to his secret room in the basement no one ever saw. He recorded his podcasts down there with the door to the stairs locked from inside. Dad claimed the room contained expensive equipment and soundproofing that he didn't want damaged.

But he had to have been hiding something else.

She lifted the combination lock and took a photo of the numbered dials to ensure she returned them to their original position before she left. She'd tried every birthday combination she could think of, every special date she knew, but none had worked. Now she went through random numbers systematically using a chart of the 10,000 possible combinations of four numbers, checking them off one by one. Every day she'd try twenty, sometimes more.

She worried that he changed the code sometimes. He must have suspected her because each time she'd seen him open the door, he'd always stare at the dials for a few seconds before spinning them.

What would she do when the lock clicked open?

Look inside and photograph everything. Because he constantly railed against the decline of western culture and the rise of the queer agenda, she suspected he was hiding porn. Maybe even gay porn. Wouldn't that be ironic as hell?

She remained in his house to find out. To nail him. To reveal to the world that, once again, someone who condemned the behavior of others was frequently guilty of the same.

It bothered her that many in Clear loved him. A giant of a man with a long beard hanging straight down from his chin, quick to smile and laugh outside his family, he had opened an abandoned church and held services on Sundays and game nights on Tuesdays.

"All are invited! Come as you are!" As long as they weren't queer, or liberals, or Trump haters, or trying to indoctrinate children with CRT and LGBTQ nonsense. Or

intent on confiscating everybody's guns. If there was a town in the state with none of the above, it was Clear, Alaska. Or they kept their heads down like Grace and Maddi.

Grace had promised Gram she'd leave town with her after graduation—along with Maddi. Gram had a house in Homer, which was far more tolerant of “lefties” than Clear. They even held Pride Marches. Gram called it a drinking village with a fishing problem.

After twenty tries, Grace called it quits. She wrote a note to her father about Taylor laughing at her request to sign the book, which she left on the kitchen table.

She hurried to her room to grab some clothes because she intended to spend the night at Gram's with Maddi. Since she'd turned eighteen, her walls were covered with photos of Biden and Harris and AOC and the Squad, various rock stars—including Lil Nas X and Phoebe Bridgers—Bernie, Black Lives Matter posters, and more. What Grace did not display, however, were Pride Flags. She couldn't summon the courage to do it because she feared her father would crucify her during his podcasts and tell the world she was queer.

Crystal, Haley, and Payton in *Crystal's House of Queers* didn't care what others thought, which was why she admired them so much. If only she could summon the same courage.

When her dad had seen her newly decorated room, he'd fumed and threatened to kick her out. She had expected him to destroy her property and slap her around even as she said she'd call the troopers. But surprisingly, he didn't.

He'd merely stomped off and never entered her room again, as far as she could tell.

Why? She had no idea.

So she stayed with him—though she spent more and more time at Gram's—and redoubled her efforts to break his combo. She had only two months left.

She grabbed some chips to snack on as she drove to Gram's, one half of a vinyl-sided, two-bedroom duplex rental on F Street. She saw Maddi's car in the driveway, squealed in excitement, parked her truck, and bolted through the door.

The two girls crushed each other with hugs and kisses as Gram sat at the table reading *Crystal's House of Queers*.

"I didn't expect you until later," Grace said, breathless, pushing her fingers through Maddi's red-haired pixie. She'd graduated last year and now worked at the Blue Sky Lodge a few miles from town. Resembling an anime character with huge green eyes and a button nose, she looked younger than she was.

"The restaurant was dead," Maddi replied in her distinctive husky voice, "and I'd already finished wrapping the silverware, so I cut out."

Grace rubbed the girl's nose with her own. "I met another lesbian today," she teased.

Maddi's eyes bulged. "Who?"

Gram stood, a large, handsome woman with a buzz cut she did herself. "Taylor Baird MacKenzie. Your teacher," she said with her soothing, mezzo-soprano voice. She

dropped Grace's copy of *Crystal's House* onto the table and removed her reading glasses to hang on the lanyard around her neck. "AKA, Brooke Skipstone."

"Your teacher is a lesbian?" Maddi asked. "Cool."

Grace had shared her suspicions about Taylor's pen name before giving Gram the book the night before. "Did you finish?" Grace asked.

"Just now. I love the ending." She blew her big nose into a tissue. "A time to blow strawberries, a time to love, and a time to fight. Such a heartwarming romance, even if everyone is gay." She chuckled, revealing her lovely smile. "Imagine a house of queers in Clear. Your father would blow it up."

"No," Grace said, "he'd rant about it on his podcast until the town did it for him."

Maddi pulled on Grace's arm. "Come. Take a bath with me. I'm tired of smelling like cigarettes and grilled meat."

"Okay. But wait a second." She turned back to Gram. "Taylor loved a woman in college. Guess what her name was."

Gram smiled and scratched her ear. "Brooke Skipstone?"

"Yes!" Grace held out her phone for Gram and opened the chapters Taylor had given her. "Read this."

Gram took the phone. "By Taylor?"

"Yes. The story of her and Brooke in college before Brooke died."

Gram frowned and pursed her lips. "She died? Why did she give this to you?"

"I asked her to. No one in her family knows about the real Brooke."

"No one?"

Grace shook her head.

Maddi looked at the phone in Gram's hand. "Will you read it to me later?"

"Yes," Grace said. "After our bath." She pulled Maddi to her.

Gram put on her glasses. "Someone so important to her, and yet no one knows?"

"Except me," Grace said.

Gram plopped into her wingback chair. "She's kept a secret for so long, and now she's writing a book about it. Why now?"

"She said her brother was just released from prison and wants to find her."

"Why?"

"Come on, Grace," Maddi urged.

"I think he wants to hurt her. She turned pale when she mentioned him."

Gram blew out a long breath as she raised her glasses to her eyes. "Prison, huh. I wonder what for."

Maddi squealed when she finally pulled Grace from the room.

Chapter Three

The Sound of Falling Water

Having just climbed into her car, Taylor watched Allison glare at Grace as the girl walked back to her truck. Allison moved toward her just as Taylor was about to close her car door.

“That girl is a wild one,” grumbled Allison. “I’m surprised her father allows it.”

Taylor looked up at the angry face and flashed a smile. “I don’t think he has a choice. Good night.” Taylor wasn’t sure if Allison had heard the “two hours of sex” line or not, but she was sure about her witnessing the hug. She gently pulled her door closed, avoiding more conversation.

So far, the only news Levi could spread was that Taylor wrote obscene fiction. No one knew she had given books to Grace. But that would come out eventually.

Perhaps her husband told Levi by accident, possibly blurting it out without thinking of the consequences. Or did he have his own plan?

She’d find out in an hour when he came home from work.

As she drove down Fourth Avenue toward her house, she noticed tiny catkins emerging from willows next to her garage. Snow covered her yard for seven months of the year. When the temperature finally broke forty degrees, and the first buds formed on the most spindly limbs, Taylor allowed herself to believe in rebirth and change.

And color.

She parked her car and stepped slowly onto the ice covering her gravel driveway. She stared at her empty iron hanging baskets and imagined them full of multi-

colored calibrachoa spilling over the sides of coconut fiber inserts. And the delphiniums, which returned every summer to grow higher than the window, thick with light purple and dark blue petals.

Would she see them bloom this year?

She'd been so busy writing during the past weeks she hadn't bothered to order seeds to plant under her grow lights in the back bedroom. This would not be a normal spring-to-summer transition—transferring seedlings into larger and larger pots until a joyous planting on the first of June in the outside beds.

This year, there was no scenario she could imagine permitting that sequence. One way or another, she'd be gone.

She opened the door and again missed the excited scraping of claws on the floor and the unrestrained tail wagging as Sunny greeted her. The big Golden Retriever had always welcomed her as if she'd been gone for days rather than hours or even minutes. Coming home to that love and excitement had been the highlight of her day. But Sunny had died of cancer during their last year teaching in a village. Not able to withstand another loss, Taylor had opted to forgo pets, thereby ensuring her remaining life of no physical affection, no unbridled joy, and no absolute, non-judgmental empathy for her.

The joy of being loved seemed never enough to stand the pain of its loss.

Once inside, she removed her computer from her satchel and opened it on her desk. She wanted to record what had happened that day with Grace.

Slipping on her headphones and starting her ten-minute continual loop of the sound of waterfalls, she escaped into the persona of Brooke Skipstone—talented, kind,

extroverted, romantic, sexy. Taylor's own mundane existence, devoid of love or passion, was inadequate to create the stories and characters she wanted. Only through Brooke could her heart and mind soar. Her office disappeared, and her fingers found the keys automatically as she replayed the day's events.

Two hours later, the time on her computer screen indicated six o'clock. Marshall was late. She rose and walked the length of her house to the sunroom, her favorite area because of all the windows, but now six-foot berms of snow loomed over the deck, blocking the view on two sides. The third side faced the driveway, which gleamed under the sun shining along the path through the trees.

Above her hung etched baleen from a Bowhead whale caught by the father of one of her students in the village of Kaktovik some years ago. Tied to some hair strands were fossilized tusk ivory from walrus and bear claws. She had witnessed the village celebrate twenty-seven whale harvests during the years she and her husband taught the Iñupiat, the last time she felt part of a community. She had been beloved, and she had loved in return.

But in the confines of their house on stilts next to the school, Marshall and Taylor had drawn farther apart. Their daughter, Heather, had gone to rehab twice and used drugs both times immediately after release. She had become pregnant and had a miscarriage. Once, she was clean for a few months and had become a popular motivational speaker at 12-Step meetings, but a former boyfriend hooked up with her, and she'd used again.

Heather had called them infrequently, mostly asking for money to fix a crisis of one kind or another. Marshall refused to send anything and wanted to change their phone numbers. He'd had enough.

Taylor wanted to fly down to Oregon to be with her, even if it meant losing her job.

Then one evening, Heather called and complained that her boyfriend had hit her, and one of his friends had come by, threatening to kill him. She'd fired a shotgun in the friend's direction to get him to leave.

Taylor asked if she'd come to visit. Would she agree to leave her boyfriend and live with them? They could start over if she promised to stay with her parents for at least six months. Heather promised.

Marshall argued against the idea. He and Taylor fought, but she bought all the tickets anyway. Her daughter would arrive the next day.

Taylor couldn't sleep from anticipation and worry and happiness, but when Heather exited the plane holding an underweight, crying toddler, Taylor couldn't stop her tears as she ran to grasp her daughter and grandchild. Heather had never mentioned a baby.

"You had a baby?" Taylor asked. "Why didn't you tell us?"

Heather took her daughter out of her mother's arms and shot her a cold glance. "Like you would care."

Taylor gasped, her legs almost buckling.

As soon as they entered their house, Heather asked, "Do you have any vodka?"

“No,” Marshall answered in disbelief. “This is a dry village.”

Heather scoffed, “I met a guy on the plane who said he could get me some. Do you want me to call him?”

Taylor prepared food for Sierra, who ate everything and asked for more. Then the phone calls began. Her boyfriend wanted her back.

Taylor begged her daughter to stay while Marshall threatened to break her phone. Heather demanded money to fly back. She and Marshall screamed at each other while Taylor tried to distract Sierra.

The boyfriend announced his mother had given him money to fly Heather home. She left the next day after the village police questioned Marshall about his threats against his daughter and the kidnapping charge she’d levied against him, claiming he had refused to let her leave the house. All lies, of course, intended to make her parents want her to leave.

Seven months later after no contact, Taylor answered an early morning phone call from Heather’s boyfriend. Heather had died of a seizure. The young man said he was very sorry and hung up. Taylor screamed uncontrollably, waking up Marshall, who couldn’t understand why his wife was acting insane.

Despite their repeated attempts to talk to Heather’s boyfriend, they never heard from him or Sierra again.

During the next five years, husband and wife barely spoke to each other. Taylor spent more time at the school—teaching music, preparing the kids for talent shows, organizing the student store, and more.

But nothing could fill the hole in her heart, which gaped wider and deeper when she started dreaming about Brooke. After all the intervening years, Taylor had managed to lock her memories of Brooke into a dead section of her brain. But after Heather died, it burst open. Two women had been stolen from her life. She'd been able to bury thoughts of Brooke behind family obligations and the natural progression of her children's lives, but when Heather died, the façade of her world shattered.

The beautiful, passionate, engrossing life she'd lived with Brooke began to insinuate itself into every empty, insipid moment of her existence. What she'd had then and what she'd been condemned to since mocked her every day.

One night Taylor broke down wailing and couldn't stop. When Marshall asked what was wrong, Taylor whimpered, "I miss Heather." Which was true, but Brooke had forced the tears.

He sat next to her, filling her nose with his aftershave lotion. "She wasn't herself since high school. The person we met here a year ago was someone else."

Taylor choked on her tears. "Still . . ." She'd never told him about Brooke. He tried to hold her, but she shuddered and couldn't even pretend.

The only embrace she wanted to feel was Brooke's, and she was gone forever.
Again.

They retired from teaching and moved back to Clear. Marshall fixed up their house and built elevated planters and flowerbeds, while Taylor nurtured seedlings and began to write a story loosely based on her daughter's life.

For a year, she was able to distract her mind and lose herself in the all-consuming rush of creation. She enjoyed her sons' and families' visits to Alaska, fishing, hiking, and gardening. But the long winters became increasingly cold and lonely, especially after her family's response to her first book.

Until she found refuge in Brooke Skipstone and wrote *her* stories.

A pickup truck turned onto Fourth Avenue. Not Marshall's.

Levi's. Marshall rode shotgun.

Her heart thumped against her chest. She hadn't expected to deal with both of them.

She hurried to fetch her coat and stood on the deck when Levi parked.

Both men emerged with tight lips.

Marshall wore a Carhartt knit cap, hiding his still-thick, whitening hair. He'd always been a handsome man and had aged well. When they met, he was a little taller. Seventy-two years and some back problems had pushed him down to a little over six feet. Still strong with just a hint of a beer belly, he worked part-time at the bowling alley on the nearby air base.

"Where's your truck?" Taylor asked.

"Being towed to Nenana," Marshall answered. "We couldn't get it started."

"I think the alternator's bad," Levi said, hooking his thumbs on his overalls, pushing back his jean jacket.

There was a pause as both men scrutinized her.

Taylor smiled. "Your daughter asked me to do the strangest thing today." Levi's eyes tightened. She didn't think he expected her to mention it.

"What's that?" he asked.

Taylor smiled. "Sign a book. Something she'd been reading. She said she'd never had a signed copy before and wondered whether I'd oblige." Her heart pounded, but she managed to appear calm and bemused.

Marshall's jaw tightened. "Did you sign it?"

"Sure I did. Why not? I told her she could sell it on eBay as a genuine signed copy." Taylor winked. "Just don't mention who signed it."

Both men's mouths dropped open.

Taylor couldn't help but puff out her chest. "I told her to bring me any other books she wanted to be signed. I hope that's okay with you, Levi."

"I'll have a talk with her," Levi grumbled.

"No need. No one's ever asked me to sign anything, so it made me feel special." She wasn't lying. She knew Grace loved having a signed copy of her book.

Levi pursed his lips. "Marshall, you need a ride tomorrow?"

"Nope. I won't be going to the Base. Thanks anyway."

"Okay." Levi nodded toward Taylor. "I'll be seeing you, Taylor."

"I'm sure you will," Taylor said with as much innuendo as she could muster.

"Thanks for bringing my husband home."

Marshall didn't take his eyes off his wife, even as Levi turned around and drove off.

Taylor waved vigorously, then looked over at Marshall. “We need to talk.” She opened the door and walked inside until she reached the kitchen. She heard Marshall’s slow footsteps behind her as her anger grew.

Marshall folded his arms and leaned against the kitchen table. Taylor leaned back against the sink. A granite-covered island stood between them.

“Do you have something to say to me?” Taylor asked, slinging a hard stare at her husband. “Or do you just talk to Levi about your discoveries?”

Marshall rolled his eyes and shuffled his feet. “You’re something else, Taylor. You’re the one keeping secrets for three years.”

“What secret have you kept for two weeks after I turned off my screensaver? You were able to read my computer screen when I wasn’t around.” She searched his eyes.

Marshall scrunched his forehead. “You wanted me to see what you wrote?”

“Duh. It never dawned on you that suddenly my screen was always on when it had been dark for months?”

Marshall sucked in breaths as he flattened his lips against his teeth.

Taylor smirked. “You always snoop around my computer when I’m away from it. You try to guess my passwords, then leave the screen in a different position than where I’d left it. I decided to make it easy for you. And then see what you’d do with your discovery.”

Marshall balled his hands into fists and muttered.

“I think I just heard ‘bitch’ or maybe ‘shit,’” Taylor snapped. Her body vibrated in anger as her neck throbbed. “What I never heard was, ‘Taylor, we need to talk about

your books and your pen name. I want to understand what you've been writing and why.' No, what you decided to do was tell your secret to the biggest right-wing asshole in town! For what purpose, Marshall? So he can destroy me on his podcast?"

Marshall stared back at her, his chin thrust out. "You've been writing filthy books about queers, Taylor. Seems to me you're the one at fault here. Why were you hiding it if you didn't think what you were doing was wrong? Why haven't you told our sons?" His eyes were wide as he paused. "Because you don't want them to know you're writing queer porn."

Her stomach hardened. "Porn? Have you read any of my books? They've all won awards. My latest received a Kirkus Starred Review, which is pretty damn hard to get. Lots of people have left heartfelt reviews. They've cried and laughed and loved my characters."

He shoved his hands into his pockets. "Yeah, well, there are millions of people out there. You can always find a few who'll like anything."

The air between them sparked with hatred. Taylor had long since deadened her feelings for him and sworn to herself he would never hurt her again, but no shield was impervious all the time.

"And you know what's worse?" Marshall asked, his nostrils flaring. "You're promoting a perverse lifestyle in which gays and transgenders and 'I'll have sex with anyone or anything' are normal. Something to teach about in kindergarten. There's movies and books and TV shows everywhere, full of these people. It's gotten to the point where being straight and normal—"

“Is dull and boring!” Taylor mimicked his voice. “‘You’ve got to be queer or trans to be cool nowadays.’ Says your great friend, Levi Mitchell, almost every day.”

Marshall stabbed the air. “Well, it’s true. It’s all part of *The Queering of America*. If we don’t stamp it out now, there’ll be no normal males or females in this country or the world. Everyone can choose to be whatever they want.”

Taylor tightened her eyes. “Define ‘stamp it out,’ Marshall.”

“Stop it!” he shouted, his upper lip curled back. “Stop publishing books like yours. Get rid of queer media.”

“Just ‘Don’t say gay.’”

“Exactly!”

“And ‘Don’t ask, don’t tell.’”

“Exactly!”

Taylor shook her head and blew out a breath. “What will you do if one of our grandkids comes out as gay?”

He folded his arms and scowled. “That will never happen.”

“Really? What if one or more of them does?”

Marshall cocked his head. “I’m sure Gene and George will know what to do.”

“Which is what? Throw them out? Or maybe the kids will be so scared of consequences they’ll hide who they are and be miserable for the rest of their lives.” Heat surged through her neck. “And then get married to someone you never really loved because you were afraid to tell anyone you’re a lesbian? Because your girlfriend was killed by a homophobic piece of shit!”

Marshall's mouth dropped open. "Who are you talking about?"

"Brooke Skipstone."

He grimaced. "You're Brooke Skipstone."

"I wish I was." Taylor wiped tears from her face. "More than anything." She strode toward her office, Marshall stomping close behind. "I'm going to send Gene and George copies of all my books and links to my reviews." She sat at her desk and lifted her computer lid.

"No, you will not!" He slammed the computer lid down.

Taylor yanked her fingers out just in time. "Are you resorting to violence, Marshall?" She pulled out her phone. "I'm recording everything, starting now." She punched her camera button. "So what do you have to say after slamming my computer lid?"

Marshall growled and raised his fists to his head. "Sometimes, Taylor, sometimes—"

"I want to kill you? I wish I'd never married you? I wish you'd drop dead? All of the above?" His face turned purple on her screen.

Marshall took several deep breaths before speaking. "If you don't agree to stop writing books and remove the ones you've already published forever, Levi will share your secret with everyone in town and his thousands of listeners. He's waiting for my call."

Taylor's stomach balled up as she stared at her husband's smirk.

“Think hard about this, Taylor. You’ll be crucified in this town. Is that what you want?”

She shook her head, stopped recording, and tried to keep from laughing. “That’s not what *you* want, obviously. My embarrassment would spill over onto you, which you couldn’t stand. I have another proposal since we’re bargaining over my life.” She leaned back in her chair. “I’ll keep writing and doing what I want without interference from you *or* Levi, and in return, I won’t bring my books to school for anyone who wants to read them. And I won’t post links on the community Facebook page to download free ebooks.” She watched Marshall’s eyes widen in fear. “What do you say to that? Do we have a deal?”

Marshall swallowed and cleared his throat. “You wouldn’t.”

“I would. No doubt about it.”

“What about our sons?”

She sat upright and opened her computer. “I probably won’t have time to send them anything tonight. I’m trying to finish a new book.”

He harrumphed. “What’s this one about?”

“The life and death of Brooke Skipstone.” She watched his right eye twitch. “You’ll read it someday.”

He shook his head. “Don’t think I will.”

“We’ll see.” Her eyes perused his face, noting the strong nose, chin, and still-full lips he had since they first met. And blue eyes, which had faded only a little. She spoke

softly, “When did you become such a hateful homophobe? You didn’t use to be this way.”

He sneered. “When did you turn gay?”

Taylor sucked in breaths, trying to decide if she’d admit what she’d kept hidden for over forty years. “I was always gay. Just too scared to admit it.” Angry at herself for holding back for so long, she clenched her jaw. “I loved one woman with my entire soul and might have found another to love, but I fell into a trap.”

His upper lip curled. “By marrying me.”

“Yes.” Her voice shook. “The kids at your father’s school thought we were cute together, the youngest teachers by far on campus. Eddie and Leo and Anna played matchmaker.” Their cute faces flashed in her mind. “Every day was full of giggles and whispers until they screamed in delight when you told them we were getting married. Neither of us wanted to disappoint them. I loved those kids.”

Marshall’s face drooped. He asked quietly, “Did you ever love me?”

“I thought I did.” He dropped his gaze. “At best, our marriage has been rocky, Marshall. I know you’ve had regrets, and I don’t blame you. I can’t pretend anymore.”

The muscles in his jaw tightened. He spat out his words. “You need to stop this nonsense.”

“I am.” Her gaze fixed on his for several seconds before she said, “Go call Levi. I’ve got work to do.”

He started to turn then stopped and mumbled, “Dinner?”

She offered a thin smile. “If I don’t cook, you won’t have to clean. There are leftovers and lunchmeat. Figure it out.” She slipped on her headphones. “I’ll send you a copy.”

She didn’t notice his leaving.

In years past, she had cried and screamed after such fights, but she had become numb to them. Days would go by with nothing more than casual, meaningless comments. One day she’d kept track of how many words she’d said to him. Twenty-three. Then the inevitable flare-up, like an unpredictable geyser, would drown the day with hate and accusations and anger. Always the same words but in different arrangements.

She’d learned it was better to stay silent, to ignore him, and escape into her writing.

Closing her eyes, she focused on the roaring sound in her ears and remembered standing with Brooke under a gushing showerhead at a KOA Campground near Carlsbad during their drive to Oregon. They’d both entered separate stalls, but as soon as two mothers and kids left the bathroom, Brooke had knocked on Taylor’s door.

They’d dropped their towels and stared. Soon, Brooke hugged Taylor and walked her into the shower.

They’d stood under the warm water—nose to nose, breast to breast, thigh to thigh—and watched the streams trickle over their skin as they’d stared into each other’s eyes. The rest of the world had disappeared except for them.

Taylor had never felt so completely happy and relaxed in her life. When she started writing as Brooke Skipstone, she immersed herself in the same sound of falling water.

After several minutes, she opened her eyes to find a text from Grace.

Are you busy?

Taylor picked up the phone and hesitated. Should she respond? Technically she shouldn't be texting a student unless it related to classwork. She decided to be brief—

Writing more chapters.

Do you listen to my father's podcasts?

Taylor's heart skipped a beat. *Sometimes.*

He's talking about your book without mentioning your name. He even read some sections. He said he'll reveal more on future shows.

An uneasy combination of fear, excitement, and relief swept through her mind, swirling her thoughts—*He couldn't control himself. Marshall told him No, but Levi still couldn't resist. Everyone in town would be hanging onto his every word. Marshall must be petrified.*

Very interesting, Taylor replied.

Grace texted. *Gram wants to meet you. She has sugar cookies and scrumptious Samovar tea. Can you visit?*

Taylor took a deep breath. She had to get out of the house. She didn't want to deflect another torrent of rage from Marshall. What harm could there be in meeting a student's grandparent? *I'd love to. Sounds yummy. Where?*

F Street, between 2nd and 3rd, on the left, duplex. My truck's out front. Left unit.

Taylor's scalp tingled. She couldn't remember the last time she visited another house or sat down for a conversation. *Five minutes.*

Taylor slipped her computer into her bag and walked into the kitchen. She couldn't see Marshall in the den or sunroom. Maybe he was upstairs, hiding.

She opened the door, peeked outside, and gasped at the rippled, pink and magenta clouds glowing in the western sky. "Such a beautiful sunset!" If Marshall asked where she'd gone, she'd say, "To watch the sunset in the park." Hell, she'd tell the truth. Why not? She'd already told him she was gay.

As she drove, she realized she hadn't felt *real* anticipation or excitement since . . . when? Outside her books' characters, she often felt numb, almost emotionless.

It was nice to feel something real within herself at long last.

Chapter Four

The Gay Scene

After their bath, Grace and Maddi climbed into bed, wearing t-shirts and propping themselves against various-sized cushions while they read Taylor's book. Grace reread Chapter One out loud to Maddi, who could read but lacked fluency and loved to hear Grace's expressive voice. Maddi couldn't stop laughing after the porch scene. "I want to see the movie!" she screamed.

After finishing Taylor's next chapter about meeting Brooke for the first time in college, they walked to the kitchen to grab something to eat.

Maddi hooked Grace's arm. "Brooke and Taylor are cool together. Almost as good as us." She kissed Grace's cheek.

"Yeah," Grace said. "But we know she's going to die. Each chapter makes me more and more nervous."

They found Gram sitting in her chair, reading her iPad.

"Where are you?" Grace asked.

"About to finish Chapter Four." Gram removed her glasses and rubbed her eyes.

"Don't tell us," Maddi said.

She sucked in a breath. "I won't."

Her heart skipping, Grace asked, "Is it bad yet?"

"Not bad, but the plot thickens. There's a pot of homemade chicken soup on the stove. Help yourselves."

"Yum!" Maddi shouted. The girls found bowls to fill then sat down to eat.

Grace slurped a big spoonful into her mouth then Maddi slurped longer and louder. Soon they were snorting and cackling.

Gram laughed. "I love to have you girls in my house. You provide such interesting sounds. Whether you're eating or bathing or . . . whatever you do at night."

Grace's face heated. "Can you hear us?"

"Certainly. I'm not deaf."

"Do you mind?" Maddi asked, hiding her face.

Gram chuckled. "Heavens, no. It reminds me of when Pete and our friends used to get together."

"Friends?" Grace blurted. "You and Grandpa were swingers?"

"We experimented," Gram said with a twinkle in her eyes. "But only after your mother and uncle had moved out of the house."

Both girls stared open-mouthed at the old woman.

Gram put her hands on her hips. "Why do young people think the elderly aren't interested in sex? Pete and I enjoyed each other for many years before we decided to try something different."

"Did you have sex with a woman?" Grace whispered, her chest about to burst.

Gram nodded. "Clara and I were great friends."

"Even after Grandpa died?"

"Yes. But her husband got a brain tumor, so they moved to Seattle for treatment. Then your mother died, and I moved up here. When Clara's husband passed away, she

moved even farther away to be closer to her children.” Gram wiped her eyes. “So much tragedy happened at once.”

Grace’s chest ached as she hugged Gram. “I’m sorry you’ve been stuck in this shithole town without your friends because of me.”

Gram squeezed her granddaughter. “I’d rather be with you any day.” She held out an arm. “And Maddi.”

Maddi joined the hug.

Gram kissed both girls’ heads. “Does your mother know you’ll be leaving soon?”

“I hardly see her,” Maddi answered. “She spends most of her time with her asshole boyfriend. I’m either alone at my house or over here.”

“Well, you can stay here as much as you like.”

“Really?” Maddi kissed Gram’s cheek.

“Sure thing. You’re like my second granddaughter.” She released them both and fetched an Amazon box from the counter. “I got this today. It’s a noise machine. You can set it to white noise, ocean waves, rain, or a waterfall. Whatever you want. Turn it up loud when you two are wrestling with each other. My neighbor has called to complain about the noise a few times. The wall between us is not soundproof.” Gram lifted her brows twice. “She wonders what’s going on.”

Tingles swept up the back of Grace’s neck. “What do you say?”

“You’re watching movies.”

Both girls grinned.

Grace laughed. “Now all the movies will be about lesbians doing it on the beach.”

Maddi's eyes widened. "Or inside a tent in the rain forest. We can think of all kinds of scenarios. This will be fun. Thanks, Gram."

Gram chuckled. "Just make sure it's loud."

The girls carried the box to their bedroom and climbed back into the bed. Maddie pulled out her phone. "Ready for Chapter Three?"

Maddi snuggled against Grace's arm. "Let's do it."

Grace started reading.

Chapter Three –

After our one-off encounter in April, Brooke and I had restrained from sexual behavior or innuendo. We'd been busy preparing for the next chapter in our lives.

The summer of 1974 was the first time I'd come back to San Antonio in two years. Typically, Brooke entertained at a dinner theatre while I worked theatre camps for middle and high school students.

Brooke's parents wanted her to stay near Fort Worth, where they lived. Why couldn't she work in Dallas? But Brooke wanted a change of scenery. She'd never been outside Texas in her life.

Brooke was offered several job opportunities, but the one she accepted was because I found a position in nearby Medford. She'd join the Oregon Shakespeare Festival in Ashland—well-known with many famous alumni—and I'd teach at a private school that had just built a new theatre.

We skipped graduation ceremonies, sold our furniture, bought a hippie van, and headed to San Antonio to say goodbye to my family and pilfer the camping gear they would never use again. Brooke and I planned to stop at national parks and rest stops along the way to Oregon.

My last project to earn my teaching certificate was to direct a high school play. I had written a musical version of *Midsummer Night's Dream* the previous semester and decided it would be perfect for the kids I'd been teaching. Brooke helped me as a singing coach and choreographer. The auditorium was packed both nights, and the show was a great success. However, Mom and Dad had to attend a business conference that weekend, so they'd missed it.

Soon after Brooke and I arrived at their house, we decided to give them a quick version. I played piano for Brooke during the songs, and we acted all the parts in the living room while Mom and Dad sat on the sofa, laughing and applauding.

Puck, a girl in my version, was singing "The Power of the Flower"—she uses a magical flower to make people fall in love with each other—when my

brother entered the house. He had never met Brooke or seen any of our shows in Dallas. A year younger than I, Austin had shown no previous interest in my plays or songs, but when he heard Brooke's voice and saw her sing, he stood transfixed in the foyer as if Puck had squeezed the flower on him.

*The power's in the flower
Your eyes will spin around
The magic's in the color
To take resistance down*

*When you hold your lover close
And feel your fever soar
And put your lips together
You will ache to your core*

*Let the power of love
Make a fool out of you
Make your heart stop beating
And take the breath out of you*

*When you fall in love
You revert to a child
Sophistication leaves you
Your emotions they go wild*

Brooke was an expert at playing to her audience. She noticed Austin's response and zeroed in with all her charm.

In my version, Bottom and his crew entertain the nobles with an upbeat, crazy version of Romeo and Juliet, where the Montagues and Capulets are like a comical version of the Jets and Sharks in *West Side Story*. When Romeo finds Juliet "dead," he stabs himself dramatically a hundred times while squirting himself with ketchup. Then Juliet awakens because "the

pills of deadly poison were really only laxatives.” She finds bloody Romeo and asks the crowd to

*Say Romeo Say Romeo, rise up and take a bow
Say Romeo Say Romeo, we want you standing now*

Brooke pleaded with our audience to chant and clap. Even Austin got into it, standing shoulder to shoulder with Brooke, repeating the chant over and over.

Maddie stood up on the bed. “I like this version of *Midsummer* better than the one I had to read last year. I can’t believe Taylor wrote this.” She juked her hips as she chanted, “Say Romeo Say Romeo, rise up and take a bow. Say Romeo Say Romeo . . .’ What was the rest?”

Grace laughed. “We want you standing now.”

“That’s right. ‘We want you standing now!’” Maddi repeated the chant as she twerked her butt in Grace’s face. “Do you think this would make Romeo . . . ‘rise up?’”

Grace slapped Maddi’s ass. “First his boner, then the rest of him.”

Maddi squealed and plopped back next to Grace, who continued reading.

I hammed up my rebirth until Austin bent over laughing. Brooke ran back to my side, and we both kissed the air between us. Then Romeo said,

*Alive again with Juliet on midsummer's eve
You did it with the power of love and a little make-believe
Now all the actors are at hand to take a bow or two
Thank you all for clapping. We had fun, didn't you?*

We bowed to great applause and described the next action. All the actors and nobles paired up, feigning sleepiness when actually all they wanted to do was find a room to make out with their lovers. Left alone onstage, Puck (still played by Brooke) complained about how she'd helped everyone else to find a lover, but she's left with nobody. "Always Miss Nice. Always Miss Chump."

Then Titania (me) came onstage, still affected by the flower Oberon had squeezed into her eyes. She saw Puck and was immediately love-struck. "You're so gorgeous. So beautiful!" Titania lunged at her.

Puck backed away. "Look, Titania. I'm a woman, and you're a woman. It doesn't make sense to love me. Listen to reason."

Titania replied, "Love and reason keep little company nowadays. Now let me run my fingers through your hair."

I lunged at Brooke, who ran around the piano squealing until I tackled her, put my hand over her mouth, and repeatedly smooched the back of my hand, full of exaggerated lust, while she struggled and fake screamed. Mom

and Dad howled in laughter while Austin stopped clapping and shook his head.

When Brooke and I got off the floor, he said, "That ending's kinda sick, don't you think?"

Brooke and I frowned and looked at each other before I said, "It's a silly comedy, Austin." I shook my head. "Brooke, meet my brother, Austin, the killjoy."

Brooke nodded.

Hurriedly, Austin said, "I thought what I saw of the play was really good, and I can't believe you both acted all the parts. I just questioned the ending."

"I think the whole play was amazing, Taylor," Mom said, beaming. "And you wrote it."

I smiled. "With a little help from Shakespeare."

"Great performance, girls," Dad said. "Brooke, you have a helluva voice."

"Thanks, Ken."

"How did the audience respond?" Dad asked.

"Standing ovations both nights," I said. "The kids did a great job and had a lot of fun."

Austin frowned. "No one complained about the gay scene at the end?"

"The gay scene?" I scrubbed my hand across my face and thought my head would explode. "Maybe someone did, but I never heard about it."

"In Taylor's play," Brooke said so sweetly, looking directly at Austin, "Puck runs off stage, chased by Titania, so there's no actual kissing. Taylor and I ad-libbed a few minutes ago. We like to have fun together, and sometimes we're a little crazy." She threw her arm around my neck and pulled me close, her cheek against my head. "Next time she tries to tackle and kiss me, I won't let her, but she's so cute. Has anyone noticed how much you two look alike?"

"Eww!" I said too loudly and drew back from her.

Brooke smiled. "It's true. You two could easily play Viola and Sebastian."

"Who are they?" Austin asked.

"Says the geology major," I scoffed.

"You were so good as Viola," Mom said.

"Thanks, Pat," Brooke said.

I grabbed Brooke's hand. "We're going upstairs for a bit. She hasn't seen my room." I led her to the stairs. As soon as we entered my room, I shut the door. "That was brilliant! Now he thinks you called him cute."

"Yup." Brooke's eyes twinkled. "Now his male ego can swell and distract him from gay bashing. Why is he so sensitive to gay humor?"

"I have no idea. Since I left for college, we've hardly seen each other. He thinks acting and theatre are nothing but,"—I air-quoted—"playing dress-up."

He's into rocks and finding oil, you know,"—I air-quoted again—"real things that people need. He wants to be a petroleum engineer."

Brooke rolled her eyes. "Sounds exhilarating." She walked around the room. "So this is where little Taylor grew up. It's a little more girly than I'd imagined. White furniture, a four-poster bed with a lace canopy. A desk that looks like a make-up table."

I straightened the bow on one of the bedposts. "Mom chose everything when I was too young to argue."

Brooke cocked a brow. "Any boys been up here?"

"Yeah. One. My brother."

"Really?" Brooke asked. "That sounds yucky but interesting."

I sat on the bed. "Yucky because of him. But interesting because of Julie."

Brooke leaned against the dresser. "Ooo, tell me."

"I was a cheerleader, and one night after a game, I had the other four girls spend the night. Austin played basketball. All the girls thought he was hot. He dropped by my room wearing gym shorts and a t-shirt. We'd already changed into pajamas. They got him to play Truth or Dare. Before long, three of the girls followed him to his room."

"Why didn't the fourth girl go?"

"She wasn't into Austin, I guess. I said, 'Gross. How can they like Austin?' after the girls left. Julie said, 'I agree,' and jumped into bed next to me. We talked for a while on our backs, laughing and giggling. Then she propped herself up on her elbow and put her hand on my knee. She said, 'Do you think Susan will let him touch her knee?' I laughed and said, 'Maybe Mary.' Julie moved her hand up to my thigh. 'Do you think Mary will let him go this far?' I got a little nervous but said, 'I think she'd let him reach higher.' Julie moved her hand slowly up to my panties. 'Up to here?'

"By then, my head was spinning, and I couldn't catch my breath. She moved her fingers around. 'Would your brother do this to her?' I looked her in the eye and tried to swallow. She pushed harder. Then I said, 'I don't know, but you can to me.'"

Brooke sat down next to me and put her hand on my thigh. "How far did you two go?"

"Just as I was about to cum, Susan and Mary opened the door. Julie flopped over on her side and pretended to be asleep. Susan said, 'What are you two doing? Hmm?' I sat up, trying to calm the butterflies in my stomach. 'Trying not to barf about what you and my brother were doing. Where's Alice?' They laughed. 'I swore not to tell,' Mary said. They climbed into their sleeping bags, giggling and whispering."

Brooke put her arm around me and pulled me close. "What happened between you and Julie?"

"Nothing. Neither of us ever talked about what happened."

Brooke kissed my head. "Another one-off."

I couldn't help moving my lips toward her neck, but Austin knocked on the door, and we both jerked around.

"Can I come in?" he asked.

I stood and opened the door. "Checking to see if we're making out?" I snapped.

He sucked in his lips and pushed his hands into his pockets. "Hey, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have made such a big deal about it."

I folded my arms across my chest. "Okay."

He stepped into the room and focused on Brooke. "And to make it up to you, I'm inviting you both to join me and some friends to go bar hopping tonight."

"No thanks," I said. "We need to finish packing the van so we can head out tomorrow."

"Head out where?"

"We're driving to Oregon," Brooke said with a smile.

Austin jerked his head back. "Oregon? Why?"

"Did Mom and Dad tell you nothing?" I asked. "We have jobs in Ashland. We'll camp in our van, see the Grand Canyon, Lake Tahoe, the Redwood Forest, and then head up the coast."

He sucked in a deep breath. "You leave tomorrow?"

"That's our plan."

He leaned against the door jamb. "You two by yourselves? Where will you stay?"

Brooke stood. "Campgrounds. Rest areas. Wherever we want."

He frowned and put his hands on his hips. "That's crazy. Two girls by themselves driving across the country?"

I barked a laugh. "Girls aren't allowed to do that?"

"They're allowed," Austin replied, "but I don't think it's very wise."

"Why?" Brooke asked.

Austin shook his head. "Because there's lots of bad people out there."

My muscles tensed. "Guys, you mean." I snapped, "They'll see two hot girls by themselves and think we're looking for trouble."

"Basically," Austin said. "Look, I don't make the rules, but that's what some guys will think."

Brooke tightened her lips. "But you *are* making the rules by saying women can't be without a man for protection. Men repeat it to women over and over until they're scared to do anything on their own."

Austin tilted his head. "I should've known you're a women's libber." A bemused smile covered his face. "What will you do when a couple of bikers give you a hard time?"

Brooke's lips stretched thin as she stared at him for two seconds. I covered my mouth because I knew what was coming. Then before he could blink, she reached for the knife in her boot and held the point against his temple.

Austin stiffened. "Whoa."

I laughed. "Your eyes nearly jumped out of your head."

"Mr. Biker," Brooke purred. "Would you kindly leave us alone?"

Austin's face was still pale. "You carry a knife in your boot?"

"Duh." She slipped the knife back into its sheath. "So does Taylor when we think we might need it. Stage combat was one of our favorite classes."

I held the door open for Austin to leave. "Have fun drinking with your buds tonight. Be sure to look for girls without guys. They're the easiest prey. And make sure they're not wearing boots."

"Yeah. Very funny," Austin said as he walked out the door. "I still think you're asking for trouble."

I closed the door behind him and leaped at Brooke for a hug. "That was so badass. You were like lightning."

She hugged me back. "Do you think we're making a mistake? Stage combat is fun and games. A real biker would throw me to the ground and stomp my head."

I leaned back and searched her eyes. "What do you want to do?"

"Maybe buy a shotgun."

We'd had this conversation before. "I'm scared of guns. Besides, neither of us has ever fired one. We'd have to practice."

Brooke sat on the bed and pushed her hair back. "It would just be for show, like my knife. We've never been in a real fight. People will stay away from us if we act like we know what we're doing."

I sat next to her. "Or come at us harder. We'll be on the road for just ten days. We can have fun and be safe without having a gun hanging in the rear window above our bed." I grabbed her hands. "Mom and Dad want us to show them where we're going."

We walked downstairs. Austin had already left the house.

While Mom made dinner, we examined maps with Dad at the kitchen table. He was excited about our plans and kept recalling special moments from our family trips, laughing about minor mishaps, and describing amazing sights to Brooke. I was fortunate to have parents who loved to take their kids all over the country during the summer.

But the trips stopped when I entered college. I couldn't afford to take weeks off between semesters. I had to gain experience and figure out what I wanted to do in theatre. I realized early that I didn't have the mega talent to be a star. I wasn't Brooke Skipstone. When I worked my first theatre camp, I knew my future. I liked teaching teens. My songs and plays wouldn't be staged on Broadway, but they were perfect for middle and high school productions.

After the summer of 1970, Mom and Dad stopped their RV journeys and flew to theme parks and Europe.

"I wish I could drive with you," Dad said. "I miss our trips."

"Do you want to be seen driving a hippie van?" I asked. "We could make you some tie-dye shirts, and you can wear a leather strap around your forehead. And grow a beard!"

Mom laughed. "I'd pay to see that, Ken."

"I'll bet." He scratched his face. "Beards itch." He sighed. "I don't think I can drive all day like I used to. But I'd go if for no other reason than to keep you two safe."

Brooke and I exchanged glances. I wondered whether Austin had talked to him.

He opened a folded paper with a list of Dos and Don'ts. "Maybe if you were ugly, I wouldn't have to worry so much, but you are both beautiful."

Mom turned around and rolled her eyes. "Ken, please. Bad men don't care what women look like."

"The main rule," Dad said, "is to never be isolated. If a rest area isn't crowded, don't stop. And always park near a light. Same with choosing campgrounds. Find a crowd. Don't hike a trail unless others are hiking nearby. Don't stop at shitty gas stations late at night. Don't get anywhere near bikers. And never pick up hitchhikers."

"I think that's a good list, Ken," Brooke said.

"Are your parents okay with this trip?"

"Yes, because they believe we're staying at hotels each night. They never saw the camper bus." She turned red and covered her face.

"You never told me that," I blurted.

Brooke shrugged her shoulders. "I knew what they'd say if I told them the truth."

Mom brought dishes to the table. "These girls will be fine, Ken. They're smart and independent. They'll have the time of their lives."

After dinner, Dad helped Brooke and me pack the camping equipment in the van.

Before we went upstairs to my room, Brooke sang a medley of songs from various musicals while I played piano. Dad filmed the performance with his Super 8 camera.

I never saw the film.

Months later, I asked them to send it to me, but they wouldn't. They had disowned me by then.

Since our one night of sex weeks ago, Brooke and I had slept in our separate twin beds. I'd been thinking about us sleeping together in my double bed and even closer in the van, wondering if she'd done the same.

We climbed into my bed. I knew Brooke moved around during her sleep, so we would inevitably touch. "Do you want me to sleep on the floor?" I asked as we faced each other in the middle of the mattress.

"What are you worried about?" She moved her nose closer to mine. "Our bed is smaller than this in the van."

My pulse raced. "I'm worried about another one-off."

She touched my lips with her thumb. "Okay, we'll make some rules, at least until we move into our house or apartment or whatever it will be. No kissing on the lips. No fondling. No sex. But we can touch and hug and stay warm." She followed the curves of my ear with her fingertips. "Will that work?"

I swallowed and tried to calm my pounding heart. "What happens when one of us breaks a rule?"

An evil smile spread across her face. "You get a spanking, of course." She moved her hand behind my butt and swatted.

I gasped. Maybe the thought of us sleeping together *had* filled her dreams like mine. "I don't think that will deter me." I touched her lips and cheek.

"Taylor," she said in feigned shock, "I never knew you were kinky."

I held my wrists together in front of her face. "Did you bring the handcuffs?"

She squealed, grabbed my wrists, got on top of me, and pushed my arms above my head. "Do you want me to punish you?"

"Yes. Please punish me." I pretended to struggle. "Please, mistress."

She laughed then bent down until our lips were almost touching. "I wouldn't hurt you for anything. You're the absolute best friend I could ever hope for." She lifted up a little and searched my eyes with hers. "I love you, Taylor Baird. Don't ever leave me."

"I love you too, Tobo. Oops, I forgot!"

She growled, and we wrestled until I was on top of her. "I love you, Brooke Skipstone, and I will never ever leave you." We stared at each other with tiny smiles.

"We'd better sleep," Brooke whispered. "Let me spoon you."

I turned on my side. Brooke snuggled up behind me, moving her hand under my shirt to hold my stomach. I felt her breath on my neck as our heads lay on one pillow.

A few hours later, I awoke to a bumping sound in the bathroom which was behind the wall against my headboard. The clock said 2:30. Austin grunted, "Shit!" Brooke was still asleep, snoring softly. I crawled out from her embrace, put on a robe, and entered the hallway outside the bathroom. After knocking quietly, I asked, "Austin, are you all right?"

After a few seconds, he opened the door. His face and hair were wet. His shirt was thrown on the floor, and bloody scrapes and bruises covered his right hand. He caught my glance and whipped his hand behind his back. He wobbled and breathed rapidly.

"You're drunk," I said. "What happened to your hand?"

His words slurred against slack lips. "I had to fight a Mexican and defend a woman's honor."

"So you're racist *and* homophobic? Since when?"

He blew out a breath and shook his head.

"Which woman?" I asked.

"Doesn't matter. It was just a short fight. No big deal." He rubbed a towel over his face and hair. "Look, I've been thinking about you two driving alone. I can't let you do that. I'm coming with you."

My neck stiffened. "*What?*"

"I'll go with you then fly back here. I'm sure Dad will agree."

Cold filled my belly. "We already talked to Dad. He gave us a list of rules, and we're good to go."

"Yeah, well I'll talk to him tomorrow morning." He gasped more breaths, and fear twitched in his eyes. "I need to go."

"You *need* to go? Why?"

"Because I couldn't live with myself if I let you two go by yourselves."

My head hurt. I couldn't believe he was saying this. "We barely have room in the bus for the two of us. And where would you sleep?"

"I'll bring a tent. I can strap it on the roof. All my crap can go on the roof. You two won't have to worry as much with me there."

"Because you'll beat everyone up?"

"If I have to. That crap with the knife won't stop anyone. Please. I need to go with you."

My stomach turned into a rock. Something was wrong, but I couldn't figure it out. "We'll talk in the morning." My brain swirled as I quietly opened my door. After I closed it and turned around, I found Brooke sitting on the edge of the bed, panting. I moved closer, and she clutched my waist, pushing her face into my stomach.

"I had a nightmare," she whispered. "I woke up alone in the middle of nowhere, and you weren't there." She gulped breaths.

I stroked her hair and softly said, "I'll never leave you."

Her eyes were wide open. "Where were you just now?"

"In the bathroom. Just for a minute."

"Okay."

She obviously hadn't heard Austin. "Here. Lie down and I'll spoon you."

Still tense, she rolled onto her side. I pressed as much of my skin to hers as I could and rubbed her tummy. I kissed her neck and shoulders. She shuddered, and I pulled her hard against me.

"I love you, Brooke. I love you more than anything. I'll never leave you."

A few minutes later, her breathing steadied and she slept.

Why does he need to go with us?

"Wow," Maddi said. "What do you think's wrong with Austin?"

"I don't know, but he's an asshole," Grace replied. "Want me to read more?"

Levi's voice drifted in from the living room. Gram had turned on his podcast.

Climbing out of bed, Grace said, "I think we should hear this."

They both left the bedroom.