

The MoonStone Girls

by

Brooke Skipstone

In 1968, a seventeen-year-old queer girl traveled to Alaska disguised as a boy.

Tracy should have been a boy. Even her older brother Spencer says so, though he wouldn't finish the thought with, "And I should have been a girl."

Though both feel awkward in their own skin, they have to face who they are—queers in the late 60s.

When both are caught with gay partners, their lives and futures are endangered by their homophobic father as their mother struggles to defend them.

While the Vietnam War threatens to take Spencer away, Tracy and her father wage a war of their own, each trying to save the sweet, talented pianist.

At seventeen, Tracy dresses as a boy and leaves her parents in turmoil, with only the slimmest hope of finding peace within herself. She journeys to a girl with a guitar, calling to her from a photo, "Come to Alaska. We'd be great friends."

Maybe even The MoonStone Girls.

Prologue

I should have been a boy. Even my older brother Spencer said so in the late 60s. Yet as I look now at the three Polaroid prints on my desk in Fairbanks, Alaska, it's hard to remember why. Taken fifty- three years ago and seen by only me and three others, the photos show two nude girls kissing and walking hand-in-hand without embarrassment in front of dozens. By then, we were MoonStone—a girl band eager for a new beginning.

I was seventeen when I traveled to Alaska dressed as a boy in the summer of 1968, leaving my parents in turmoil, full of anger and grief. How that happened is what I want to explain—to myself, my children, and grandchildren, who are themselves in turmoil for many of the same reasons.

In the late 60s, our country was at war with itself—war hawks vs doves, patriots vs antiwar demonstrators and draft card burners. It was much like today's battles over masking and vaccines, police shootings, and an election. I saw riots and marches for racial justice in my teens and now in my seventies.

What I didn't see back then, however, were Pride Marches.

Very few at that time wanted to be called a *queer*. Least of all my older brother Spencer, who'd already suffered insinuations, eye rolls, and tight-lipped head shakes from Dad. Why? Because he played piano instead of sports. Because his mannerisms were too effeminate, his emotions too affected. He was too soft.

Of course, we both suffered from rigid expectations of how a girl or boy at the time should look and act. We were Baby Boomers, the children of the Greatest Generation, who saved the world from Hitler and Tojo and weren't about to allow hippies, riots, student walkouts, and a sexual revolution destroy the world they had defended and preserved. And they were determined to prevent their children from losing a war against men wearing sandals and eating rice balls in Vietnam.

Our father had volunteered for WWII at seventeen and flown Hell- cats and Avengers from aircraft carriers. After the war, he became a commercial pilot where he met Alice, a stewardess, who promptly became his housewife. They went to church, bought a house, had two children who attended Sunday School and rode bikes without helmets many blocks from home because the world was safe.

Then came the Beatles and the Stones, bleeding boys in jungles and body counts on the news every night, nudity in the movies, the pill, mini-skirts, marijuana, and flag burnings. But even with all this disruption, my parents and their friends could find solace in the basic truth of two separate genders—one who wore pants and another who wore skirts, slips, girdles, and pointy-tipped bras that lifted and separated. Boys and girls were meant for each other. Any other arrangement was unnatural and specifically condemned in the Bible.

At that time, *queer* was a slur, not a proud identity. Sodomy and homosexual behavior were illegal. Which explained my reluctance to look in the mirror and say, “Tracy, you're gay.”

Spencer and I felt awkward inside our skin and wondered whether some mad scientist or prankster-god had messed with our chromosomes before birth. Maybe one day we'd awaken from that crazy dream, me in pants and him in a dress.

But, of course, that never happened.

We never awoke.

We had to face what we were and find a way to live as best we could. On February 27, 2020, when the world hunkered down to stop a pandemic, I began to write this book as a gift of love and often brutal honesty to myself and to others.

From such a distance, it is difficult to know which events were causes and which were results. Can't every decision we make in the present be the result of a lifetime of events? Is there ever a real beginning?

Because of one critical moment—one I have regretted most of my life—I will start on the night of my brother's fall concert during his senior year in high school, November 11, 1967.

Chapter One

Jumping the Hump

I wrapped my arms around my chest and wished I could've worn a slick tux like Spencer, but no, I had to wear a puffy, frilly dress which did nothing to stop Jack Frost breathing up my legs. I leaned back against my car, shoulder to shoulder with my brother in the parking lot outside Trinity University's Music Center. Usually the weather in San Antonio was mild in November, but a cold front had started to blow through. Oak leaves rattled above us and acorns peppered the pavement. We'd run outside after Spencer's performance because he was upset with Dad and needed to smoke. I'd forgotten my coat in the rush.

I watched him inhale, holding the butt between his pointer and thumb, little finger raised, sucking the smoke through pursed, thick lips. He did everything with style and panache. He was as tall as me, but heavier and softer with a rounder face and a cute grin that Mom and the ladies at the Tuesday Musical Club adored. I was tall, lanky, with broad shoulders, muscular arms, shins that needed shaving twice a day, and small breasts. And I had what my friends called a handsome face— narrow, high cheekbones, strong nose, fuzz by my ears, and a widow's peak.

I don't remember anyone calling me cute.

I bumped against him and stomped my feet. "Hurry up and finish your cigarette so we can get in the car. I'm freezing." Our parents didn't know about his smoking, but he was eighteen, which made it legal back then. Some had accused me of smoking because of my low-pitched voice, but that was how I normally sounded.

He looked down at the asphalt, slid his shoe next to mine, and chuckled. "God, you have big feet!"

He'd done this comparison a hundred times, and I played along to cheer him up. I held out my shaking hand, fingers splayed. "Don't forget the hands. They're big too."

He put his hand on top of mine, his fingers shorter than mine by a knuckle. "If I had your hands, I wouldn't have to roll those opening chords."

"But now you have an excuse to be flamboyant." I smiled and leaned against him.

"Be *gay*, you mean." He dropped the butt and stepped on it.

I grabbed his hand and squeezed as my stomach dropped. What had Dad said to him?

Spencer had just performed the first movement of Tchaikovsky's Piano Concerto No.1 with the Youth Symphony, the final event of a celebration of Piano Guild winners, including me. He'd wanted to play that piece since we both saw Van Cliburn perform at the Coliseum in

San Antonio the previous year. Our mother had bought tickets, hoping to inspire us both to dream of playing at Carnegie Hall in New York City. It was mostly just Mom's dream since she dragged us both to Mrs. Francis for piano lessons eight years ago. Spencer cried during Cliburn's performance and ran to the stage afterward, trying to meet the Texan who'd won the first Tchaikovsky competition in Moscow in 1958. From that moment, Cliburn was his idol. Neither of us knew he was gay. Or cared. Fortunately, Dad was off flying cargo to various countries as he did for more than half of every month, so he missed Spencer's emotional outburst in the car driving home. He said Cliburn had smiled directly at him.

If Dad were driving that night instead of Mom, he would've glared at his son through the rearview mirror and shaken his head. We'd both seen this reaction before and many times since.

That night in '67, Spencer played with more flair and confidence than I had ever seen. He almost pranced to the piano before his big bow. At times, he lifted his eyes to the ceiling, his body swooning to the heartbreakingly beautiful melodies, face sagging in sorrow or beaming in joy. At the triumphant conclusion, he leapt from the bench, sweat dripping down his face. The crowd stood and roared.

"Bravo! Bravo!"

Spencer clasped his heart and blew kisses to everyone. Several handed him roses, which he sniffed deeply, his eyes upraised, his face entranced. Then tears flowed and the din somehow grew louder. He shook hands with the conductor, who pulled him in and slapped his back. Spencer raised his arms toward the orchestra, asking them to stand. Once they did, he bowed deeply in appreciation.

Our mother furiously clapped her tiny hands. Dad kept a stiff smile on his face as he applauded steadily. Mom grabbed his hand then pulled him to the stage and up the side stairs. When Spence saw Mom rushing toward him, he opened his arms wide to receive her hug then gave her the flowers and a kiss on her cheek. Spence threw out his arms for a hug from Dad, who then stuck out his hand, keeping a distance.

I saw my brother deflate just as I stepped onto the stage. I ran toward him, pulled him away from Dad, and gave him the biggest hug of my life, lifting him off the ground. The crowd laughed, we waved, and I hurried him outside.

He lit another cigarette as we stood in the dark parking lot, facing the trees.

"You know what he said?" asked Spence with a squeaky voice before taking another drag.

"You were too dramatic?"

He barked a bitter laugh. "If only. He said, 'Why are you being so prissy in front of all these people?'"

“For real? Prissy? That means the opposite.”

“Yeah. Never known for his vocab skills,” he scoffed. “All he knows is it’s an insult for a girl.” He flicked his ash then sucked smoke deep into his lungs. “Would it have killed him to hug me? I totaled that piece. The best I’ve ever played.” He tossed the butt, ground it with a grunt, and narrowed his eyes at me. “If I had announced tonight that I’d decided to be a pilot, he would have flipped out. He would’ve hugged me then. And been so proud!” He shook his head and tightened his lips. “I hate him.” His eyes blinked back tears. “I fucking hate him.”

My hands found his face and wiped his tears. “Don’t. Just ignore him. What does it matter what he thinks?”

“Because he’s my father, and I’d like him to be proud of something about me.” He turned around.

I saw his back heave as he cried. I wrapped my arms around him. “I’m proud of you, Spence.”

He clutched my hands against his stomach, sniffed, and cleared his throat. “I know, Sis.” He took a deep breath. “We should go back. Dad made a dinner reservation at Christie’s.”

“Why don’t we drive somewhere? I’ll go back to fetch my coat and tell them you want a hamburger. Maybe see a movie?”

He turned toward me and nodded, holding my hands. “Okay. You played really well tonight. I’ve never heard a more exquisite Chopin.”

My face warmed despite the chilly air. “That’s high praise coming from the king of the Piano Guild.”

“King only because you let me. You’d be the best if you practiced more. Why do you hold back?”

A familiar ache settled below my sternum. “It’s a man’s game, isn’t it?”

He frowned.

I raised my brows. “Name one female pianist.”

His mouth dropped open while his eyes searched above my head for an answer.

“Name one piece we’ve ever played composed by a woman.”

He shook his head.

“Why devote my life to playing dead white men’s music just so I can end up like Mrs. Francis, teaching piano to children of ambitious mothers? Frankly, I’d rather learn guitar and write my own music. Like Judy Collins and Grace Slick and Joni Mitchell.”

He rolled his eyes. “Have you mentioned that to Mom?”

“Not yet. Here.” I gave him the keys to my Mustang, a basic model I’d bought three months ago after working at Frost Brothers selling shoes all summer. “Warm it up. I’ll only be a minute.”

“I can’t drive a stick shift.”

“You don’t have to drive it. Just push in the clutch and turn it on.”

He raised his hands and backed away. “Not gonna do it. I’ll just sit inside and wait for you.”

“Suit yourself.” I turned and walked two steps before I heard the car door open then shut.

Spencer grabbed my arm. “I should go with you. Otherwise, he’ll call me a wuss.”

We hurried toward the auditorium entrance. “You have to stop worrying about his comments. Who cares what he thinks?”

“You do. You argue with him all the time about politics and the war.”

I kicked acorns across the sidewalk. “Yeah, well, boys are dying because of him and others like him. Almost 11,000 so far this year. I have to say something.”

We opened the doors and walked into a warm lobby full of elegant people, dressed to the nines. Somebody yelled, “Oh, Spencer! You were magnificent tonight.”

He stopped, put his right hand to his chest, held his left out then bowed.

“Where have you two been?” shouted Dad, standing near the women’s bathroom. My coat and Mom’s ermine wrap were draped over his arm. His eyes darted around to see who might hear or see him while his feet couldn’t keep still.

Spencer smiled at his fan and threw up his hands as if to say, “What can I do?” Then whispered, “This will be fun,” as we walked toward our father.

Somehow, both Spencer and I were taller than Dad. Though he never said anything, I knew that difference bothered him. One of his uncles and his brother were tall, so he had the genes to give to us. To compensate, he’d told stories of having to fight his way to school and even defend his older brother, so being tough was important to him. Maybe he would’ve been more tolerant and empathetic if he’d been six inches taller and not grown up having to prove his manhood every day during the Great Depression.

He had the more handsome version of my face with blue eyes and deep dimples. Mine and Spencer's were brown like Mom's. Right then, however, he was just an angry forty-three year-old pilot—Captain Arthur Franks, Jr., known as Art to his friends—not Arty. That was his father's nickname, and Dad damn well didn't want to be mistaken for his father. The irony of his relationship with his dad and the one he'd built with us had always escaped him.

I reached for my coat.

He tightened his grip and glared at both of us. "You upset your mother by running off."

"But not you?" I asked, my neck stiffening with anger. "You must've been relieved that your prissy son left."

Spencer flinched.

Dad tightened eyes at Spencer then looked at me, snarling. "Why do you always —"

"Because you always do your best to hurt him."

He scrunched his forehead and shifted the coats to his other arm. "My God, if he gets hurt that easily . . ."

"What?" I asked. "He can't be a man?"

We glared at each other. I'd decided long ago to never let him hurt me and to never back down. If I did, he'd be a shark with blood in the water.

He clenched his jaw several times then took a breath. "How did I hurt him?"

"Give him a hug."

"What?"

"Tracy, don't," said Spencer, hunching down and turning away.

I stomped my foot. "A hug. Here, now, in front of everyone. Your son brought the entire auditorium to its feet. They would have loved to see you hug him like Mom did, but no, you couldn't do it."

Dad stared at Spencer like he was an alien, glanced around to see if anyone was listening, then spit his words: "You were upset because I didn't hug you? We shook hands. That's what men do." He flattened his lips against his teeth. "If I had asked my old man for a hug, he would've . . . hell, I don't know what he would've done." He hissed, "This generation." He opened his arms like a wrestler wanting to crush his opponent. "Okay, Spencer, you want a hug, I'll give you a hug." He took two steps forward before Spencer bolted away.

I pulled my coat from Dad's arm.

"What's wrong with him?" he barked then checked if anyone heard.

"You. I'll drive him home." I took a step then turned around.

"When do you fly out?" "Tomorrow."

"Good." I hurried after my brother, ignoring Dad yelling after me. After all, what could he have done to me besides yell? I caught up to Spence at my car.

He wiped his face. "Now he's going to tease me forever. You shouldn't have said anything."

I unlocked the door, and we both got in. "You shouldn't have run away."

"Yeah? What would you have done?"

I pulled my door hard. "Put out my hand to stop his hug and said, 'Not until you beg me. And even then I won't let you.'"

"Really?"

"Damn right." I crushed the clutch, flipped the key, shoved the stick into reverse, and raced backward into a ninety-degree turn before spinning my tires forward on the pavement.

"How can you be so tough?"

"That's the only way to treat men like that. Show them any weakness, and they take advantage. That's how he was raised. Make yourself hide your emotions." I pulled into traffic on Stadium Drive and headed toward Woodlawn Ave. "Like Iago: '*When my outward action doth demonstrate the native act and figure of my heart . . .*'"

"*'I will wear my heart upon my sleeve for daws to peck at.'* Dad is like a flock of crows, ready to pounce."

I turned my face and smiled at him. "I just finished *Othello* in class. You still remember from last year?"

He nodded and smiled. "I never forget. I can still play every piece I ever learned."

Like a stoner, I said, "Wow, man," dragging out my vowels, hoping he would play our game of slang.

"For real."

"That was lame. Put some feeling into it. Far out, man."

Spence laughed and finally copied my accent. "Groovy."

"Such a gas."

"That's boss."

"Righteous, bro."

"Uh, for real."

I slammed the horn. "You lose. Already used 'for real.'"

"When?"

I jutted out my chin. "Says the man who never forgets."

"With things that matter. Stupid slang doesn't matter."

"Don't be square!" I laughed.

"Okay, you win."

"Of course, I do. Our generation has the best slang." My eyes widened when I saw the train track hump on Woodlawn Avenue. "Guess what I'm going to do?" I downshifted and sped up, blood surging to my neck and face.

Spence's eyes bulged when he saw the tracks. "Tracy! Don't!"

I raced down the hill toward a slower car. "Guess I'll have to pass."

"Please!" Spencer lifted his knees and covered his face with his arms.

I jerked the wheel to the left and raced past a sedan just as it crawled across the tracks. I caught air, landed with a satisfying thud, and whipped the wheel back to the right just before running into the dividing curb where palm trees grew in single file between lanes. "Yee haw! Loosen up, Spencer. Get it together! That was so bad!"

Spencer unfolded and sat up in his seat. "Are we still alive?"

"I caught more air than Dad ever did. That was righteous."

Spencer slammed his hand on my dash and made a buzzer sound.

"You lose. I already used righteous."

"I know. I wanted to see if your brain still worked."

“Promise me you’ll never do that again with me in the car.”

“Okay, but promise me you’ll do that yourself one day. Just catch a little air. That’s the only way you’ll throw him off your back. Every day he drove us to school in his VW Bug, he’d race over that hump.”

“Why? I could never understand why he enjoyed scaring us.”

“He was pushing our buttons, trying to toughen us up. As long as we screamed, he kept doing it. When I laughed and said, ‘Higher, Daddy,’ he told me, ‘Good girl,’ and stopped. You weren’t there the first time I drove his Bug to school. He wanted me to prove I could drive before letting me do it myself. I raced over the hump faster than he ever had. And you know what he did?”

“What?”

“He screamed, ‘Shit, Tracy, slow down!’ I laughed and slapped my wheel. ‘Got you back, didn’t I, Dad?’”

“And your point?”

“You never got him back, Spence. You just stopped screaming, but he always knew it bothered you. Jump it yourself once then do it with him in the car. You’ll feel so much better.”

“That’s easy for you to say.”

I stopped at the light before turning onto the expressway. “Just a little jump. Please. You’ll love it. Trust me.”

“Okay. Someday I’ll do it.” He held up his thumb and pointer finger separated by half an inch. “A teeny jump.”

“Cool.” I smiled at him then merged onto IH10, heading home.

He did do it someday, and never came back.

He caught more air than all of us.

Chapter Two

Itsy Bitsy Glasses

Spencer! Come watch the Cowboys with me!” Dad’s voice boomed as he turned on the television for the Thanksgiving contest between Dallas and St. Louis. He leaned back in his recliner, feet up, hands clasped behind his head. Spencer started the opening trill of Debussy’s *L’isle Joyeuse*, a beautiful piece he would play later that afternoon. The sound drifting from the living room was so exotic—notes dancing on high then falling, only to rise again. Spencer’s version of this piece was beautifully expressive, almost improvisational in tempo and tone.

As I carried the leftovers of our Thanksgiving lunch back to the kitchen, I saw Dad grit his teeth, get out of his chair to turn up the volume, then look back toward the living room where Spencer played with eyes closed behind the raised lid of our Steinway Grand Piano. “Five thousand dollars and no volume control,” Dad growled. He marched out of the den toward my brother. “Spencer! The Cowboys are on. Watch with me.”

Spencer stopped. “I’m supposed to go to Dr. Sorel’s later and play this for him,” he pleaded.

“It’s Thanksgiving. Take a break, for God’s sake,” he shouted. “You don’t want to miss the kick-off.”

“Dad, please. I’m supposed to meet another pianist from Mexico. I need to practice.”

“At least put the damn lid down.”

I heard a thump as I wiped the dining room table. Then the front door opened and closed.

Dad huffed his way back into the den and stood with his hands jingling keys and coins in his pockets.

Mom exited her bedroom, wearing a plain housedress, rubbing lotion on her hands. She stopped in the foyer. “Did Spencer leave? What was all that yelling about?”

“Dad wanted to watch football,” I said while twisting the cloth around my hand. “Spence wanted to practice. Dad won.”

Dad threw his hands into the air. “It’s tradition to watch football on Thanksgiving Day. Millions of people are doing it right now. And most of them don’t have to deal with a Steinway Grand drowning out Frank Gifford’s commentary.” He plopped into his chair.

I threw the cloth into the kitchen sink. “You mean only one of them had the privilege of listening to Spencer’s version of *The Isle of Joy*. There’s a high school pianist visiting Dr. Sorel from Mexico. Spencer was invited to play for him. Pablo is supposed to be very good.

He's also applying to Juilliard, so they'll be competing against each other at the auditions. It's the first time Spencer has met anyone as good as he is."

Grumbling, Dad cranked the lever to recline his chair. "He could've watched a game with me then practiced."

"He doesn't like football."

He slapped the Naugahyde covering. "I'm gone from this house over half of every month. When I'm home, I'd like to spend time with him and you . . ."

I stood between him and the television. "Doing what *you* want to do? Dad, we're not little kids anymore. Most of our lives are spent without you around. We can't just drop everything we're doing and planning because you're home."

"One game!" His voice shook. "That's all I'm asking." He slapped the arm of his chair with each word. "One. Stinking. Game!" He jerked his head left and right, trying to see around me as a thunderous cheer rose from the TV. "Move! Move!"

Mom sat on the sofa. "I'll watch it with you, Art. Tracy, could you . . ."

A sour tang filled my mouth. "Sure." Mollifying Dad was more important than comforting her son. I grabbed my jacket and walked outside.

Dad flew for Jupiter Airways, a charter company that moved freight and people all around the globe. As a child, I remember feeling sad when Dad had to leave the house for days at a time, often weeks. Tree houses and science projects were started but never finished. Vacations were interrupted or postponed. The rhythm of life jerked and lurched from heartache to disappointment to apathy.

Somewhere between preteen and teen, both Spence and I noticed everyone felt more awkward when he was home. He was like a distant relative who dropped in randomly and expected to be treated as the king of the house.

I saw Spencer walking down our street toward Shallimar where he could round the corner and smoke. When I caught up to him, he flicked his butt into a culvert.

"Don't be a litterbug, Bro."

He leaned on the metal railing separating the sidewalk from the ditch. "Want me to climb down there and fetch it? I'm afraid if I do, I won't want to come out."

I shuddered. "You don't mean that."

He turned his moist eyes toward me. "You sure?"

My skin turned clammy. “No.” I hooked his arm and leaned my head against his shoulder. My pulse raced. “Come out, as in stay alive . . . or reveal a secret?”

He breathed heavily, staring hard at the concrete. “Could be both. Or one could cause the other.”

My brain swirled. I hadn't expected this. “Maybe your secret isn't as big as you think.” My heart pounded. *Should I push this?* “Maybe it's something we share.” I watched a single tear ooze out of the corner of his eye.

He turned to me. “Your eyes are dry. Mine are wet like a girl's.”

“Lots of boys cry.”

He pulled his arm away and wiped his face. “Not like me. I've always been emotional. But you. . . It's been a long time since I've seen you cry. You always manage to suck it up.”

“Like a man?”

“Exactly.”

I stared out, following the culvert to a larger one between the elementary school and the residential area. My throat ached, and I tried to swallow. “I cry sometimes at night when I can't . . . when I can't stop thinking about why . . .”

Almost as a whisper, he said, “Why your body should be different?”

I nodded. “Yeah. I look pretty much like a boy anyway. It wouldn't take much to fool anyone. Besides, I act more like a boy than a girl.” I hocked up a big loogie and spit it into the ditch.

Spencer backed away from the rail. “Jesus.”

I laughed. “That is so cool! You don't like to?”

His body shook. “Promise me you'll never do that when anyone else is around us. You should watch the game with Dad. Spread your legs and smack gum and throw your fist into the air with a whoop when Dallas scores.”

I felt a surge of blood race up my neck. “Sometimes I want to be loud and gross and scratch my privates.”

“Gag! And I don't want any part of that. Or towel popping in the dressing room.”

I clapped my hands. “I'd love to do that!”

“It fuckin’ hurts.”

“You’re supposed to pop someone else. Not *be* popped.”

He grimaced and turned away from the rail. “You scare me sometimes.”

“Just go inside, sit down, and watch the game.”

He shook his head. “I’d have to act like I care for two hours. Sounds like you know what to do without even trying.”

“But you’re his son. That’s what he expects from you.”

He kicked a rock against the curb. “That’s bullshit.”

“Yes, it is, but that’s the sexist world we live in. You notice he didn’t ask me to watch with him.”

He hooked my arm and started a slow walk. “You know football is a rape simulation, don’t you?”

I coughed a laugh. “I’ve never thought of that.”

“Sure, it is. Those beefy guys bang heads, trying to *penetrate* that line. Their family jewels bulging through their light blue shiny pants. So much of the terminology is sexual, like ‘scoring.’ And the football is a . . .”

“Sperm! It is! And the end zone is the egg.”

“And you have to kick it through a *narrow* opening.”

I laughed. “You should tell that to Dad.”

“He’d just scream at me.” He imitated Dad’s voice, “‘How dare you make fun of the Cowboys. They’re not rapists!’” We neared our house. “That’s the second time he’s touched the piano—when he dropped the lid. The first time was in Alamo Music when the salesman told him the price. ‘Is it made of gold?’ he asked. Not once has he sat down in the living room while I played or asked me anything about the music.”

I sighed. “Mom told him that would be the last piece of furniture he’d ever have to buy, which is why our house is so bare.”

We stopped, looking at our large, two-story, inconspicuous brick house with two oak trees in front.

Spencer shook his head. "Empty, you mean. No pictures, no knick- knacks. Just a big, brick rectangle with blank walls and a grand piano."

"So we don't have much to move when we have dances. Does he know about our party tomorrow night?"

"Nope," he said. "He's never seen me dance with Ava. Can't imagine what he'll say."

I squeezed his arm. "Maybe he'll cheer like the rest of us."

"Fat chance. Tell me some names on the team, so I don't sound like an idiot."

We turned into our walkway from the sidewalk. "Don Meredith is quarterback. Dan Reeves and Don Perkins are running backs. And don't forget Bob Hayes . . ."

"The fastest man in the world. I remember him."

After we opened the door and walked inside, Spencer bellowed in his best Texas accent, "Are we ahead? Has Dandy Don thrown a touchdown yet?"

Dad turned around, beaming. "Yes! Cowboys lead 7 - 0." He thrust his fist above his head.

"Hot damn!" Spencer jumped into the sofa next to Mom and spread his legs as wide as he could. I caught his eye as I walked toward the kitchen. He saw me discreetly scratch my privates and grinned.

At the end of the third quarter, Spencer excused himself and headed for Dr. Sorel's house.

Hours later, after I'd practiced piano, had a few arguments about the war at dinner, and listened to complaints from Mom about Spencer's continued absence, I slipped into my pajamas and tried to stay awake, listening to "19th Nervous Breakdown" from the Stones' *Big Hits* album.

Something stumbled against my door. I heard Spencer cuss. I ran to the door and yanked it open just as my very drunk brother rapped his knuckles against the air.

"Whoa," he said. "Where'd the door go? Hey, Sis."

He wobbled just outside my room with a lopsided grin on his face then put his finger to his lips. "Shhhh. Don't tell anyone, but I'm drunk." He giggled.

"No shit." I put his arm over my shoulder and turned him around. "Let's get you to bed."

"Whaa . . . No." He jerked his arm away and banged it into the wall. "Ouch. Why'd you hit me?"

“You hit the wall, Spencer. Get to bed before you wake up Mom and Dad.”

He put his hands on my shoulders and his face an inch from mine. “You need to meet Pablo. He’s outside.”

“He drove you home?”

“Yeah. He thought I was too drunk to drive.” He breathed and giggled. “He’s a really nice guy. We had a good time.”

I laughed, trying not to pass out from the alcohol fumes. “Evidently.” I had never seen Spencer drunk. Dad would let us drink wine at dinner sometimes. Maybe share a beer between us. But Spencer was never that interested. Probably because Dad said a man’s got to learn how to hold his liquor. “What did you drink?”

His eyes crossed. “Tequila. Oh, that’s the best. From itsy bitsy glasses.”

“A shot glass?”

He held his hand like a pistol. “Bang. Bang. Shot after shot. C’mon, you need to meet him.”

I helped him down the stairs. He tiptoed to the foyer then grabbed the front door handle. Red lights flashed through the glass at the top of the door.

“Cops?” I helped him open the door, and we both stared at a policeman with his foot on the back of a young man, spread-eagled in our yard.

“Don’t you move, son,” yelled the officer.

Spencer’s eyes bulged as he screamed, “What are you doing?” He ran toward the officer.

Somebody’s going to get shot! I followed. “Spencer! Stop!”

“He’s my friend!” He pushed the cop nearly to the ground then bent down to help Pablo.

I ran to the officer whose hand moved toward his holster. “That’s my brother’s friend. He drove my brother home and was waiting to meet me.” I stood between him and the boys, holding my arms up, gasping for breath.

The man looked at me. “You live here?”

“Yes, with Spencer and my parents.”

Pablo was on his knees crying. “I thought he was going to kill me.”

Spencer knelt and pulled Pablo to his chest. “You’re safe. You’re safe.”

He bent down to pick up Pablo's white beret, brushed it off, and set it on his head.

Pablo was thin and shorter than Spencer. His mouth hung open as he gasped for breath; his face was wet with tears.

Spencer clutched the boy against his chest and glared at the cop. "What did he do?"

"He was a Mexican outside our house at midnight," I said. "Right, Officer?"

The man tightened his eyes at me. "I've never seen him in this neighborhood. He looked suspicious."

"Suspiciously brown?" I barked.

"That's enough, Tracy," said Dad, tying his robe, as he strode down our walkway. "I'm Arthur Franks. This is my house. Did the boy do anything wrong?"

"He looked like he was trying to get inside that car, and I knew it wasn't his."

Pablo's voice cracked. "I wanted my cigarettes. I just wanted to smoke a cigarette. ¿Qué carajo?"

I hoped the cop didn't speak Spanish because Pablo had just said "What the fuck?"

"Are we done?" I asked.

The officer rested his hand on his pistol. "You sure you want this kid in your yard, Mr. Franks?"

"No, I'm not, but he'll be gone soon. We'll take it from here, Officer."

"Okay, but if you need anything, just call dispatch. I can be back here quick." He shot Pablo one last glare before sliding into his Castle Hills patrol car and drove away.

"Where have you been, Spencer?" Dad growled. "And do I smell alcohol on you?"

"If your nose works," Spencer giggled. "We stayed at Dr. Sorel's for a while then went to Pablo's cousin's house. I think I had one too many shots of tequila." He giggled again.

"Maybe two too many," laughed Pablo with a thick accent.

"You said tutu!" Spencer laughed.

"No, I said two too," laughed Pablo as he playfully patted Spencer's face.

"Jesus," Dad muttered as he folded his arms and glared at the two boys.

With his arm around Spencer's shoulder, Pablo faced me and Dad.

"Hello, my name is Pablo Gutiérrez Delgado. I drove Spencer home because he's not used to tequila, and I wanted to make sure he arrived safely. He wanted me to meet his sister, Tracy, so I waited outside while he brought her down."

"Thanks for driving him home, Pablo," I said, shaking his hand. "And I'm very pleased to meet you." Dark skin framed his big brown eyes and beautiful mouth.

"El placer es todo mío. Sometime you should play for me. Spencer says you are very good."

"I'd love to, but maybe not tonight."

He laughed. "No, it's late. Yes?"

"How are you getting home, Pablo?" asked Dad, his voice stern and cold.

"He can drive my car," said Spencer. "Tracy can take me to his cousin's tomorrow or the next day." He gave Pablo the keys. "Drive safely." Spencer grabbed Pablo and hugged him fiercely. "Thanks for tonight."

He kissed Pablo's right cheek as Pablo kissed his.

Dad's eyes widened. He shook his head stiffly, a snarl on his lips. Fearing a confrontation, I reached for Pablo's hand. "Good night, Pablo." Then I leaned in and kissed his cheek. He kissed mine. "We'll see each other again."

He nodded and smiled. "I will look forward to that time. Good night, Mr. Franks." He sat in the car, waved through the windshield then pulled away.

"Was all this necessary, Spencer?" barked Dad, his eyes darting up and down the street, obviously checking for onlookers.

"Absolutely. This was the best night of my life!" He grabbed me by the waist and tried to lift me off the ground. "Ugh! You've gained weight, Sis."

Laughing, I said, "Or possibly you are slightly impaired." I grabbed his hand. Dad was going to blow up any second. "Come inside and tell me everything."

As we passed Dad on the walkway, he hissed, "What's with the kissing? It's bad enough the neighbors have to see a policeman and my drunken son on my front yard. You don't have to compound it by kissing a boy." The porch light revealed his blood-red face and clenched fist.

I stopped and glared at him. "It's considered a cultural courtesy in Mexico. On the right cheek."

"That's bullshit." Spit flew out of his mouth as he jabbed the air with his finger. "I've known hundreds of Mexicans, and I've never seen them kiss each other or try to kiss me."

"It was just a friendly peck on the cheek," Spencer whined. "We had a good time tonight."

"Is he your boyfriend?" sneered our father.

Spencer's mouth dropped open. "We played piano, told jokes, and drank a little. Why does that make him my boyfriend?" His chin quivered. "C'mon, Dad. Why do you have to ruin everything?"

"Me? *You're* the one ruining your life with this pansy bullshit. And I guarantee you it will ruin your life."

I let go of Spencer's fingers and folded my arms. "Actually, Pablo asked me if he could call tomorrow, so I think he's interested in me."

Dad shook his head. "You two are thick as thieves." He spit into the grass. "What a great pair of kids I raised."

"Why thanks Daddy." I almost jumped with fake joy. "That's the first time you've complimented us both since . . . since when Spencer?"

"Since who gives a fuck?" Crying, he stumbled into the house, ignoring our scared mother who had been peeking around the door.

Both of my hands clenched, I stood between Dad and the door. "What's ruining his life is you! Everything he does is wrong. You're killing him!"

He stepped forward. "How much more do you want our neighbors to see?"

"That's all you care about. Such a kind and loving father!" I moved inside and bolted up the stairs. As I passed the bathroom, I heard Spencer retching into the toilet, crying, and banging his fist against the wall.

Chapter Three

Ava and the Lifesaver

The next day, just before 7:00 pm when our party would start, Spencer and I carried a bucket of grapefruit, oranges, and golf balls to the back porch. We planned to make two teams pass the objects from neck to neck. We also had toothpicks and cherry Life-savers in reserve for a mouth-to-mouth relay if there was interest. Passing a candy from one set of lips armed with a toothpick to another was fun and a little dangerous.

House parties were fairly tame back then for us. No spiked punch, no marijuana, no real sex. Most of our friends were excited about the relays, though some said they were lame, a cool response to avoid revealing one's insecurities. Some of the girls planned to line up in front or behind specific boys and maybe sneak a kiss. I'm sure guys thought in similar ways. The winning team members would receive a set of love beads.

I had brought my record player, speakers, a microphone, and albums down from my room and set them on the built-in shelves in the den. My collection was larger than most, so kids knew they didn't have to bring their own records. Both of us played DJ during our parties, with Spencer adding the most commentary.

We set up a few plastic chairs along one wall and hung colorful beads across every entrance to the den. Our dance floor was an open expanse of terrazzo—easy to dance on. Neither of us wanted helium-filled balloons floating against the ceiling, but Mom had insisted. She wanted a festive look. At our last party, a couple of guys sucked on balloons and talked like “homos,” complete with limp wrists. But Mom was in the kitchen at the time and had heard only pops, not the talking and laughing afterward. We inflated just a few for tonight.

I had just started the Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* album to set the mood when Dad came out of the dining room, munching on a sandwich. We'd spent most of the day avoiding each other. Spencer had slept past noon, nursing a hangover, telling me later he'd lain in his bed awake the last hour, worried that Dad would barge in and call him a queer.

Mom must have told him to not start a fight before our party, because he hadn't mentioned the previous night at all.

“Y'all are dressed up,” he said. “I thought parties were more casual now.” He finished his sandwich.

I crossed my arms and tried to keep my anger from rising. “Is that a criticism or an attempt to pretend nothing happened yesterday?”

He stopped chewing and swallowed. “Just trying to make conversation.” He paused, looking at each of us. “That’s quite a tie.”

“Mom liked it,” Spencer said, looking anywhere but back at Dad.

I held the purple paisley tie away from my brother’s shirt. “‘Quite a tie’ as in great and beautiful or too loud or . . . too flowery, perhaps?”

Dad clamped his jaw, forcing facial muscles to knot.

I spread my dress hem and swayed. “And is this *quite* a dress?”

Dad raised his brows. “Quite a short dress.”

“I wanted to wear pants, but Mom said no. She’s right, however.” I sighed and pouted my lips. “How else am I to attract a boy? I have few attributes except my long legs. Got to get a boyfriend soon or people will talk.”

Spencer stifled a laugh.

Dad glared at both of us. “We can always cancel this party.”

“*You* can,” I said. “Mom likes our parties.”

The doorbell rang.

Mom came out of the kitchen wearing her full bow apron and looked at us. “Will one of you answer the door?”

I flashed a smug smile at Dad. “I will.” I almost skipped toward the foyer.

“Tell them I have tamales and queso in the kitchen,” said Mom.

“Will do.” I opened the door and found two freshmen with parents. “Hey, Buddy. Mary. Come on in.” With a flourish, I raised my arm toward Dad. “Meet my father, Art Franks.”

Dad smiled and shook hands. “Follow me for food and fun.”

Ava stepped through the door followed by her father. I tried not to gasp, but still let out a tiny cough. “Hey, Ava.” I’d always thought she was gorgeous. Her father hadn’t taken her to a party since she got her license at fourteen—the same age we all did. We played basketball together and were friends.

Ava cocked a brow. “I got a speeding ticket today, so Daddy was kind enough to supplement my driving instruction.” She rolled her eyes.

“Okay. Hello, Mr. Blunt. Just toss your coat on the sofa, Ava.” I gestured toward the living room. Ava removed her jacket to reveal an orange chiffon sleeveless, backless dress with a plunging neckline held up by a loop around her neck. I couldn’t help but stare.

She twirled around. “You like?” she asked. Mr. Blunt’s eyes bulged.

“Love it. And those earrings are perfect.”

She jiggled her large, gold hoops. “Of course, they are. Daddy, the kitchen and food are at the end of the den.” She waved her hand. “Go. Go. I don’t want to be hovered over.”

He shook his head and sighed. “Excuse me, Tracy.” He walked away.

“That’s the first time he saw the dress?” I asked.

She nodded and laughed. Ava was almost as tall as me with short red hair and green eyes. And a much fuller figure than mine, which was great for clearing space under the backboard, trying to snag rebounds. She played defense and I played offense for the Lady Wolves, which kept us on opposite ends of the court back then. Girls couldn’t possibly run the entire eighty-four feet or learn both offense and defense, after all. It made me sick.

I touched the material below her waist. “It’s so pretty.”

“Thanks. It was on sale at Ward’s. But I couldn’t find a bra.” She shook her torso slightly. “Do you think anyone will notice?”

I clasped my hands to my mouth and tried not to laugh. Her jiggling boobs were obvious. “Maybe if you stay in the dark. Don’t get food. If you want something, tell me, and I’ll get it for you.” Was she flirting with me or just being Ava—loud, unreserved, and funny?

She tilted her head and grinned. “Tracy, you’re staring.” She shook a little more.

I pulled my eyes away from her breasts to her face, but couldn’t keep them there. “I have a thin white shawl. You can drape it over your shoulders.”

“Show me.” She flipped her shoes into the living room and ran up the stairs. I followed. My bedroom was near the bathroom that kids could use during the party. I’d cleaned up my stuff in case someone peeked inside. Ava had been there before, during other parties and a sleepover for the basketball team last year. She loved to laugh and was definitely not shy. The only girl to take a shower after PE or games, she’d emerge from the little bathroom wrapped in a towel, face her locker, pull her panties up, then drop the towel and put on her bra. Most girls rolled their eyes and turned away, but my locker was right next to hers. I couldn’t help but see her, unless I turned my head to the wall on my right side, but I didn’t want to make a scene.

Besides, I didn’t mind catching glimpses. And I’m sure she’d caught me a few times.

She opened my door and walked in. “When are you going to have another sleepover?”

“For the team?”

“Or just me. Girls can have sleepovers, you know.”

A thought slithered into my brain—was Ava gay? Was she trying to tell me?

My heart skipped. Could I? No. I could see Mom’s face if I’d asked.

And Dad would’ve freaked. “Kinda weird to invite just one girl. We’re seventeen, not ten. Could you?”

She shook her head and looked at my posters. “You really like Grace Slick, don’t you?”

“I love her. Voice. Music.”

“Looks?”

I nodded. “She’s very pretty.”

“Do you still have the one where she shoots the finger?” She opened my closet door to see the poster hidden behind a few shawls and scarves. “Yup. You do.”

“That’s the shawl, by the way.” I reached for it.

“Wow, your dress is short. I love it.”

My heart raced as I draped the shawl around her neck so the ends covered her chest. “There. Now you can flash people if you want or hide when necessary.”

She lifted the shawl ends from her chest and shook. Blood rushed to my face as I grabbed her shoulders. “Stop. Please.”

“Okay, but who cares what I do up here? You obviously like looking, and I don’t mind. It’s kinda fun.”

I shook my head. “I don’t *like* looking. It’s just hard . . . not to.”

“It’s okay if you do. What’s the harm?”

My chest tightened and I looked away. “People talking.”

“They can’t talk about things they don’t know.”

I tried to breathe. “But what if they find out?”

She put her face right in front of mine, her eyes wandering over my features. “Tell them to go fuck themselves. Girls can have fun too. There’s no law against it.” She licked her lips and backed up to my door.

“But there is.”

She held the door knob and grinned. “And you never break the law? You never speed?”

“Sometimes. But I think they’d do more than hand out tickets . . . for that.”

“Life’s too short to fret the details. What we do stays between us. You dig?”

I bit my lip and nodded, feeling a wave of possibilities swirl in my stomach.

“C’mon, let’s party.” She ran down the stairs, me following at her heels.

During the next ten minutes, our front door was open more often than closed. A few more parents arrived with eighth and ninth graders. Most everyone else drove themselves. By 7:30, both sides of our street were full of cars, and our den was full of teens.

Adults usually stayed in the kitchen where we had a large, round breakfast table. Mom made great deviled eggs and cocktail sandwiches full of pimento cheese or chicken salad, crust removed, of course. And lots of chips and dips.

I turned on two large lava lamps at each end of the room. Somebody yelled, “Groovy.” The blobs of orange and red reflected off the walls and ceiling. Spencer grabbed the mic and howled. “Owoooooooo! Greet- ings from your DJ for the evening. I am not a big bad wolf. Owooo, I mean baaaa. Time to turn off the lights and turn on the dance moves.”

I flicked off the lights just as Dad slid open the kitchen door, throwing a glowing shaft across the floor.

Spencer howled again, “Owoooo! It’s supposed to be dark in these spooky woods.” He started “Lil’ Red Riding Hood” by Sam the Sham. “Either close the door or kill the kitchen lights.”

I moved to the door, reached around the jam, and flicked the kitchen switch. Then I danced out to the middle of the floor. “Some- body dance with me.” I’d been practicing my moves while watching *American Bandstand*, just like most of us had learned to dance. This song had a slow, steady beat, so it was easy to sway hips and arms without looking stupid. A few couples moved toward me then Ava literally jumped out of the darkness.

I yelped a little then smiled. “Hey, Ava. Are you playing wolf tonight?”

“You want me to? By the way, I love your dress.”

I twirled. “Thanks.” *Okay, she’s definitely flirting. And I love it.*

She turned the shawl around so the ends hung over her back then raised her arms above her head. “Do what I do,” she flashed a mischievous smile then shook her boobs.

I shook my chest. “Doesn’t have the same effect for you, I’m sure.”

“You never know.” She stared at my chest. “I’ll do other moves.”

“Okay, but keep them simple.” I raised my hands and swayed my arms with hers.

She looked at my legs. “Oh, my! That hem is pretty high.”

I looked down and saw my dress hiked up most of my thigh. “Lucky it’s dark.” I glanced around to see if anyone else was watching me.

“I can see just fine.” She reached higher and side-shuffled, leading with her hips a few steps left then right.

I followed her, taking some awkward steps, my legs separating.

She laughed, and I pulled my dress down. She leaned close. “Pink panties?”

My eyes bulged. “You saw?” The funny thing was I didn’t feel embarrassment as much as excitement.

She moved closer. “Just a flash.”

“Do you think anyone else —”

“Just me. We’ll have to do this again sometime.” She winked, turned her shawl around, and moved over to Spencer just as he set the needle down for “Along Comes Mary” by The Association.

“Mary Ford, this song is for you,” announced Spencer as he pointed to Larry. “She needs a partner. You’re the man.”

Some of the girls pushed and pulled Mary onto the floor while guys on the basketball team walked Larry out to her. He was the back-up point guard, shy with girls but a little general on the court.

Travis, the speech contest king with hair reaching close to his collar —the limit permitted at school—tapped my shoulder and we danced. He liked to tuck his arms close against his torso with clenched fists as he bent over and shuffled with this feet. His face grimaced and jutted, as in, *I’m so tough, so cool, don’t you think so?* He tried to twirl me around, but he was shorter than me, and my head hit his arm. But it was fun.

Most of the girls' hairdos were short, various beehives and bobs. Some had long hair pulled back with stretch headbands. A few had hippie hair, including me. I'd clipped two daisies on the side. Boys' sideburns were just beginning to lengthen, but none past the ear hole—school rules. A few had pulled their shirttails out, perhaps in a silent protest of the school's tucked policy. Tommy, the sophomore class president, wore a pair of bell bottom jeans he'd bought in New York City, as well as a silver peace symbol on a leather loop around his neck.

"Find your honey," Spencer crooned. "This one is slowwww." He dropped the needle on "Scarborough Fair" by Simon & Garfunkel. This plus "Sound of Silence," and "Cherish," and "When a Man Loves a Woman," were stand-and-hug songs. Guys who refused to fast dance would volunteer for these because all you had to do was wrap your arms around each other and sway or shuffle in a circle.

I was about to leave the floor and get something to drink when I felt a tap.

Charles gave a slight bow. "I don't think we've ever danced, Tracy." He held out his arms. "Would you?"

Charles was the star basketball player—tall, handsome, slicked hair, and very full of himself. Several girls in my class would nearly faint if he smiled at them. "Certainly, Charles. I'd love to." I'd danced close with boys before and tried to like it, but had always felt the urge to push away. I'd thought maybe I was shy, that I'd grow out of my aversion. But that never happened.

Since this was our first time, I expected him to put his hands on my waist and keep some distance between us. But he wrapped his arms around my back, one hand just above my butt. He groaned as he pressed his cheek against mine. I nearly gagged on the scents of Dentyne, Brylcreem, and Old Spice. I tensed and nearly pushed him away, but I forced myself to calm down. Maybe I could do this.

He groaned. "I've always wanted to dance with a tall girl."

"Why?"

"So everything would fit better."

I leaned back. "Fit what?"

He pulled my lower body closer to his. "I don't have to lean over. I can stand up straight and feel every bit of you. And you feel very good." His other hand rubbed up and down my back slowly. "You are so warm," he whispered.

Panic shot up my neck. I was just about to push away when I felt his boner against my pubis. He pressed it ever-so-slightly against me. My stomach clenched, and a bitter tang filled my mouth.

“You see, everything fits.”

I almost hit him but then I thought, *A guy can do this and get away with it.* My skin tingled as my body temperature soared.

He slowly pushed it higher and moaned.

I pulled my head back and looked at his closed eyes. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

He opened his blue eyes and half-smiled. “Whatever are you referring to?” He pulled it down then pushed slowly up.

My stomach tensed. I had an overwhelming urge to lift my knee into his groin. *What a fucking prick!* “How do most girls react when you . . . do this?”

“Most say nothing. Their hearts beat faster, they breathe fast or hold their breath.”

“Then what?”

“When the song ends, I ask them if they want to go outside for a walk. Do you want to?”

Okay. Time to teach this asshole a lesson. I pushed my fingers through his hair above his ear and nearly touched his nose with mine. “Why don’t we just go upstairs to my bedroom?”

His eyes widened and he leaned back. “Whoa. For real?”

I tightened my fingers around his hair as I looked directly into his eyes. “So what you do is push your boner into girls’ stomachs. They freeze because they don’t know whether you’re doing it on purpose. You hump them a little and groan, which makes them more uncomfortable. Then you get them outside and, what, kiss them, push it against them again, and maybe you get a hand job, or better?”

He tried to back away, but I yanked both arms and pulled him closer. “What if a girl pulled you close so that one of your legs was between hers. Like this.” I straddled his thigh and hip then slowly humped. I moaned. “Babe, you fit so perfectly.”

He tried to push back, but I clamped onto him. “You don’t like it?” The song ended.

“I think you’re a little crazy.” He squirmed and gasped.

“But I’m doing the same to you as you do to girls,” I taunted. “And you get away with it all the time. Because you’re a guy, and the world is so fucked up.” I let go of him and stomped over to Spencer. “I think it’s time for Grace.”

Dad came toward us, his lips tight and eyebrows scrunched.

“Oh fun,” I said.

“Maybe he has a request,” said Spencer.

“Weren’t you dancing a little close to that boy?” he growled.

“Were you spying on me?” I so wanted to tell him what Charles had done, but I knew Dad would freak out. Most likely at me, not at Charles. My fists clenched at my sides.

“That’s not an answer,” he snapped.

“Yes, I was dancing close, but I didn’t have a choice.”

“You always have a choice, young lady. Just say, ‘No thanks,’ and walk away.”

I smiled. “What great advice. Why didn’t I think of it? That must be what Dads are for.” *Of course, it’s always the girl’s fault. Boys are naturally horny, so it’s solely up to girls to keep them at first base. Any farther and the girl must be a slut. So. Fucking. Sick.*

He shook his head at me then turned to Spencer. “Do you ever dance?”

Spencer cocked his head and smiled. “Why, yes I do.”

“Really? I haven’t seen you once. Did I miss something?”

I saw Ava sitting on the brick ledge in front of the fireplace, drinking from a cup. “Your dance queen is over there.” I pointed.

“You miss almost everything, Dad.” Spencer took off toward Ava.

I grabbed the Jefferson Airplane album and found the mic. “I think it’s time for some psychedelic rock, a little acid group from San Francisco and my favorite singer, Grace Slick.” I didn’t use drugs, but I loved the raw power of her voice and the image of her leading six guys like the queen she was. “So hug one of the lava lamps or find somebody to love.” I put the needle down, and “Somebody to Love” pounded through the speakers.

Spencer and Ava held hands above their shoulders and calmly walked to the center of the room before both their bodies bucked and whipped to the beat. The difference between Spencer’s movements and every other guy’s was commitment. When he moved his pelvis, he thrust it. No holds barred. When his torso undulated, I wondered how his bones stayed attached. He commanded space. He and Ava had some kind of weird connection. They never seemed to look at each other but always knew what the other was doing. When one held out a hand, the other immediately grabbed it for a twirl or a pull-in. When Grace pounded her syncopation lyrics, both circled the other, grinding to the rhythm, like perfect counterpoints in space. And always at the end, he spun her into a lay-back on his knee, one of her feet kicked up.

The applause was immediate and loud. They both popped up and bowed, Spencer throwing out his left arm and flicking his wrist. As they walked toward Dad and me, others filled the dance floor in their wake as I let the next track play.

I hugged Spencer then Ava. "That's the best you two have ever danced." And I'd meant it.

"Aren't you going to introduce me to your girlfriend?" Dad asked. Spencer rolled his eyes at me.

Ava stuck out her hand. "Hi, Mr. Franks. I'm Ava. I play with Tracy on the basketball team." She side-glanced me. "We've met before."

"Oh, that's right. How long have you and Spencer been together?"

Spencer smiled. "Ava, how long have we been, you know, doing it?"

Ava barked a laugh.

"They've been dancing together since last year," I said. "So what'd you think?"

"Oh, they were good," said Dad, nodding at both of them. "I didn't know you could be so loosey-goosey, Spencer." He chuckled.

"Loosey-goosey?" Spencer asked, scrunching his forehead. "That means relax. Jim's girlfriend yells that out before he shoots a free throw."

"Well, I meant flexible." Dad smiled and tried to move his arms and torso, doing a poor imitation of Spencer's moves.

Was he mocking? Or trying to find a way to say something nice but screwing up, as always? I could see the hurt in Spencer's eyes as they looked down at Dad, still waving his arms.

Dad pointed at a couple dancing nearby. "They're doing great."

I shook my head and grabbed the mic. "It's time for relays! The winning team gets hippie love beads. You can put them on and say, 'Far out, man,' and everyone will think you're stoned."

Dad frowned at me. I covered the mic and whispered, "Just a joke. Be cool, Dad. Please."

"Everyone who wants to participate or watch, exit this door." I pointed onto our back porch. "I'm going to put on The Turtles' *Golden Hits* album and let it run for all you deadbeats who don't know how to have fun." I turned off the mic and started the record.

"Lead the way, Bro," I said. "Why don't you run this show?"

“Sure.” He looked back at Dad and shook his head. I heard him mutter, “Such a dick.”

Over half the teens and a few parents gathered on the porch.

Spencer lifted both arms. “Okay. Two teams form a line on my left and right.”

Kids scurried to get into lines, alternating boy/girl, leading from the back porch into the grass, beyond the halo of light. Ava sauntered to the back of one line.

“Everybody settled?” Spencer asked. “Tracy, check the numbers.”

I moved down both lines, counting sixteen in one and fifteen in Ava’s. “We need another boy behind Ava.”

“Another boy,” Spencer shouted. No one moved.

I pointed at Spencer and signaled him to take the spot while I ran the race. He shook his head.

“Tracy, you’re better than all the boys anyway,” Spencer said.

He wanted me to stand behind Ava. A tongue of excitement flicked up my legs.

“The last person in line is the most important because they have to carry the object under their necks using NO hands and drop it in this bucket. Does everybody understand?”

Kids nodded and murmured their agreement.

“We’ll start with grapefruit.” He held two up. “Your hands must be on the other person’s waist. If you drop it or touch it with your hands, the grapefruit goes back to the head of the line, and you start over. If the last runner drops it, you start over. Questions?”

Somebody yelled, “Start already!”

I moved behind Ava, my feet fidgeting as my stomach fluttered.

She turned and smiled. “We got this, girl.”

I got lost in her eyes and smiled.

“Your father is a dork,” she said.

“Among other things.”

Spencer placed both grapefruits between the chin and chest of Charles and Travis who headed each line. “Go!”

The two guys spun around and bent until the girls behind them could reach up to snag the fruit.

“No kissing!” yelled somebody.

A jolt of excitement slashed through me. I'd be grabbing and hugging Ava in front of everyone. Luckily, we were at the end of the line out in the grass where the light faded.

Each line moved in sync, passing without difficulty. When Ava turned, she grabbed my waist and pulled me against her. Our cheeks touched, and I gasped.

“Sorry,” she said. “Did I grab you too hard?”

“No. Hurry.” I clasped the fruit and ran, head hunched, alongside Buddy from the other line. Spencer held out the bucket. Buddy and I released our fruits. They both got stuck against each other inside the rim.

“That, my friends, is a tie!” said Spencer.

Some yelled, “No way!”

Spencer carried the bucket down the line to show the two fruits wedged together. “So each team has a point. Looks like we might need the toothpicks and Lifesavers, after all.” He held out two oranges for Charles and Travis to put under their chins. “Go!”

The flurry of turning and bending moved down the line until someone yelled, “Shit!”

I leaned forward to see what had happened and soon felt Ava's butt against my thighs. “Sorry,” I said, but before I could back up, she reached her arm behind her and pulled me close.

“Sorry, my ass,” she whispered. “You did that on purpose.” Her arm still held me.

“I swear I didn't.” My heart danced in my chest.

She whipped around so that our fronts touched. “I think you're blushing,” she whispered, her lips close to mine.

“You're so warm,” I stammered.

She smiled and turned around, making sure her butt still touched me.

“Back to the front,” said Spencer.

Someone in my line had dropped the orange. The other line was still moving, but when they got to the end, Buddy dropped it during his run.

“Back to the front,” said Spencer, amidst groans.

Twenty seconds later, Ava turned around with the orange in her neck. I bent my head to clasp on and did, but she wouldn't let go.

“Let go, Ava,” I whispered, my pulse surging.

“I like you here,” said Ava. “You'll have to pull it from me,” she giggled.

I pushed closer and forced my chin into her neck. I could smell the orange squeezing.

“What are they doing?” asked a girl in the other line.

Ava laughed as she clenched tighter.

With another push, I forced her chin up and grabbed the orange with a grunt. The other team was about halfway through, so I sauntered and twirled as I moved to Spencer. Several on my team screamed at me. “Hurry!”

I stood next to Spencer and watched Buddy start his run then I lifted my chin and dropped the orange slowly into the bucket.

“The winner!” yelled Spencer.

During the next round, our team couldn't get the golf ball to Ava because of multiple drops. Once when I leaned forward to see what was going on, Ava quickly turned around, our chests touching, and her lips just below mine. “There you go again,” she said. “Are you hitting on me?”

My mind screamed, *Yes!* but I couldn't speak. I panted and couldn't move my eyes away from her lips. Finally, I said, “Someone will see.”

“Who? It's dark back here.” She licked her lips.

Spencer declared the other team the winner of that round. I had to bite the inside of my cheek to keep myself from kissing her. With a groan, I grabbed her waist and twisted. “Turn. It's the candy race.”

Spencer raised his arms. “The candy must be an intact circle when it's dropped into the bucket. Dropping a toothpick is okay. The only thing that matters is the Lifesaver.”

He handed everyone a toothpick.

As he walked back to the bucket, Ava turned and leaned into my ear. "I won't give it to you if you have a toothpick between your lips."

I gulped. "Then how . . ."

"From my lips to yours," she whispered.

My head seemed to float above my body, every hair prickling my scalp.

Spencer placed the candy onto Charles and Travis' toothpicks then yelled, "Go!"

After a few passes, someone yelled, "Ow! You poked me."

"Sorry!"

I heard a candy shatter on the concrete. Then more grunting and yelling until finally Ava turned to me and pulled her toothpick from her lips.

"Where's the candy?" I gasped.

She opened her lips, revealing the red cherry Lifesaver between her teeth. She flashed her brows. "Come get it."

My heart fluttered then pounded. I glanced at the other line. They were three from the end. Then I saw Ava's father standing by the back door with his arms folded, squinting at us. Could he see? I looked at Ava and nodded toward him.

"We're in the dark," she said. She slowly pulled me close, touched my lips with hers, and pushed the Lifesaver into my mouth followed by her tongue. Heat exploded in my mouth. I touched her tongue with mine then pushed it hard into her mouth.

She pulled back slightly with a grin. "Wow. Now go."

I broke away and ran toward my brother. I bent over the bucket and dropped the Lifesaver I most wanted to keep.

"The winner!" yelled Spencer.

My team erupted in shouts and applause. I turned to find Ava and saw her father pulling her into the house. I pushed my way through my cheering teammates and found Ava putting on her shoes in my living room.

"What's wrong?" I asked, my stomach twisting into a knot.

She turned to me with red, teary eyes. "Him!" She blew out a breath. "I just had to get a ticket today."

“Let’s go, Ava.” Mr. Blunt opened the front door. “Now!”

“I need to give her this,” Ava barked.

She reached out her hand with my shawl. As I took it from her, she squeezed my fingers and kissed the air between us. Her father grabbed her arm and pulled her outside.

We weren’t done yet, I’d make sure. I’d had a taste of freedom to be who I was, to touch who I wanted.

I was determined to do it again.