

Chapter 1

Monday, September 4, 1978: Sageley, Iowa

“Hey, Spence, is this the year you decide to get a steady girlfriend?” George displayed his impish trademark grin with a space between his teeth.

The clamor of the first day at school swirled around us.

“Wash your mouth out with soap,” I said. “I have no interest in hooking up with a girl in this school.” I rummaged in my bag for an ink pen and scribbled my name on the locker: *Spencer Edwards, Senior*.

George swept his fingers through his cowlick before printing his name on his door tag: *George Peterson, Senior*. “Come on, Spence. Don’t be a wallflower. Will you be the only senior who isn’t dating someone?” He plopped his book bag on the floor and extracted four three-ring binders and five textbooks.

I snorted. “What about Ken Hunt or Bill Greenslade or Ron Hartmann? They aren’t dating anyone.”

“Yeah, but they don’t count because they’re nerds. If you had a girlfriend, you could go double with me and Christy.”

“Forget it. Quit your scheming to hook me up with someone. Last year, all the girls were either attached or—”

“Or didn’t meet your standards.” He waved a finger in my face. “Loosen up a little. You’ve got to have fun. Is there any girl in this school who measures up?”

“Yeah, if you dumped Christy, I’d ask her out in a flash. Come on, it would take a prybar to peel her away from you, and I won’t change my standards, so forget it. I’m not interested in anyone else.”

I stuffed my books in the locker and nudged him with my elbow. “Look at the balcony. They repainted the school’s name. The yellow lettering doesn’t look as nice compared to last year’s tan.”

“Nah. Except for the added flourish to the L and C, it’s not much different, just a lighter shade. It still says, Lincoln Christian High School.”

Big John Dawson lumbered up and selected the locker next to George. His voice rumbled as he said, “Good morning, guys. Are you rearing to start another year at Lincoln Christian?” His locker clanged open, and he stuffed an armload of books inside before scribbling his name on the tag.

“I’ll be glad when it’s over,” George muttered. “Graduation will be my time to celebrate.” He pointed to John’s football jersey. “How good is this year’s team? Better than last year, I hope.”

John’s eyebrows danced. “Since Barry Peterson is the quarterback, Coach says we have a chance to win the conference. This guy’s good.” He swung his arm as if throwing a football.

I grunted. “That’s good to hear compared to last year’s mediocre finish.”

John grabbed a textbook. "Ain't that the truth? Hey, have you guys seen Miss Eby, the new music teacher? She's a real looker."

"No, I haven't," I said. "I dropped music."

He grinned. "Bummer. You'll miss a grand show. She's great eye candy. I know a guy who signed up just because of her." He tucked a book under his arm. "Don't forget to come to the game on Friday. We'll win for sure with Barry leading the team. Anyhow, I gotta run. See you guys around." He climbed the stairs to the upper floor.

I pulled my history book from the locker. "If our team is anything like last year's, it'll take a miracle to win the conference title. My first class is history. What's yours?"

He removed his geometry book. "I'm headed to McIntyre's class. He's a grouch. Want to trade? You take mine, and I'll sit in yours."

I chuckled. "That'll be a momentous day when Mr. Bly lets a student sit in for someone else. Our illustrious principal would never let that happen."

"Yeah. Bly's a stickler and doesn't give an inch."

"I know, he's stubborn. By the way, where were you last Sunday? I missed you at the youth group. The preacher asked about you."

"One of our best milk cows got stuck in the mud by the pond. Dad and I worked late to dig her out."

"Was she alright?"

"She wasn't injured, but her milk production will drop. Dad's not happy about it." He pulled a class schedule from his pocket and browsed it. "Hey, what are you taking since you dropped music?"

"I figured woodworking is more practical. I enjoy singing, but building stuff could be handy later on. This year's project is a walnut desk to put by the phone for Mom."

"Wow. You'll have to modify the plans a bunch for her bad leg. She'll need to stretch it out."

I tapped my head. "I'm thinking hard about how to do it exactly. She has to be comfortable when she sits, but I don't want to make it too wide because of the limited space. What about you? Are you still in the band?"

"Yeah. I'll be the bass drummer, like always. Boom, boom, boom."

I jabbed him with a finger. "You mean Jennie beat you out for the first chair? I thought you were better than her."

"Nah, I play for fun and didn't contest the honor of the first chair. It's all hers. I did sign up as a distance runner for the track team. Coach said my stamina would help them out."

"Really? Your dad's okay with you being away from the farm to run the mile?"

"Yeah, we discussed it. He agreed I should go ahead and have fun before graduation. Coach put me on the relay team, too. He said my strong legs would make a difference at the finish line."

Hopefully, we'll advance to the state level. Why don't you come out and help the squad? Your long legs could really eat up the track."

"Come on, George. I'm skinny as a rail and hardly weigh a hundred and fifty pounds soaking wet. Besides, you're always faster than me at the Fourth of July races."

"Yeah, you're right. Hey, speaking of sports, we need to consider our yearly wager."

I groaned. "Can't we forget it this year? You always win our bets. Last year, I thought we'd thump our rival at the homecoming football game. We lost. The year before that, I thought we'd beat Almon in basketball, we didn't come close. I don't recall the bet in our freshman year. I'll concede this year's wager and give you twenty bucks."

He extracted a comb from his hip pocket and ran it through his cowlick. "Nope. It's not gonna happen. I want a legitimate clean sweep, four wins for every year of high school. Don't forget that this is my year to choose what we bet on. But I'm not going to select a sports event. It's got to be something different."

"Yeah, like what? How will you stack it in your favor? What about betting that you and Christy get hitched right after graduation? That'll be a sure thing."

He grinned. "Hey, I like the idea. If I asked, she'd say yes. But her dad would nix it and make us wait so she could go to college for a couple of years. Her mom would jump at the chance to put on a wedding. But nah, it wouldn't be fair. What about something that involves you, like dating someone? Since your sisters' accident, you've not had—"

I balled my fist under his nose. "Don't you *ever* mention my sisters. I thought you knew better."

He quickly stepped back. "Calm down, will you? I didn't mean anything by it."

I tightened my fist. "They're forbidden territory. Got it?"

He held up his hands. "Alright. Alright. I got it. They're off-limits. Not another word."

I relaxed my fingers. *You lost control, Spence. Count to ten.* I took a breath. "Sorry. It's just ... I don't know. It's a sore point."

"Okay. I didn't mean to get you riled. Mum's the word. Hey, about our wager, here's an idea: Linda goes to the prom with you."

I snorted. "Drop the idea of me dating someone, especially Linda. She'd flat-out say no. I don't know why, but she would. I invoke Linda as forbidden territory. For our wager, if you're bent on me taking a girl to the prom, I could ask Karen, Grace, or Ann. They'd go with me."

"Nope. It can't be them, because they'd say yes. I want uncertainty in our wager."

"What if I asked Stephanie to the prom?"

"She's pretty enough. But she's your relative. That would make her forbidden territory."

"She's my second cousin. There's nothing illegal about that," I said.

"Nah. It's gotta be someone new."

“Hey, turkey. Why does our bet have to be about a girl? Why not something like both of us working toward an A+ in a class? Or there’s the election in November. We could wager whether Governor Ray gets voted out of office.”

He chortled. “Nah, I get mostly Cs. You get mostly As. Forget politics. Our other wagers have been about something at school. I’m leaning toward you dating someone. Hey, here’s an idea, how about you asking one of the girls in the freshman class to the prom?”

“Hey, goofball. That’s cheating. Mr. Bly doesn’t allow freshmen or sophomores to attend the prom. There you go again, trying to stack the deck in your favor. Our wager must be fair.”

He grinned. “Yeah, you caught me on that one. Let me think.”

“Hey, George, here are some ideas: the Muhammad Ali and Leon Spinks rematch, or which teams go to the World Series, or who wins the Super Bowl.”

He shook his head. “Nope. Those are sports events. Besides, Ali will win the fight, that’s a given. The Yanks and Dodgers are sure to be in the Series, and I hate professional football.”

“Then you’re as picky as me.”

He grinned, showing the gap between his teeth. “Yeah. We’re both choosy.”

I flicked my gaze to the flow of students in the hallway and did a doubletake. My mouth dropped open. “Oh, wow. Who’s the new girl with Christy?”

He spun around. “Wowzah. That girl isn’t just pretty, she could replace Raquel Welch as a pinup girl. Look at her long legs.”

I swallowed. Christy assisted in the principal’s office, so this new girl would be someone Mrs. McManus, the administrative secretary, had asked Christy to show around. The girl’s long strides swung her dark ponytail back and forth. Her gray skirt fell below her knees instead of just above, as the dress code permitted. Christy stood at five-foot-six. I was six feet tall, and this girl could look me straight in the eye.

The two girls, intent on their conversation, strolled past us. Neither looked in our direction.

A couple of guys stared after the new girl as she and Christy disappeared around a corner.

George’s mouth hung open. “Gosh, that chick is beautiful. If I weren’t going steady with Christy, I’d consider asking her out.”

“Would you consider her for our bet?”

“Hey, I thought you weren’t interested in dating.”

I chuckled. “I never said I wasn’t interested in girls, just not the ones in our class. That girl is a transfer student.”

“What if she has a boyfriend?”

“I didn’t see her wearing someone’s class ring, so she’s available.”

“Come on, Spence. She’s gorgeous and probably has lots of guys dying to ask her out.”

I glanced at where the girls had disappeared. “I’m interested in learning more about her unless she has a boyfriend. That would put her in forbidden territory.”

The bell for the first period clanged above our heads.

George picked up his books. “Let me chat with Christy and see what I can find out. We’ll discuss this later.” He climbed the stairs to his geometry class.

I gathered my books for history. In my rush to class, my mind whirled. George and I were Christians, and I promised Mom I’d never date anyone with questionable standards.

If the girl had poor morals, I’d put her in forbidden territory, whether she had a boyfriend or not. Did she smoke? Did she drink? She was great eye candy. Did it affect her personality?

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