

## Chapter One of Crystal's House of Queers

Crystal lies naked on her back, watching Haley remove three wet fingers from between her plump lips then slowly insert them into Crystal's mouth.

"Get them wet. Very wet," Haley purrs as her green eyes fix on Crystal's browns. Haley lies against Crystal's left side, propping her head on her right arm.

Crystal wiggles her tongue around each digit while sucking breath in through her nose.

Haley removes her fingers. Her voice sultry and teasing, "Now stretch your arms behind your head. All the way back."

Crystal reaches to touch the headboard, heart pounding in her chest

Haley raises her brows, licks her lips, and says so slowly, "Spread."

Crystal separates her legs.

"You must always look at me." Haley's left hand inches down Crystal's stomach, sending electric jolts through her skin. She groans and twists. With gentle admonishment, Haley says, "No, no, no," and lifts her hand. "You cannot move. Or I stop. Got it?" Haley smiles then licks Crystal's lips.

Crystal reaches with her tongue to touch Haley's as she pulls away. "I won't move. Touch me. Please."

"Look at me always." Their eyes lock together. Haley slides her fingers between Crystal's legs. "You may groan."

Crystal gasps then hitches in a breath, eyes tightening on Haley's. Crystal's arms stiffen, pressing her hands hard against the headboard as Haley's fingers move in circles, faster and faster.

Deep groans roll out from Crystal's belly, spasms convulse her insides, her skin flushes with sweat, but always she sees Haley's shining eyes, and she does not move . . . until . . .

Crystal jerks to a sitting position in her bed, gasping for breath. Slowly, her eyes open to the red numbers on her alarm clock—3:00 am.

She's had another dream of sex with Haley. The second time this week after in-person school started on Monday, September 14, when she saw her senior classmate for the first time since the March lockdown. Crystal shivers as the sweat evaporates from her bare skin. She grabs her pillow and hugs it to her chest.

Years ago near the end of fourth grade, Haley spent the night and slept in this bed. Crystal woke in the early morning with Haley snuggled up against her back, an arm thrown over her side. Crystal tried not to move so Haley would stay glued to her. But she did reach ever so slowly for her hand and brought it to her lips. The next morning, Crystal awoke in the same position with Haley. Crystal wasn't sure, but she sensed Haley was awake, and either they were both too nervous to change position, or too reluctant to end the contact.

Crystal's grandmother knocked. "Are you two girls going to sleep all morning? I've got breakfast ready."

Both girls snapped up, disentangling from each other with nervous laughs. "We're up." That was the last time Haley slept over. Crystal never understood why.

Now, 18-year-old Crystal lies back down, hugging her pillow, replaying the dream in her mind until exhaustion pushes her into sleep.

Just before the alarm rings, Crystal flings her legs off the mattress and stands. She has a weird feeling that something is amiss. She pulls on jeans, a scoop neck t-shirt, and a gray cotton jacket, left unzipped. After lifting her pack onto her shoulder, she walks down the hall into the kitchen, where she finds no one. Normally, she'd be met by Summer with a plate of eggs, toast, and sausage, but today there's a square of cinnamon swirl coffee cake on a napkin.

Crystal sets her pack on the oak table, stuffs the cake into her mouth, and heads toward the sunroom at the other end of the house. She needs to find something to draw today in art class and record it in a photograph or video. She opens the door onto the deck, letting in cool, moist air. A bank of fog drifts near a narrow pond along a trail leading into the woods behind her house.

All of her senses prickle. Something moves toward her.

She takes out her phone and starts a video as she sits on a fat stump near the woodshed. Her nose and throat fill with the scent of freshly split spruce and birch.

"I wonder if all special needs kids have special powers. I know I do." There's a muffled stamping and the brittle snap of leaves along the path. She holds her breath a moment, worried that even the slightest sound will be too loud.

"I know when animals are watching me. I can feel their eyes on my skin and hear their hearts beating." She stands and strains to find the brown mass she knows moves toward her, an

absence of light in the woods which would otherwise glow on this chilly morning in Clear, Alaska.

“With my pen I can draw the shape of anything with a single, continuous line—face, body, raven . . .” She hesitates slightly, lowers her voice even more, and moves her lips closer to the phone. “Or moose. But above all, I have no fear—not of the dark or whatever danger lurks around the next corner.”

The fog dissipates, revealing a moose twenty feet away, its breath erupting in bursts of steam through its massive nose tilted straight down, huge black eyes—orbs of pure darkness—fixed on Crystal, who calms her beating heart and does not move. Even when she notices the calf standing behind its mother, shaking its head and twisting its Mohawk bristles along its spine, she remains in control. Crystal knows she’s too close, but this view and this intimacy with such a magnificent animal are priceless and worth any risk. She’s seen a cow charge her younger brother, JD, when he emerged from the trees into a clearing, but that moose snorted and screeched before moving. This one stands still and silent except for pushing air out of its nostrils in a steady, menacing rhythm. Maybe she senses that Crystal has no fear.

She continues recording. “Who else would stand this close to a thousand-pound cow and her baby with nothing but a camera? Only me.” A smile quivers in the corners of her mouth. “Sometimes I’m magic.” She barely lifts her right foot and inches it backward. “I’ll draw you both later.”

She stops the video and walks away from the animals, keeping her gaze fixed on the mother for any sign of a charge. The cow would protect its child at all costs for a year. But after that, she’d drive it away or just leave.

Crystal knows what that feels like. Her mother left her and JD with her grandparents, Mac and Summer, fourteen years ago then disappeared. According to them, her mother and father died in a car wreck a few years later. His fault, of course. They hated Eugene and blamed him for all of Maya’s problems.

For years she had wanted to know why her father drove the car drunk, why he flipped off the road into a tree, killing her mother and his irresponsible self. Why he kept her hooked on drugs and alcohol. Why Crystal lost her mother at the very edges of her memory.

Crystal has some recollections of them, like mist along the pond—there one minute and gone the next. Or flitting like redpolls swarming from tree to tree. What Crystal remembers and

what Mac and Summer told her were often different. Like when Mom supposedly ran away from her evil husband and flew to the Alaskan village where her grandparents taught, promising to enter rehab and never return to Eugene, the dope dealer.

But Crystal remembers her father driving them to the airport, helping Mom wheel the bags and carry JD while she held Crystal's hand as they stood in line. They were four and three at the time. Dad had even kissed Mom before she left him at the bottom of the escalator to go through security. At least, that's what Crystal saw. She'd asked JD several times about the car ride and the kiss, but he barely knew his name back then.

Doesn't matter anyway. The fact is, Mom left them fourteen years ago and never returned. And Crystal is sure she'd always intended to leave them. Dump the kids and have fun again.

Crystal turns around to look for the moose as she steps onto the deck at the back of her house, but they are gone. Faded into the trees. But not from her phone where they'll live forever. The greatest thing about photographs and her drawings is their permanence. Stuff stays put.

Crystal opens the door and hears the phone ringing in the kitchen. Mac keeps a landline so when the power goes out and the Internet is down, they'll still have a way to make phone calls. Cell phone coverage can be spotty in their area.

Seeing no one nearby to answer, Crystal runs and grabs the phone on the fourth ring. "Hello?"

"I'm looking for Mac Rose," a man's voice says.

Crystal covers the mouthpiece and hears Mac coughing upstairs. "He can't come to the phone right now. Can I tell him who's calling?"

"No . . . that's all right. I'll call back another time. Are you Cr . . .?" He stops.

"Sorry?" Crystal is sure he was about to say her name. Why did he stop?

"Ah, nothing."

"Can I give him a name or number?"

"No. No, I'll call back later. You . . . you seem like a nice girl."

Crystal wonders why he said that. "You were expecting something different?"

"No. Never mind. Sorry to bother you." He hangs up.

*What the hell?* Mac coughs again and Summer says something to him.

JD opens the bathroom door behind her. They both hear more coughing. "Mac is sick," says JD. His steady eyes meet hers. "Could be Covid." He sucks in his lower lip.

“What’s wrong?” she asks, as cold fills her belly.

“Fever. And he keeps sucking on his inhaler.”

Her little brother is six foot three with massive shoulders. He dwarfs Crystal by more than a foot and a hundred pounds, which would be scary, but he is the sweetest brother anyone could hope to have.

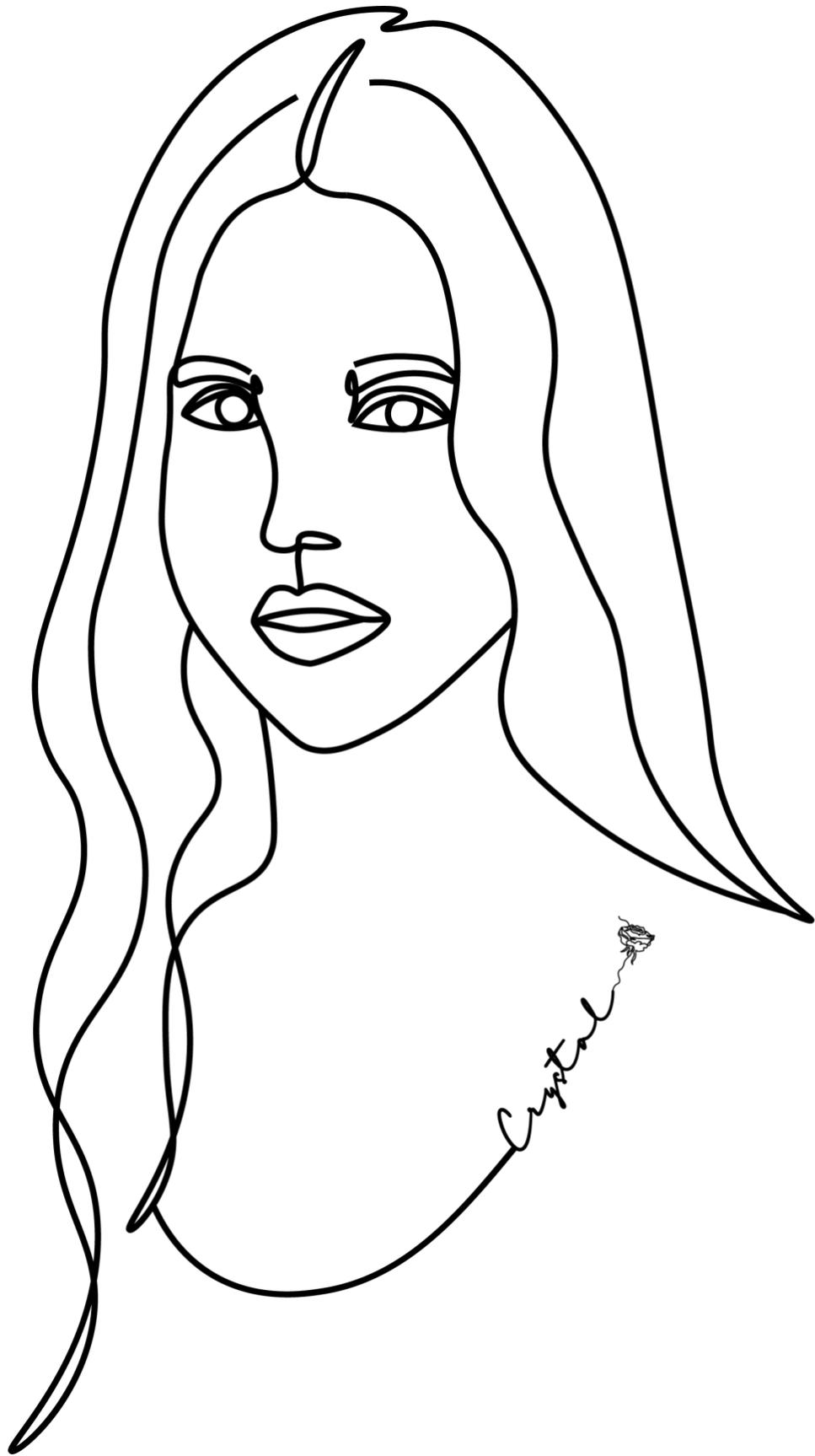
He walks past her into the living room with his staggered gait. He’s been disabled his whole life. His hips are deformed, so he walks with a rolling limp, like he’s always skating up an imaginary little hill with his left foot first. He fails every academic subject at school. And he’s teased a lot. Mac and Summer doubt he will ever be able to live by himself, but Crystal thinks otherwise. He can hunt and fish, build anything, and he cherishes his girlfriend, Gena. How many skills does he need to raise a family in nowhere Alaska? He’s seventeen and ready to find a job. School is doing him no good.

One night many years ago after JD had gone to sleep, Crystal went to her grandparents’ bedroom and asked why her brother had so many problems. Mac whipped off his glasses and blurted, “Whiskey.” Summer slammed her book shut and tried to shush him, but he wouldn’t stop. “Jack Daniel’s to be specific. Old No.7. Your mother practically bathed in the stuff. Your brother was drunk when he was born, and so were his parents. They’d just come off a weekend binge, so they called him JD.” Until then, Crystal hadn’t known his real name was Jack. Or why.

She had never told her brother the truth. Or that their last names used to be Rock before Mac and Summer Rose adopted them. If anyone asks him what the J and D stand for, he says, “They stand for me. I’m JD.” He likes making the rhyme.

Crystal finds the self-portrait drawing she finished last night unmoved on the kitchen table. Usually Summer says something nice about her art pieces at breakfast.

She picks up the paper and once again loves the fact her name is Crystal Rose rather than Rock.



Crystal

A perfect name for an artist because she can draw a beautiful, one-line rose at the end.



At first Crystal had trouble keeping her pen moving on the paper without trying to fix the mistakes. But her teacher told her to “embrace the imperfections” and let them “add a little character to the final result. Just let your talent flow.” Crystal practiced over and over until she filled dozens of sketchpads, and she finally realized she had embraced her own imperfections through her art.

She rolls up her drawing and pushes it into a tube she carries in her pack.

Her grandparents come down the stairs, both wearing masks. Mac sits at the table as Summer offers him two pills and a glass of water. After he lifts his mask and gulps them down, she places a wet cloth on his forehead.

“Are you sick?” asks Crystal.

“Maybe. Probably just a cold,” says Mac, wrapping his big arms around his chest to stop shivering.

“You two need to wear your masks in the house from now on,” says Summer.

“In the house?” asks JD. “Why?”

Summer clenches her jaw and sighs before speaking with more impatience and volume than normal. “Because you’re mingling with the whole town at school every day. Who knows how careful any of them have been?”

Crystal watches JD’s eyes widen. She knows he’s confused by Summer’s tone.

Very firmly with a sharp look at both of them: “Put. On. Your. Masks.”

Crystal pulls hers out of a back pocket and fastens the straps behind her ears. JD searches his pockets then, finding nothing, stares meekly at Summer, who shakes her head slightly before pulling another mask out of a drawer.

Sweat gathers on her brother’s forehead. JD tries hard to not disappoint his grandparents, and she knows he believes he just did.

Summer hands the mask to JD. “Please keep those on all day.”

JD puts his on. “Does Mac have Covid?”

Mac pulls his mask down and smiles. “I’m not dead yet, JD. You can ask me.”

Summer pulls Mac’s mask back to his nose. “Keep it on, Mac.”

“Do you?” asks JD, a little quiver in his voice.

“Probably not. I can still smell and taste. Just a cold. Can’t anyone catch a cold anymore without everyone freaking out?” He tries to laugh but ends up coughing. Summer pats his back as he props his head on the table.

Mac is still a big, strong man, but now Crystal sees wrinkles and wispy hair and a heaving chest. How sick can he be? She feels a pain and realizes she’s been twisting her fingers.

“No one is freaking out, Mac,” says Summer. “The cases are increasing all over the country. Over 200,000 people have died, and our governor is doing nothing. Most of the people in this town think Covid is a hoax. But I don’t. We’re both too old to get this.” She looks at JD and Crystal. “Keep your masks on. You don’t want to spread it to your friends, and you don’t want to bring it home to us. Do you understand?”

Crystal nods.

JD mumbles, “Yes.”

This is the first time since the pandemic began they have been told to wear masks in the house. Is Summer blaming them for Mac’s illness? How could they be the cause? Crystal’s heard nothing at school about anyone—student or parent—being sick.

Summer scans Mac’s temperature again. “I don’t know why you two have in-person school now anyway. Cases are going up in the borough, not down. You spent the first three weeks at home using your computers. Why’d they have to change?” She looks at the number on the probe.

“Same?” asks Mac then pulls a dose from his inhaler.

“A little higher.”

Crystal and JD are very happy to be back in school. They’d been online from mid-March through May and then from late August until Monday, two days ago. During that time, Crystal had seen virtually none of her classmates. She’d never been very social, but she had missed seeing her art teacher and especially Haley. They’d been close friends in the elementary grades but had drifted apart in high school.

Crystal unties her hair and shakes her head. “One reason we went back this week is that special needs students don’t learn as much in remote learning.”

“Who said that?” asks Summer.

“SPED teacher.” Crystal bends over the table to grab her computer and feels her grandmother’s eyes searching her, just like she felt the moose eyes earlier.

“Crystal, why aren’t you wearing a bra?”

She lifts her eyes to Summer, who signals to hold her shirt against her chest. “Why are you looking?” She stays bent as she shoves books and her computer into her bag. “No one cared about me wearing a bra before. What difference does it make now?”

“Crystal, we’ve talked about this. You developed over the summer. You can’t be flashing everyone.”

“Am I flashing, or are you making a special effort to look down my shirt?” She feels blood rushing to her face. Her eyes throb.

“Please stand up straight.”

Crystal finishes stuffing her pack without hurrying, drags the zipper closed then swings her pack onto her shoulder as she stands. “Better?”

“Please put on your bra.”

Mac coughs. “Just don’t bend over in front of the boys, Crystal, and keep your jacket zipped.”

Crystal cocks a brow. “Because it’d be my fault if they stared at my boobs?”

JD laughs. “Gena calls them boobs too. A lot of my friends call them tits.”

“JD!” Everyone flinches when Summer slaps the table. Crystal can remember only one or two other times when she screamed at JD. He now stands with his mouth open, breathing noisily. His eyes bulge. “There’s no need to be crude. Why are you and Gena talking about her . . . breasts?”

*Because they’ve been having sex for the past six months*, thinks Crystal so loud she wonders whether anyone hears her. “C’mon, JD. We need to go.” Crystal pushes a chair farther under the table and heads for the door.

Summer grabs her arm. “Why are you being so defiant about this?”

“I’ve gone my whole life without my chest being strangled and bound. No one cared. Now if I don’t crush my boobs all day and much of the night, there’s something wrong with me. Guys go shirtless at PE all the time. Why can’t the girls?”

“That’d be embarrassing,” laughs JD as he moves through the door. “Hope you feel better, Mac.”

Summer releases Crystal’s arm and wrings her hands. “Now you want to go topless? Where are you getting these ideas?”

“Why do I have to *get* them from somewhere besides my own head? Cause I’m too dumb?” Her heart pounds in her chest and lips tighten against her teeth. She wants to say much more but is afraid to start another argument. She tries to slow her breathing. “Hope you feel better, Mac.” She exits the house and heads toward her Honda 4-wheeler where JD sits sideways behind the seat.

“I think it’s my turn to drive,” he says, just like every morning.

Crystal straddles the seat and starts the motor. “It’s not your turn until you’re older than me.”

“And what day will that happen?”

“Exactly.” She zips up her jacket, shifts gears, and races away from the house down her long driveway, bordered by spruce and aspen.

Last weekend, Kato told her she needed to wear a bra when she returned to school. He said he didn't want guys staring at her all day. They'd been best friends their whole lives and had never even kissed. Then her boobs grew over the summer, and he couldn't keep his hands off her. He complained she was teasing him, being coy, making him think dirty thoughts. All during July and August, she'd felt excited and confused, sometimes angry. Before this past weekend, they'd only kissed, and honestly, she'd never wanted to do anything more.

But she finally relented. The experience wasn't very exciting, certainly nothing like her dreams of girls. Or kissing Haley in fifth grade.

At first, the dreams bothered her. Could something more be wrong with her brain beyond what school told her? She's never fantasized about a boy. After Saturday's session with Kato, she believes she understands why, but doesn't know what to do or who to tell.

Maybe Haley?

What's the worst that could happen?

She could laugh. Walk away. Tell others.

What's the best she could say?

Me too.

How amazing would that be?

When the best option offers so great a reward, Crystal always ignores the danger.

Witness—her encounter with the moose this morning.

Maybe she'll talk to Haley today.