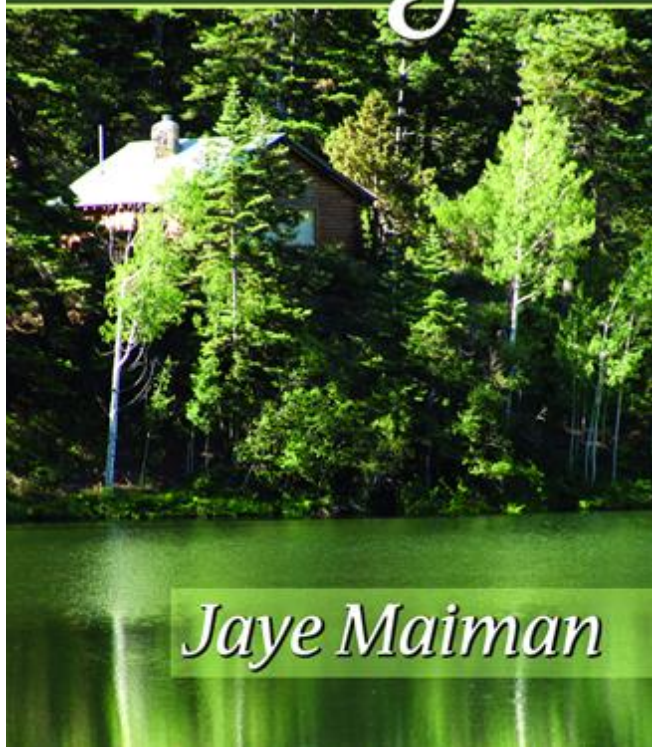


A Robin Miller Mystery

UNDER *my* SKIN



Jaye Maiman

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by

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2011

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*Dedicated to Risa Morris,
whose smile, laughter and loving kindness will never be forgotten.*

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About the Author

Jaye Maiman has written five other Robin Miller mysteries: *I Left My Heart*, the Lambda Award-winning *Crazy for Loving*, *Someone to Watch*, *Baby It's Cold* and *Old Black Magic*. She was born in Brooklyn, New York, and raised in a Coney Island housing project where she spent Tuesday nights consuming blueberry cheese knishes and watching fireworks from a beachside boardwalk. She now lives in New Jersey, much to her surprise.

CHAPTER ONE

Thick clouds blotted out the moon. I flipped up the collar of my wool blazer and shivered. The road to Robert and Allan's house was longer and steeper than I had remembered, and the night air here in the Pocono mountains of Pennsylvania stung with the promise of a bitter winter. Sucking in the scent of rustling pine trees and wood-burning stoves, I paused for a moment then bent into the wind.

The night wrapped around my city eyes like a blindfold. I squinted, anxious for even a faint glimmer of light to tell me I was closing in. Instead, all I could make out was the shape of an unidentifiable animal slinking into the bushes on the side of the road. My breath spat steam as I quickened my pace.

When my teeth started chattering I began to wonder how much of my chill was due to the temperature and how much due

to the phone call I had received before leaving the log-framed cabin I was renting for the month. The conversation filled my head like hot air expanding in a too tight balloon.

K.T. Bellflower was headed here. Two nights early. Or six months late, depending on how you looked at it.

The first and only time we kissed, I had succumbed to instant meltdown: weak knees, pounding heart, and that deep ache between my legs clenching hard. We'd been on Fire Island when it happened, on a boardwalk leading to one of the world's most exquisite beaches. And when our lips touched, I knew a tidal wave was coming for me. The only thing that saved me from the undertow was fear. And common sense.

In the past two and a half years, two of my lovers have been murdered. It's a track record that frankly scares the crap out of me. Understandably, I have one hell of a black-widow complex.

After that limb-shivering kiss, my internal alarm system shifted into high gear. I backed off and mumbled something about "not being ready" — one of those dumb phrases we all resort to when we feel like sprinting back to safe ground. But I wasn't scared or dumb enough to reject K.T. totally. We spent the day walking through the Sunken Forest, our hands sealed together like Velcro.

As it turned out, she left the country two days later.

K.T.'s a famous chef, with her own cooking show on PBS. For the past six months, she's been a guest instructor at the LeClerc's Culinary Academy in Paris. Me, I've been in therapy trying to figure out why intimacy seems so incredibly appealing when I'm single yet makes me want to puke small, angular stones whenever an available woman comes along. My therapist, Vivian Mauer, tells me that when I find the answer I'll also know why I turned my back on a lucrative career as a romance writer to become a private detective. I figure by then I'll also know the true stories behind the Big Bang and JFK's assassination.

At last, a light flickered at the top of the hill. I shoved aside memories of K.T. and began gearing up for the festivities.

Robert and Allan were staging a Bless-the-Turkeys party in anticipation of Thanksgiving, which was just five days away. Almost all of the gay couples living in the private Telham Village

community were coming, plus a few straight neighbors. The bottom line was that, straight or gay, Helen Ananias and I would be the only single women in a room of fifty plus.

The realization almost propelled me back to the cabin I was renting, but the sensor lights tagged me and announced my presence with a blue-white beam. A second later a perfectly groomed English sheepdog had her bagel-sized paws planted on both of my breasts. Knowing the salami-sized tongue was next, I fainted to my left.

“Don’t tell me you walked!” Allan exclaimed as the screen door slammed behind him. Caitlin’s snout headed unswervingly for my crotch. Life must be considerably less complicated in the canine kingdom. I stepped around her toward Allan, who was observing Caitlin’s antics with the amused appreciation of an overindulgent parent. He smiled broadly when our eyes caught. “She loves you, Rob. Kiss her.”

I complied reluctantly, receiving a healthy dose of wet dog breath in return, then tried to climb the stairs with eighty pounds of dog humping my right calf. Allan bounded in front of me. Slender, with short-cropped hair the color of chestnuts, he had the energy of a prepubescent male and the timing of a Catskills comedian. Dress him in drag, and he’d be a dead ringer for Doris Day. The fact that his lover Robert resembled a young Rock Hudson has often compelled me to burst into song. *Que sera sera*. I followed his tightly denimed butt into the kitchen and asked, “What’s cooking?”

He pursed his lips and wiggled an eyebrow. “Triple fudge brownies. Robert will only eat them straight from the oven. Warm and gooey. C’mon, darling. If you don’t move fast, you’ll miss out on Joannie’s artichoke dip.”

I followed him into the great room, marveling once again at the impeccably designed surroundings. The wall-to-wall carpeting was the color of New Mexico sand dunes at sunset, with bleached oak furniture, a verdigris ceiling fan, and turquoise-and-peach-toned *objets d’art* positioned around the multi-leveled home for the greatest visceral impact. Allan strode ahead of me, tracking crushed leaves under his lavender Nikes and tipping his battered Yankees baseball cap to one of the guests. I worked

my way through the crowd with appropriate kisses and hugs and arrived at the buffet table. Eight feet of dining heaven. I almost cried when I spied the steaming cistern of mulligatawny.

Just then I heard voices rising above the party din. I speared a Carr's cracker into the artichoke dip and moved toward the commotion. I grimaced when I saw the source. Noreen Finnegan, drunk extraordinaire, was out on the front deck, brandishing one of Robert's potted geraniums at her ex-lover Helen Ananias. As the only other single person in the room, I rushed to her defense. Who says gallantry is dead?

"Put the flowers down," I declared with the confidence of a woman with over two years of tae kwon do under her belt. I met Noreen's fiery glance and held it till she backed down. Helen skulked away silently. "What's the problem, Noreen?" I slid the glass door behind me till it closed with a snap.

She shook her head and walked down two steps to the lower deck. I followed her, then jerked back as she halted abruptly. I took a whiff, expecting her usual acrid whiskey breath, then cocked and eyebrow. Damned if she didn't smell sober.

"Helen won't accept my apologies." The petulant tone was incongruous with her appearance. Almost five-ten, Noreen was imposing in a Phantom-of-the-Opera way. She had dark brown hair the color of the cheap walnut-veneered office furniture they sell in Kmart, and ice blue eyes that only emphasized the striking paleness of her skin. A ropy four-inch scar ran across her left cheek. Dressed in a tartan flannel shirt, black jeans, and cowboy boots, she was a model of butch fashion from the fifties.

She pulled a super-thin cigar from her breast pocket, bit off the tip, and spat it over the side of the deck. With distaste, I watched her light the cigar. Flat-chested and hipless, in another era Noreen would have been called a stone butch. All I know is that no one in Telham — gay or straight — wanted to be on her shit list. When she and Helen moved into the community last June, their elderly next-door neighbor made the mistake of calling Noreen *Mister* Finnegan. Twice. Three days later the poor man found a hamperful of dirty sanitary napkins on his back porch. Last I heard, his house was still on the market.

Helen called it quits barely two months later. Now she's

renting a lackluster place on a cul-de-sac, and Noreen's got a brand-new lover installed in a massive split-level contemporary with an exquisite view of the Acee River.

I watched Noreen swing a leg over the rail and straddle it like a horse. The wood creaked lightly as she kicked a post with her heel. "What are you apologizing for?" I asked.

She looked at me with surprise. "All the shit that went down between us." From the little I knew about her seven-year relationship with Helen, there was enough shit to fertilize the Midwest twice over.

"Why now?"

There was a beat of hesitation, then she said, "I'm in recovery."

I tried to picture Noreen at an AA meeting, but the image wouldn't jell. "You usually apologize with a flowerpot aimed at someone's head?" I asked testily.

She shrugged and said, "Nah, she just got me pissed. But I almost went too far. Again." Her arm shot out in my direction and I jumped back involuntarily. Then I realized what she wanted. I shook her hand. "Thanks for interrupting," she added, sounding almost sincere.

I nodded and started back up the stairs. Her baritone voice stopped me. "You still a detective?" she asked.

"Yeah," I said defensively.

"I want to hire you." She swung her feet onto the deck with a thud that shook my soles. I watched her dig five twenties from her back pocket. Shoving them at me, she said, "I can't talk about it here. But take this as a deposit. We'll talk tomorrow. My place."

I palmed the money away from me. "Noreen, I can't take this from you. After we talk —"

She shoved the money into my shirt pocket. "I know what makes people tick. And keep commitments. Tomorrow. Around six."

With that, she pounded down the steps.

I took a deep breath and hoped that the brownies were waiting for me back in the kitchen. I desperately needed something sweet.

The dark chocolate melted in my mouth. I leaned against the rolled arm of the eggshell couch and took another bite of the moist brownie. From across the room a curvaceous redhead with basset hound eyes pointed at my chest with a sly smile. If it had been anyone but Carly I would have found the look titillating, but the two of us have known each other since grade school. I nodded at her playfully and she rolled her eyes, poking a finger at her own chest meaningfully. I glanced down and saw what had attracted her attention. There were four chocolate chips melting on my right breast. I brushed them into a cocktail napkin.

When I looked up again, Carly had Amy in her arms. I felt a pang of jealousy. After twelve years, they still adore each other. Painfully aware of my single status, I retreated to the bathroom. The one downstairs was occupied so I padded upstairs, grateful for the sudden quiet as I closed the door. I turned on the faucet and wet the edge of a guest towel. As I sponged the chocolate stain on my shirt, I heard tense murmuring in the hallway. A natural snoop, I pressed my ear to the door.

“She’s driving me crazy. I’ve never met anyone so damn secretive. She’s always talking about the importance of family, but whenever I get close she pushes me away. How did you manage for so long?” The voice was low and sultry. I tried to place it but couldn’t.

I waited for the response. “It was like sleepwalking through a nightmare.” The words were passionless. No regret. No anger. The emotional equivalent of fog. I knew the speaker instantly. Helen Ananias. “You have to wake up, honey. Before you slam into a wall like I did.”

There was a muffled sob. The other woman had to be Emanuela “Manny” Diaz, Noreen’s new lover.

She cleared her throat, then whispered, “She’s selling the house. Don’t ask me why. Madam Noreen just decided it was time for us to move. No discussion. Christ, we haven’t even finished paying for the new porch. You know what she’s listed the house for?” She stated a figure that lifted my eyebrows in surprise.

“She wants to sell quick. I keep telling her I can’t afford to

move again. Besides, I just started managing that antique store in Cresco. If I quit, who knows when I'll find another job. And if I ever needed the money, it's now. Some crackheads just moved into the damn tenement where my mother and brother live. If I cut off their support, God knows where they'll end up."

The voices grew fainter as the speakers wandered down the hall. I pressed against the door so hard I half-expected it to swing open. The last words I caught were Helen's.

"It's time someone gave Noreen a little bit of her own poison."

Within less than twenty-four hours, those words would echo in my head like the buzz of a mosquito hot for blood.

The party was in full swing by the time I descended the stairs. I watched the action from the landing. Allan was regaling a small group of long-time Telham homeowners with another believe-it-or-not story about Bobby Gardener, a seventeen-year-old whose favorite summer sport consisted of dumping potted plants and beach chairs into the community pool. The laughter seemed forced.

Bobby was a Telham native long before the New York, New Jersey, and Philadelphia crowd discovered a little bit of heaven in the Pocono mountains. In the past seven years, the makeup of the community had changed substantially. Now, twenty-five of Telham's one hundred homes were gay-owned. Most of the couples were urban refugees. Still, the community was a rare example of tolerance and mutual respect. The exception was Bobby.

The pounding in my temples told me that I'd had enough festivities for one night. I spent a few minutes with Carly and Amy planning our Thanksgiving dinner, then said goodbye to Robert and Allan, who planned to spend the rest of the week in Key West.

I snuck out the side door. The air was even sharper than earlier, but now I welcomed the bite. Memories of past relationships rose up like hard waves presaging a winter storm. Cathy Chapman

arguing with me in a San Francisco bar because I danced with a buck-toothed secretary from her office who was too young to remember *Lost in Space* or Ed Sullivan. Mary Oswell, precious Mary, staring at me uncertainly as we said goodbye at the airport for the last time. Two years later, she was dead and our arguments would remain forever unresolved.

Despite the temperature, my cheeks felt hot. I was tired of hurting, tired of losing. And even more, tired of being alone.

A tree branch snapped sharply. I stopped and listened. The movement in the dark woods felt more human than animal. I called out. The sound ceased abruptly. I moved into the center of the road. Great vacation, I thought. I'd have to remember to thank my therapist for recommending a month in the country as an antidote for stress.

I jogged the rest of the way down the hill, my lungs burning from the cold. Minutes later, I turned into the circular driveway. The gravel crunched under my feet as I slowed, my heart beating hard. The lights were on in the living room. I tried to remember if I had turned them off before I left.

Then the floodlights shot on.

Shit. I walked between my new Subaru, affectionately known as "Hubba," and the midnight blue Buick Skyhawk with rental plates.

K.T. had arrived.

I stared at the cabin, acid shooting into my esophagus. The door opened, and she stepped out onto the porch. Even from a distance, I could see how exquisite she looked. A thick mane of curly, red-brown hair fluttered gently against her slender neck. She was wearing a spruce-green flannel shirt and tight-fitting jeans. What do I say to her after all these months, I wondered as I stepped forward. By then I was close enough to see the fire in her eyes. That's when I realized that there would be no words.

She folded herself into my arms, her cheek warm under my lips, the faint scent of cinnamon clinging to her skin. Our mouths met, and passion ran through my center like a shot of Schnapps. We slow-danced back into the house, our hips pressed tight together, our legs interlocked.

K.T. had started a fire in the living room. We shimmied

toward the warmth, then I pressed her onto the oversized couch and explored her mouth, its silky depths, her tender, moist lips. I pulled back for a moment and stared at her. She rested her head against a throw pillow, her eyes closed and her mouth open, waiting for me. Something exploded in me, something far more potent than simple desire.

I licked the center of her upper lip with the tip of my tongue. She shivered beneath me, and I felt myself grow wet in response. Our kisses grew deeper, more urgent, our bodies grinding together. I rubbed myself hard against her long, tight thigh, listening to her breath become more ragged, her moans deeper. She ran her tongue around my ear, then blew lightly on the spots she had moistened. Chills went through me. Over and over again, she whispered in my ear two words and only two words. *I want. I want.*

We rolled onto the floor, the ache between my legs wonderfully excruciating. I tugged her shirt out of her pants and slipped my hand against her cool skin. She arched against me, and my palm discovered the delicate hollow of her lower back. Her mouth moved to my neck, biting lightly, teasing me with pauses that elicited involuntary groans. I began my own mantra.

Yes.

Yes. To desire. To making love. To taking. To being taken.

K.T. shimmied under me till her head was at my breast. She opened my sodden shirt with a tug of her teeth, then began sucking a nipple through my bra. I flattened myself against her knee, craving the pressure. She moved against me, slow and sporadic by design. The irregularity made the tension unbearable. I could no longer hear the crackle of the wood in the fireplace, the wail of the wind against the corners of the cabin. I felt blind and dumb, with one purpose.

I lifted her half-buttoned shirt over her head, but the sleeves caught on her wrists. I left them tangled in cloth above her head and propped myself up onto my elbows to stare at her small, pale breasts. Again she arched, till I lowered my mouth onto her hard nipples. They blossomed in my mouth, swelled under the flick of

my tongue. I traveled between her nipples like a drunk reveling in her taste, her texture, her curves.

Her whimpers were a dizzying symphony, an opera played only for my ears. She didn't struggle to remove her shirt, but stared at me openly, with a vulnerability and a trust that briefly disoriented me. I kissed her eyes, whispered into her ear all that I intended, and was welcomed with a moan so deep that I felt it rumble through me as if it were my own.

I removed her pants, running my tongue just below her belly button. Her thighs were full and tight. Suddenly, I wanted time to cease, wanted these exquisite seconds to last for an eternity. I slowed my pace, stroking her length with my fingertips, licking her so lightly I could feel the fine hairs of her body yielding under my tongue. She filled all my senses. The saltiness of her moist skin, her singsong whimper, the edges and curves of her sweaty limbs, the sharpness of her nails as they dug into my shoulders, and the scent of her desire.

At last, I parted her with my tongue and entered her, beginning a voyage long overdue. I sucked and licked and probed her till I carried us both far beyond the stars.

By the slant of light falling over K.T.'s belly like a lover's arm, I guessed that it had to be late afternoon. Neither of us had left the bed for longer than the time it took to run down the hall to the bathroom and back. Once I took a few extra seconds to gum some toothpaste, then I was back in her muscular arms, nuzzling her salty neck, her supple lips.

"Are we still on earth?" K.T. whispered hoarsely. Still half asleep, she rolled onto her side and smiled at me.

I traced the line of her jaw and said, "Lady, we're not even in the same galaxy." She cuddled into me, her nipples hardening against my chest. Her mouth pressed against my ear as she began murmuring descriptions of what she wanted to do to me, specifying how often and how deep. I wasn't about to argue.

Just then, off in the distance, the phone rang. I groaned and buried my head under the covers.

K.T. joined me under the sheets. “That’s the fifth time. Maybe you should get it.”

It took less than ten seconds to convince her that we had more pressing business at hand.

I was on the edge of tumbling into a glorious black hole when the doorbell rang. I crashed back to earth with a painful thud. “Shit.” I grabbed an oversized flannel shirt from the back of the door and buttoned it as I ran down the stairs and into the living room. Whoever it was had better be wearing a bulletproof vest and one hell of a crash helmet. “Be prepared to defend your life,” I shouted as the intruder rang the bell again *and* slammed the knocker.

“Cool your jets and open the damn door.”

It was my friend Carly. I swung the door open and stared at her menacingly. She was pale and her bottom lip was trembling.

I grabbed her hand, pulled her inside, and closed my arms around her tightly. The scent of fear rose from her skin. I glanced up over her shoulder and saw K.T. glaring at me from the top of the stairs.

Christ.

She spun around and stormed toward the bedroom.

I half-grimaced, then moved Carly to arm’s length. I would have kicked her out, but she looked like hell. “Is Amy okay?” I asked, a knot forming in my throat. Carly and Amy are an anchor in my life. If anything ever happened to either of them. . .

“It’s not Amy,” she said. “It’s Noreen Finnegan. She died a few hours ago, and Helen’s up at the house stinking of booze and wailing like a banshee. She thinks the police are going to arrest her for murder.”