**THE HITCHHIKERS BY CHEVY STEVENS**

**Excerpt**

CHAPTER 1

ALICE

July 5, 1976

The first time Alice saw them, they were walking side by side on the narrow gravel road that led into the RV park and campground. A boy and girl, moving together in a slow, slouching way, with his arm around her shoulders, and her hand tucked into the back pocket of his bell-bottoms. His army-style backpack looked heavy, the seams stretching, a rolled-up orange sleeping bag tied to the bottom. The girl’s pack was smaller but equally as stuffed, with a green sleeping bag that rested below her hips. Maroon shorts shimmered underneath.

Tom slowed the Winnebago, giving the couple room. The boy turned to look at them. Square sunglasses, brown hair to his shoulders, and a blue tank top that said *Keep on Truckin’*.

He pulled the girl closer, shielding her from the gust of hot air and road dust that the RV stirred up. Alice caught a glimpse of her bowed head, pale blond hair tossing in the wind. She watched in her mirror until they disappeared around a corner, but the girl never looked up.

The campground’s office was a quaint log cabin skirted with river rock and topped with a Canadian flag, the red maple leaf bright against the white background. Alice got out of the RV with a yawn and trailed up the office steps after Tom. He checked them in while she halfheartedly spun a postcard rack. She blinked the sleepiness from her eyes, regretting their late night, but this Fourth of July had been important, and it seemed all of Seattle had felt the same way. The waterfront had been crowded with people watching the Bicentennial fireworks.

She scanned a display of brochures, reading one with warnings about bears and how to store food safely. Tom was talking with the campground manager.

“Been on the road since sunrise, crossed the border in Blaine, Washington. You ever been there?” Alice didn’t hear the man’s answer as she moved over to the shelves of camping items. Yellow plastic egg holders. Metal poles for toasting marshmallows and hot dogs. Bug spray. Citronella candles. She picked up bits of the men’s conversations. Tom’s deep voice.

“We stopped in Vancouver for lunch and drove through Stanley Park. Walked the seawall for a stretch. Boy, there’s some beautiful views of the city.”

“This your first time visiting Hope?”

“Sure is.”

The men chatted about the small town for a moment, then the manager unfolded a map of the campground, pointing out their site. The restrooms with showers. The wood pile. The wide river, which he warned had a current far too strong for swimming. Shame on such a hot day.

Tom thanked him and turned to Alice. “Ready?”

She nodded.

They drove slowly through the campground, which was split into two sections—one close to the river, and the other in the forest. Everywhere she looked, there were tents, RVs, vans with their sliding doors open, music playing, towels hanging to dry. A dog barked as they passed.

Their site was tucked among a circle of tall firs. Tom frowned slightly as he steered the RV into the parking spot. Alice tried to guide him, but they both winced when a branch scraped the side.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I didn’t see it.”

“It’s fine. It’s bound to get some scratches.” Tom smiled, but she could hear the disappointment in his voice, the hint of annoyance.

“It’s okay to get mad. I won’t break.”

He met her eyes and quickly looked away. Her face felt hot. They both knew how close she had come to breaking this last year. She stayed silent while he finished parking the RV.

They pulled out their aluminum camping chairs, and Alice spread the plastic tablecloth across the picnic table, smoothing out the fold lines. The yellow-and-red poppy pattern looked cheerful with the green camping dishes she’d ordered from the Montgomery Ward catalog.

Tom poured them wine. “Should we toast to our first night?”

“How about to all our adventures ahead?” They tapped their plastic glasses and Alice took a small sip. She hadn’t drunk any alcohol for months. Too much would have her maudlin.

Tom placed kindling and newspaper in a neat stack at the center of the fire pit, leaned forward to blow on the embers. It wasn’t dark yet, the summer days long, but it was nice to stare into the flickering flames. Tom sat close beside her in his chair and reached for her hand. With their fingers linked, they sipped wine and listened to the voices of other campers, the occasional person crunching past on the gravel path, soft chirps of birds settling in for the night.

“What are we going to do all evening?” Alice said.

Tom turned with a raised eyebrow. “Bored of me already?”

“Not at all.” She tried for a reassuring smile. This road trip was important. A reprieve. Tom had bought them a Winnebago Chieftain with a sporty orange-and-brown stripe down the side. Alice loved the dinette with its green floral bench seats and table that converted into an extra bed, the plush shag carpet, the wood paneling, the small fridge and stove, and the toilet that flushed when you stepped on a lever. The rear couch turned into a double bed, and there were overhead cupboards for all their clothes. There was even a privacy curtain. Tom swore they could make the payments and reminded her that the doctor had said she needed to relax.

She swirled her wine, vowing to be different on this trip. She’d be fun again. She just needed a moment to get herself together. The wine had been a mistake.

“We can play Uno,” Tom offered.

“After dinner? I want to take a shower. I’m all sticky.”

“Want me to walk you?”

“I’ll be fine.” She patted his shoulder. *See? I’m doing so well.*

\* \* \*

The restroom smelled of mildew, the concrete floors gritty with sand, the shower stalls littered with empty containers of shampoo and slivers of soap. Alice kicked at the plastic curtain that clung to her legs and wished she could have showered in the RV, but Tom wanted them to use the campground facilities so they didn’t have to empty the tanks daily. She pulled on her shower cap and quickly washed in the tepid spray.

Alice had dried off, changed into fresh clothes, and was gathering her belongings when she heard the *slap, slap* of sandals. She stepped out of the shower area and was surprised to see the blond girl by the sink, who gasped and whirled around.

“Sorry,” Alice said. “Didn’t mean to scare you.”

“It’s all right.” The girl folded a small piece of paper towel and bent over to wrap it around the toe strap of her sandal. She winced. “Blisters. I forgot to pack Band-Aids.”

“We have a first aid kit in our RV. You’re welcome to come by.”

The girl straightened and bit her lip as she thought over the offer. She was pretty, with large blue eyes set in an elfin face, but she was extremely thin, her slender body swimming in the white baby-doll shirt that billowed around her midsection. She stood with her feet turned out.

“That’s nice of you, but I should ask my boyfriend.”

Alice waited while the girl brushed her hair and applied lip gloss, then slid everything into a colorful granny-square crocheted purse. She tucked the purse into her backpack, which was leaning against the wall, and shrugged it on.

The boy was waiting near the building when they walked out, arms crossed over his chest, sunglasses pushed up onto his head, and his backpack by his feet. A macrame belt held his jeans up on his narrow hips.

His dark eyes narrowed as he glanced between Alice and the girl. “You okay, babe?”

“Uh-huh.” The girl hooked her arm through his. “This lady has Band-Aids.”

Alice held out her hand. “Alice Bell.”

The girl was the first to shake it. “Ocean, and he’s Blue.”

Alice hid a smile. Hippies. Maybe on their way to work on one of the farms for the summer, or to a music festival. She shook the boy’s hand. Warm, with the scrape of calluses. His knuckles were scarred and rough. He slid his hand back into his front pocket.

“Did you want to get them now?” Alice said. “We’re not far.”

Ocean turned to the boy, who gave a small nod. She walked alongside Alice, and the boyfriend followed. They exchanged pleasantries about the weather and the campground’s beautiful setting, the mossy paths. Ocean spoke in a breathy voice—her Canadian accent stretching her vowels and lifting the ends of her sentences, which Alice thought was charming.

A young woman in a halter top and hot pants was walking toward them. She paused to pick a wildflower, adding a few fern fronds to make a small bouquet. When she grew closer and noticed Blue behind them, she gave him a flirty smile, and a sweet “Hi.”

Ocean turned and scowled, but she needn’t have worried. Blue ignored the girl and moved up to walk on the other side of Ocean, draping his tanned arm over her shoulder. Alice looked away when he whispered something into Ocean’s ear.

Tom was sitting by the fire when they entered the site and got to his feet, eyebrows pulled together, and a curious smile playing at the corner of his lips. He met Alice’s gaze.

“I found some friends in need of a first aid kit.” She turned to the couple. “This is my husband, Tom. I’ll get the Band-Aids for you.”

When she came back out of the RV, they were sitting at the picnic table, drinking bottles of cream soda. Ocean doctored her feet while Tom attempted to engage Blue in conversation, but the boy’s answers were brief. He was from a small town up Northern BC, worked in a hardware store—they were on vacation and wanted to see more of the country before settling down.

“You’re hitchhiking?” Tom said.

“Yeah.”

“I hope you’re checking in with your families,” Tom said.

Blue glanced at Ocean, who looked stricken. She blinked a few times like she was on the verge of tears. Blue put his arm around her shoulder and pulled her closer.

“My dad’s a drunk, my mom ran off, and Ocean’s parents are dead.”

Tom lowered his bottle and stared at them aghast. “I’m so sorry.”

“It’s okay. We have each other,” Blue said with his chin lifted. Ocean gazed up at him, her eyes soft. He kissed her forehead. “There’ll be three of us soon.”

At first, Alice didn’t understand. Then Ocean’s hand dropped to her belly, revealing a round bump that had been hidden under her loose shirt.

“You’re *pregnant*?” Alice said, surprised. The girl looked so young.

Ocean flushed, and Blue frowned at Alice.

Tom grabbed Alice’s hand under the table and squeezed. “Congratulations—babies are a blessing. We haven’t been so lucky ourselves.”

The couple turned their gazes to Alice, who now wanted to cry, but she clung to Tom’s hand and lifted the corners of her mouth into what she hoped resembled a smile.

“How far along are you?”

“Maybe five months.” Ocean shrugged. Alice wanted to ask if Ocean had seen a doctor. How could she be so casual? Why was she *hitchhiking* when she was carrying a precious life inside her body? But none of it was her business. Alice sat frozen, anchored to her seat.

“We’ll get married this year,” Blue said, and Ocean smiled at him.

“That’s wonderful. We’ve been married sixteen years now,” Tom said. “I’m the football coach at our local high school, where Alice was a secretary. That’s how we met.”

“Football?” Blue looked confused. “Where you from?”

“Seattle. We’ve wanted to visit this beautiful country of yours for years.”

“Cool.” Blue took a drink of his soda.

“Where’s your site?” Tom said.

“We don’t have a tent, so we slept on the beach.”

“You weren’t cold?”

Blue shook his head. “We built a fire.”

Tom was about to say something else when the air filled with a loud rumbling as a group of bikers rode past. Their bikes were low to the ground with high handlebars. The last rider gave them a hard look as he went by. He had long greasy red hair, a scraggly beard that blew in the wind, and a bare chest under his leather vest. His gaze lingered on Alice and Ocean. The bikers took the access road that led to the campsites near the river and the rumble of their engines faded.

Tom turned to the young couple. “Going to be loud at the river tonight.”

Ocean shot her boyfriend a worried look. He tried to give her a reassuring smile, but Alice couldn’t help noticing how his shoulders and arms had stiffened.

“Why don’t you eat dinner with us?” Tom said. This time it was Alice who tensed. She didn’t want to sit across from a pregnant woman. A pregnant *teenager*, who’d probably conceived in the back seat of a car. Alice despised her bitter thoughts, the sour taste of them.

Blue sat straighter. “We’ve got food.”

“Save yourself the trouble.” Tom was already moving toward the barbecue grill. “You can’t beat the taste of steak over charcoal briquettes.”

Blue and Ocean shared another look, then he said, “Sure. Thanks.”

“Wonderful!” Alice forced a smile and stood up. “I’ll make a salad.” She walked quickly to the RV, where she splashed water on her face, fixed her hair, and took a couple of breaths. Then she vigorously chopped vegetables and shucked corn until her emotions were in order.

They ate in the last of the sunlight, chatting about the Olympics. Alice shared how she’d stood in line for hours to pick up a schedule of events and an order form for their tickets, then they’d waited weeks to find out what events they’d secured before planning their trip.

“Queen Elizabeth will be at the opening ceremony,” Tom said. “It’s going to be quite a show.”

“Are you driving straight to Montreal?” Blue said.

“No, we want to spend some time in Banff National Park, then we’ll stop in Calgary, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba. When we get to Ontario, we’re going to rent a canoe and explore the lakes. Alice wants to hear the loons calling.” He smiled over at her.

“Don’t forget birch trees and touring a real maple syrup farm.”

Tom turned back to Blue and Ocean. “Do you have any suggestions?”

“We’ve never been past Vancouver,” Blue said with a shrug.

“Thank you for dinner.” Ocean wiped butter off her fingers with a napkin and patted her lips dry. “It was so good.”

“I’m glad you enjoyed it.” Alice stood and began to gather plates. “Anyone up for dessert? We have watermelon.”

“Thanks, but we should probably go,” Blue said. “We need to find a spot to sleep.”

“You could stay here. We have a spare tent, and with those bikers camping near the river, it might not be a safe place for…” Tom’s gaze shifted to Ocean.

Alice focused on the dirty plates she was collecting. She didn’t look at Tom.

“Maybe they’re right, babe,” Ocean said. She sounded nervous.

When Blue didn’t answer, Alice glanced up at his face. He was looking back and forth between Tom and Alice. She wondered why he was hesitating. Did he sense that she was upset?

“You’ll be more comfortable,” Tom said.

“Okay. If you don’t mind…”

“That’s settled then.” Alice carried the plates into the RV.

\* \* \*

Tom and Alice lay together in bed. They’d played several games of Uno by lantern light with the couple. Ocean had never played before, but she’d picked it up quickly, even if she couldn’t seem to bring herself to shout “Uno!” like the others and said it more like an apology. Blue had no problem slapping down his cards. During the night, Ocean had revealed she was nineteen and Blue was twenty-two, but Alice felt like Ocean seemed younger. More innocent. Alice had made Jiffy Pop on the fire, and Ocean had nearly jumped out of her seat when the kernels began popping. Then she’d watched with big eyes as the aluminum foil expanded into a silver dome.

“Did you believe their story?” Alice said. “That they’re just traveling?”

“Sure.” He adjusted his pillow. “Didn’t you?”

“They don’t seem prepared. They could be runaways.”

A soft shrug in the dark, the rustling of sheets. “They don’t look underage.”

“Their names are definitely made up.”

“No crime in that. They’re having fun.” She couldn’t miss the admiration in his voice and felt a stab of guilt. Maybe that was why he wanted to spend time with them. They made him feel young again. It had been the opposite for her. Thirty-six had suddenly felt like forty-six.

“They barely spoke about themselves.”

“Sounds like they had things rough at home. I don’t think there’s anything to be concerned about.” He stroked her arm. “Try to get some rest.”

His breath deepened as he relaxed. She willed herself to turn in his direction, to press her cheek against his bicep, but her bones were too weary. Her heart too heavy.

She used to find comfort in his solidness. Tom wasn’t a tall man, but he was built stout, with wide shoulders and strong legs. His black hair was thick and feathered back, his sideburns trimmed tight against his jaw. He enjoyed food, beer, and laughter with friends. He loved entertaining and they hosted Super Bowl parties every year. More than once, she’d heard someone refer to him as a gentle giant. She agreed, but she was jealous of how easily he could shrug off problems. How quickly he could make decisions without agonizing over every detail.

Sixteen years. It was a long time, and yet, the physical side of their marriage had never been a problem. Until last year. There was the fracture, then the ever-widening crack until it was now this big gaping, silent thing between them. He used to make small attempts, his hand linking with hers, his body rolling against her, his hand on her hip, his lips to her neck, but she couldn’t stop her muscles from stiffening, couldn’t make her body feel anything, and so he’d stopped.

Muffled music leaked through the RV walls, loud laughter, yelling. The group by the river. She’d fretted when Tom said he wanted to bring his dad’s old handgun, but now she was glad for the protection. Tom was making a soft snoring sound. She thought of the couple in the tent. Were they asleep yet? Tomorrow she would be cheerful. She would make them breakfast. Absently she ran her hands over her now-flat stomach, then yanked them away as though burned.

That night she dreamed of a small lifeless body being placed in her arms, swaddled in his blue knit blanket so snugly that she couldn’t see his face. Then the cedar coffin lowering into the ground. Dirt falling. She clawed and clawed at the earth, but she couldn’t bring him back.

CHAPTER 2JENNY

They’d zipped their sleeping bags together and lay with her head on his chest, his arm wrapped around her. He was tracing soft patterns on her skin. The night air was still warm enough that they could sleep in their T-shirts and underwear, but their pants and shoes were nearby in case they had to dress in a hurry. They hadn’t unpacked their bags.

Simon’s voice was low and close to her ear. “*Blue* and *Ocean*?”

“I wasn’t thinking. The names just popped into my head.”

“I like them.” Simon moved his hand to stroke her lower back, scratching gently. They’d been bitten by so many bugs on the beach, they were both covered with welts. Alice had given them calamine lotion and a red thermos full of water, and when she realized they didn’t have pillows, she’d insisted that they take a couple of decorative ones from the RV. They were firm, and roughly textured, but Jenny was grateful they didn’t have to use their packs as pillows again.

“Should we ask them for a ride?” Jenny said.

“I don’t know … Tom asks a lot of questions.”

“I think they’re nice.” Jenny flexed her toes, trying to stretch the knotted muscles in her calves. Simon and she had been in constant motion for days. First, taking the aluminum skiff down the coast in the pitch-dark and tying up in a hidden bay when the sun rose. The next night, they’d boated up the river, but the rapids had stopped them. They’d abandoned the skiff at the dock and slept on the campsite beach. They planned on continuing by road, but when they tried to walk to town and find a gas station, where they’d hoped to catch a ride with a long-haul trucker, someone who could get them to the next province, Jenny’s feet had hurt too much.

“Did you notice that everything they have is new?” Simon said.

“Maybe they’re rich.”

“They probably have cash with them.”

She realized what he was thinking. “No.”

“We’re going to have to do something for money.”

“Not that.” They were good people. She could tell right away. Tom spoke in an upbeat, encouraging gym teacher voice, and Alice was pretty with her hazel eyes, brown curly hair, and dimpled cheeks. It was sad that they didn’t have kids. Alice seemed like she’d be a good mom. Not like her own. Jenny rolled onto her side so that Simon wouldn’t feel her tears.

Simon turned over too, his hand cupping her stomach, his thumb rubbing soothingly. He was excited about the baby, thinking of names, and talking about how they could live on a farm, or he’d get a job on a fishing boat in Nova Scotia. She’d make jewelry to sell in shops.

“I promised that I’d take care of you,” he said.

“I don’t want anyone else to get hurt.”

“Okay. We’ll just ask them for a ride.” Simon kissed the crook of her neck. “Whatever makes you happy, babe. I’d do anything for you.”

It was scary sometimes, in a way she didn’t quite understand, his willingness and loyalty, his fierce protectiveness of her. She wasn’t always sure she deserved it. But he did. He’d saved her, and she’d never forget that. She owed him everything.

\* \* \*

They were woken by the hushed voices of Alice and Tom as they moved around, the smoky smell of campfire. When Simon and Jenny emerged from the tent, Alice greeted them with a pot of coffee. She looked ready for the day, with her curly hair in a low ponytail, tied with a white silk scarf. She was dressed in blue pin-striped shorts, and a sleeveless, white-collared shirt. Tom was more casual in a purple University of Washington tank top and gold athletic shorts.

Jenny and Simon used the washrooms, then sat for breakfast. Jenny took forkfuls of pancakes, savoring each maple-syrupy mouthful. Alice didn’t seem to be eating much, but Tom was halfway through his stack. He paused to take a sip of his coffee, steam drifting into his face.

“So, are you hitting the road this morning too?” he said.

Simon set down the syrup he’d been pouring, taking a moment to wipe his sticky fingers. “Hope so. Any chance we could get a ride?”

“Where do you want to go?”

“If you could get us to the next town, we’d be grateful.”

Tom got his map, unfolded it on the table, and narrowed his eyes as he peered down at it, humming to himself. “That’d be Lytton.” He checked the scale, spread his fingers between the two cities. “Looks like it’s about seventy miles, give or take. That work?”

“Yeah, perfect.”

Jenny nodded. She didn’t know anything about Lytton, but it didn’t matter.

“We’d be glad for the company,” Tom said. “Right, honey?”

Alice looked startled, her cheeks flushing, and Jenny wondered if maybe she wasn’t glad about it at all, but she said, “More the merrier,” and added another pancake to his plate.

After breakfast, Tom and Simon packed up camp, while Jenny helped Alice wash dishes inside the RV. Alice had wanted Jenny to relax again, but Jenny had insisted that it was only fair. She glanced at Alice, who was drying the plates so fast it was like she was waxing a car.

“You *sure* you’re okay with giving us a ride?”

“Of course.” Alice smiled but it seemed more polite than genuine. Was she angry that they were interrupting their trip?

“We do appreciate it.” Jenny dropped her hand to her belly and caught Alice shooting a glance at her. “The baby’s moving. Feels like flutters.”

“That’s wonderful.” Alice turned away. “I’m going to secure the bathroom.”

Jenny stared after her. Did she say something wrong? When Alice was finished in the bathroom, she came out and began putting away the glasses. Alice seemed fine, but Jenny didn’t want to possibly upset her again, so she washed the last plate and slipped outside.

While Jenny gathered her backpack, she listened to Tom telling Simon about the Winnebago. “It’s the smallest of the models, just twenty-three feet, but good enough for what we need. See the windshield there? It’s slanted six degrees, so it blends with the side windows, gives you views all around. Got a reserve gas tank and a V8 engine. It’ll climb mountains.”

Simon spotted Tom’s fishing rods, and the subject changed to fly fishing—something Tom was learning. Simon knew everything about fishing, in all types of water. Jenny tensed when Tom asked Simon how he’d gained so much experience, but Simon only muttered, “My dad.”

After they’d loaded the RV with their gear, Tom gave them a tour inside. Simon asked about the carpeted hump between the two front seats, and Tom explained that it covered the engine. He showed them how the passenger’s seat spun, but not the driver’s because it was blocked by the dinette, then had them try the seats so they could feel how comfortable they were.

When they were ready to leave, Simon ran to the bathroom, while Tom and Alice sat up front, looking over their map and discussing the day—where they would stop for lunch, where to get gas. Jenny waited at the table, facing the front of the RV so she could watch for Simon.

The RV was running when Simon jogged back, his eyes bright and excited looking. He sat beside Jenny at the table and dropped his arms around her shoulder. Tom slowly drove out of the campsite. As they passed the washrooms, Alice made a surprised sound.

“I thought those men would still be sleeping it off.”

Jenny looked out the window. Two of the motorcycles with the low handlebars were parked in the shade at the side of the washroom.

Alice turned in her seat. “Did they give you any trouble, Simon? They look rough.”

“Must have just missed them.”

When Tom and Alice began talking to each other again, Simon leaned closer to Jenny and whispered into her ear. “Found cash in one of their saddlebags.”

Jenny stared at Simon. Why would he take a risk like that? He could’ve been caught, gotten hurt.

“And this.” Simon lifted his shirt to show her the hunting knife clipped onto the waistband of his jeans. A *big* knife, with a carved antler bone handle and an intricate scroll design on the leather sheath. It looked important. Like it had mattered to someone.

Jenny turned away, trying to catch her breath. She regretted all the food she had eaten, the overly sweet coffee and pancakes that now sat heavy in her stomach.

“No one saw me,” Simon murmured, and she nodded, but she couldn’t meet his eyes, too scared that he might see her upset. He might think she doubted him, or, worse, that she couldn’t handle their new life on the run. Up in the front, Alice spun the radio dial. Jenny’s thoughts flipped into new fears. She hadn’t thought about the radio. Would they be on the news? It would give their descriptions. Alice and Tom would figure it out. They would turn them in.

“I have a headache,” Jenny said. “Do you mind if we don’t listen to music?”

“Of course.” Alice reached over and shut off the radio.

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