

WHO IS IT?



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Published in the United States
by eBooks2go, Inc.

1827 Walden Office Square, Suite 260, Schaumburg, IL 60173

ISBN-10: 1-5457-4771-7

ISBN-13: 978-1-5457-4771-1

ePUB ISBN: 978-1-5457-4772-8

Mobi ISBN: 978-1-5457-4773-5

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication

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CHAPTER I



The first bell rang throughout the halls of Rorertown High School, giving students a five-minute warning. Teenagers wandered the crowded hallways; darted off to different classrooms; talked with their friends; and hurried to their lockers, making every minute of procrastination count. Their loud and high-pitched voices echoed through the long building.

Fourteen-year-old John Dolton was one of six guys standing in a row, taking up the hallway. Tall and lean, he had curly, shoulder-length black hair, matching dark eyes, and a light complexion. The group split up, darting down different halls toward their classes. His pace quickened, with Tom and Chad racing to keep up with him.

A girl stepped in front of him, blocking his path. He came to an abrupt halt, almost bumping into her. “I like your hair.”

“Uh, thanks,” John said.

“It’s so long,” another girl said, appearing by his side.

The next thing he knew, girls surrounded him in a tight circle. They talked all at once, tangling their hands in his hair. He shifted back and forth uncomfortably on his feet. Class would begin any minute, yet he couldn’t move. He glanced over at his buddies for help and glared at them for laughing.

“Dude,” Tom called out. Taller than most seniors, he had short, spiky black hair offset by a light complexion with matching acne. “Come on.”

“We’re going to be late,” Chad slurred. Short, husky, and hairy, he had dark circles under his eyes, matted dirty-blond hair, and a speech impediment.

“I have to go.” Seeing an opening, he darted through the girls and

caught up with his friends amid the giggles and shouts trailing after him.

“You little whore,” Tom said, “you can have any girl you want. All you have to do is stand there and let them come to you.”

“Whatever.”

John turned a corner and came to a complete stop. He saw a girl coming toward them. Not just any girl—the girl. She was tall and slender, with wavy dark-brown hair flowing past her shoulders. Her dramatic eyes complemented her light-brown complexion. He had first noticed her six weeks ago in one of his classes, so he knew she was also in the ninth grade. But he never had the guts to approach her. Basketball practice kept him busy every day after school. The only time he saw her, aside from class, was between classes. If other girls weren’t surrounding her, she was always heading off to her classes or out the front door.

But this time his eyes remained on her. She walked by the group and smiled at John, their eyes meeting briefly.

Wait a minute, he thought, she’s in my next class. Here’s my opportunity to talk to her. It was time to make a move before someone else stole her away.

“I’ll catch up with you guys,” he said to Tom and Chad. He turned around and followed her.

“Man, he always gets the pretty ones,” he heard Tom say to Chad.

He shot Tom a look over his shoulder, who smirked in reply. Chad hit him on the shoulder playfully, and they resumed walking toward the classroom. Shaking his head, he scanned the students and saw the girl had stopped at a locker. He paused, took a deep breath, and then slowly walked up next to her.

“Hi, I’m John.” Some pickup line.

She looked over and smiled, making eye contact. “I’m Lisa.” “You’re in my English class, aren’t you?”

Lisa studied his face.

“With Mrs. Braughan.” He held his breath. “Yes, that’s right.” Her eyes lit up.

“Can I walk you over there?”

“Sure.” She shut her locker, and they walked back the way he

came. "Are you new here?"

She looked over at him, raising an eyebrow.

"Oh. I mean I don't recognize you from my junior high school."

"I went to Swedson."

"That explains it," he said. "I went to Westchester." "I've lived in Rorertown my entire life," Lisa added.

"Same here."

Her eyes swept around and he followed her gaze. Several heads turned their way. He looked all around him but saw that the oncoming looks were curious. Ignoring the stares, he turned back to her.

"What kind of music do you like?" "Rock, pop, and R and B."

"Good answer."

They entered the room, where more heads turned in their direction, eyes lingering on them for a while before returning to their own business.

What's going on? he thought. He couldn't tell who the stares were directed toward. I know she's pretty, but I approached her first.

John spotted Tom and Chad, already seated in the back. He nodded to them, then followed Lisa down a middle aisle and sat behind her. A boy abruptly stopped in front of the desk, staring at him.

He had taken the boy's seat.

Before John could say anything, the boy turned on his heels. Muttering under his breath, he walked to the back of the room, where the only empty seat remained. John smiled, dumped his book bag on the floor, and leaned forward to be closer to Lisa. Close enough to smell her shampoo. Honey and vanilla?

Quick—think of something to say. She's looking back at you, he thought.

But John couldn't. He didn't know much about her. His eyes widened. Basketball—why didn't I think of it before? He could ask her to the game tonight.

Lisa turned sideways. "Is your hair naturally curly?"

His eyebrows shot up. "Uh, yeah." He hadn't expected that. She laughed. "You don't like it?"

"It can be a real pain sometimes." He moved his hair out of his

eyes. "I like it."

"Thanks." He smiled.

He heard snickering behind him. He glanced over his shoulder and saw Chad giving him the thumbs up, while Tom hollered away. Shaking his head, he faced forward. Lisa leaned back in her seat, looking past John and at his buddies. Right when she looked back at him, Tom whistled loud and long.

They're killing me, he thought, meeting Lisa's questioning gaze. He threw his hand up, rolling his eyes in disgust. And they wonder why they have no girl.

"Your friends?" she asked, raising an eyebrow.

"I've never seen them before," he said with a straight face, and she laughed. "So, do you like basketball?"

"Yes." Lisa nodded.

"Our first game is tonight, if you want to come," John said. "Sure. What time?"

"Six o'clock."

"I'll be there," she promised.

During the rest of the school day, John walked Lisa to her classes and then made a mad dash to his classrooms. But he didn't care. Her eyes lit up each time she spotted him by the door, waiting. Her subtle perfume lingered after they parted ways. Her giggles echoed in his ears.

He could see her beautiful smile while he counted the minutes until the next period. Just to be around her was intoxicating.

After school let out, John said bye to Lisa, then walked to the gymnasium. He entered the locker room, where he found his buddies already changing. Only then did he realize how the day had flown. He had been too distracted.

"There you are," Tom said. He smacked him on the leg with a towel. John dodged it too late. "Been looking for you."

"Sorry," John muttered, opening his locker. He dumped his book bag and grabbed his uniform to change.

"It's all good," Chad slurred.

"Who's that chick you've been with?" Ben asked. He also had black hair, thick and long that framed his head. He stood medium height,

with broad shoulders and black eyes.

“Lisa.”

“The one that you ditched us for?” Adrian piped up. He had a bony frame, tanned skin with dark-brown hair, jetting brown fuzz on his upper lip.

Ben punched his shoulder, and Adrian grabbed the towel out of Tom’s hands, smacking him. Ben flinched. “Dude, that was my ear.”

“But it’s true,” Adrian whined.

“She’s hot,” Jason added. “I’d dump your ugly face for her any day.” He had a dark complexion with matching dark hair, complete with hazel eyes.

“Thank you,” John spoke up. “I knew you’d see it my way.”

Laughter erupted in the room. John quickly changed his clothes while his friends continued to joke around and punch each other. Fishing a hair band out of his book bag, he pulled his hair away from his face into a ponytail. Dressed and ready, John shut his locker when Jason approached him.

“Hey, man,” Jason said, “you going to hook up with her?”

“Working on it,” John said. He scanned the crowded locker room, noticing that it suddenly turned quiet. He turned back to Jason. “Why? What’s up?”

“We overheard some guy telling his friends earlier that he also liked her,” Adrian told him. “Just so you know, he got pissed when he saw you hanging around her.”

John frowned. He thought back but didn’t remember anything unusual. But then again, his attention had been solely on Lisa. They did get a lot of stares, though. “Who?”

“His name’s Danny.” Ben shut his locker. “He’s in one of my classes. We can point him out to you.”

“Think he’ll come tonight?” Chad slurred. “She’s coming,” John added.

“Then he’ll come,” Tom confirmed. “And we’ll kick his butt. Don’t worry.”

John smiled, shaking his head. More hollering erupted in the room. He looked around, seeing that the entire team stood ready to go. “All right, you guys,” he yelled, “let’s go kick some butt.”

“Yeah!”

The team piled out of the locker room and into the gymnasium to begin their workout.

Students filled both sets of bleachers, which faced each other on the sidelines of the court. The cheers, shouts, and stomps flooded John’s ears. Not surprising for the first game of the season. They were playing Doverly High School—their rival—the Dogs. Since Rorertown was a small city like Doverly, they each had one high school, though the distance between them was five minutes driving. It was the Dogs versus the Rangers.

There were two games tonight: the junior varsity and the varsity. John was captain of the junior varsity team, which consisted of freshmen and sophomores. Besides himself, his friends made up the freshman half, and the rest of the team members were sophomores. The varsity players were juniors and seniors. They stood off to the side, waiting for their game and watching the junior varsity warm up.

But John wasn’t fazed. He stood hyped and ready to win. He surveyed his team piled in two lines, practicing lay ups. He drilled the team a long time until he felt certain they had loosened up. Now they were focusing on their skill. As he waited his turn, he watched the guys dribble down the court and make their layups. No one had missed a shot yet. He nodded, feeling certain that they were ready.

Five more minutes, he thought. Then the game should start. John caught himself seeking out Lisa but couldn’t find her anywhere. She promised to come. Now concentrate. He shook his head to clear his mind.

Adrian threw him the ball and then jogged to the back of the other line. John made a perfect layup, passed the ball to Chad, and then trotted to the next line.

“John,” shouted a voice behind him.

He turned around and there was Lisa on the third row of the bleachers with two other girls and guys. His eyes widened briefly upon seeing the guys. But then he noticed they sat on the other side of the girls who were sitting to the right of Lisa. He shook off the feelings, figuring they were the other girls’ dates.

Lisa waved at him, and he smiled, nodding to her.

Man, she looks pretty. He reluctantly turned away, but soon he felt self-conscious of his every movement. He knew exactly where she sat. But was she watching him? He snuck a glance at her out of the corner of his eye. Yes, she was watching him. Chills crept down his back. Damn, she is distracting, he thought. Suddenly he felt someone else staring at him.

John looked to the left and saw a guy standing by the steps of the bleachers, watching him intensely. He stood about medium height, with a bony frame, straggly brown hair covering his eyes, and a light complexion. John recognized the guy—he had been suspended the other day for fighting some kids in the parking lot.

They locked eyes for a second, before the guy glanced at Lisa, then back to John. He bolted up the bleachers and sat directly behind Lisa, one row up. He leaned his elbows on his knees until hovering over her.

What the hell? John thought.

The guy shifted to one side, then to the other, but Lisa never turned around. Her eyes remained on John. The guy turned red, glaring at him.

“That’s Danny,” Adrian spoke up.

So that was Danny. It explained his behavior, but there wasn’t anything John could do. “We’ll keep an eye on him,” Chad added.

“No,” he said. “Focus on the game.” He stole one last peek at Lisa. Right on cue, the referee blew the whistle to start the game.

At the tip-off, the Rangers grabbed possession of the ball, taking it straight to the basket and scoring. The Dogs did the same, slipping through their defense and scoring.

The game continued on this way for some time. Each team dashed up and down the court. Players dodged, fought, dribbled back and forth, and raced the ball to the basket. Every time the Rangers scored, the Dogs stole the ball, only to run down to the other side of the court and make a basket.

By halftime, they were tied 60–60.

During the third quarter, they continued to sprint, to fight, to try something new to outdo each other, but nothing worked. The score climbed slowly, neck and neck—62–62, 66–66, 70–70. Good, but not

good enough.

It was now the fourth quarter, with two minutes left in the game. The Dogs had the ball. As a Dog rushed down the court, John ran alongside of him, keeping up, and moved in on him, closing off his space until forcing him out of bounds.

The referee blew the whistle. It was their ball.

John started to switch places with the Dog to throw the ball in when he looked up at the Ranger's bleachers, noticing that Danny now sat on the left of Lisa. But she paid him no mind, not noticing him at all. This thought made John smile. They locked eyes again. It was time for this guy to back off already. But Danny remained where he was. John turned around, his back to the bleachers. He needed to concentrate on the game.

Sweat matted his hair to the sides of his face and rolled down his back as he took a breath, his hands on his knees. They had to do something if they were to win this game. And quick. Several students stood in the bleachers, their cheers bouncing off the walls and stomps vibrating beneath his feet. He straightened when the referee handed him the ball.

"Go, John," he heard Lisa yell behind him.

His smile diminished when his peripheral vision showed Danny leaning toward Lisa. He will not stop, he thought. And he couldn't do anything right now. But what about when the game ended? Focus!

John slapped the ball in frustration. "Break!"

Both teams spread out around the court. Seeing Jason open, John passed him the ball, but a Dog charged ahead and knocked it out of bounds. It soared through the air, and John realized the ball might smack Lisa. He dove, nearly missing it, but he managed to knock the ball to the left. As John flew, students past him before the bleachers rushed up to meet him. He crashed, landing hard on the steps. That's going to leave a mark. The whistle blew.

Laughter erupted. John sat up slowly and saw that the students were turned away from him, laughing at something else. But he couldn't see what. He picked himself up gingerly, with the help of some students, and moved back on to the court. His buddies surrounded him, asking if he was OK, then slapped his back and

shoulders, before repositioning themselves.

A dull ache throbbed on his right side. He would feel it in the morning. But at least the ball didn't hit Lisa. He glanced at Danny and then did a double take. A circular red imprint burned on his cheek. He watched as Danny's face turned a deeper shade of red. Danny abruptly stood up, stormed out of the aisle, down the steps and out the gymnasium.

Good! Now he could concentrate. John sneaked a glance at Lisa, who smiled. He shrugged.

They had less than thirty seconds, and the Dogs had possession. A Dog threw the ball in, and Tom jumped, slamming it down and away from the player. Adrian charged through and snatched up the ball. He pivoted and passed it to John.

He raced down the court, heading toward their basket. A Dog appeared by his side, but Chad jumped in the way, blocking him. John turned and went around, noticing Jason underneath the basket and passed the ball to him. Two Dogs surrounded Jason, who passed it to Adrian. John came up the center, and Adrian passed it to him. He shot right at the free-throw line and made it. 72–70.

They were down to fifteen seconds, and the Dogs had the ball. John grabbed his buddies, keeping them on the Ranger's side of the court. A Dog threw the ball in, and Tom jumped, tipping it toward Adrian. A Dog ran up and jumped in front of him, stealing the ball. Chad stepped in front of the Dog, freezing him in his movements. Chad's hand came up and knocked it out of the Dog's hands. Jason ran on the inside of them, grabbed the ball, turned around, and passed it to John. He shot from the three-point line just as the horn went off.

Swoosh! Nothing but net. They won the game. 75–70. "Yeah!"

John started jumping up and down, hollering. The Rangers ran over and surrounded him on the court. Before John knew what was happening, his buddies picked him up and placed him on their shoulders, carrying him around the court and cheering. Everyone in the gymnasium stood, shouting and clapping. John looked at the blur of faces hollering, applauding, and stomping all around him. The Rangers jogged two laps, carrying him the entire time, and when they passed Lisa, John saw that she stood cheering as well.

“All right, all right, all right!” John yelled, laughing. “Put me down!”

They stopped by the Ranger’s bench, where John touched solid ground again. Coach Winston—Coach W—caught up with the team, congratulating them and giving a quick pep talk while the varsity team waited for the bench. John only heard half of the talk, but his buddies kept slapping his arms and shoulders in approval.

As soon as Coach W excused them, John turned and pushed his way through the crowd amid the pats and handshakes. Voices called out to him, and he glanced over his shoulder, seeing his buddies waiting for him.

“I’ll catch up with you guys,” he called out. They nodded and headed to the locker room.

He walked through the gymnasium, straight to Lisa. “Good game,” she said.

“Thanks.” He stood a few feet from her since his body was drenched in sweat. “I’m going to shower real quick.”

She smiled. “OK. I’ll be right here—no rush.” “I’ll be right back.”

He sprinted to the locker room, where his buddies were changing and others already showering. Cheers broke out when he entered, making him stop briefly. He smiled. He grabbed a towel off the rack and headed to his locker, quickly patting down his sweat-drenched body.

“Good game, you guys.” John draped the soaked towel over his shoulders. Cheers erupted again.

“We kicked butt,” Tom yelled. “There was no time for jelly. They had to bend over and hold their ankles.”

Laughter echoed.

“Did you see that jump shot, man?” Jason flicked his wrists at an imaginary basket. “Right when the horn went off.”

“What about Chad’s block?” Adrian slapped Chad on the back. “Knocked the ball right out of the guy’s hands. He don’t mess around.”

Chad flexed his muscles, causing laughs and hollers to spill around the room.

“Or when Tom threw it down,” Jason continued.

But John paid them no heed. He rushed around, quickly showering,

and donned his clothes, thankful for something clean and dry. He fished in his locker, spotted his deodorant and cologne, and sprayed himself down. Much better. Now he smelled musky instead of like dirty socks. Steam already filled the locker room from the showers, mixing with the sweaty clothes and boys' body odor—a smell he didn't want to have lingering. He needed to jet before it became too stuffy.

"You going to stay for the other game?" Ben asked. "No, I'm going to hang with Lisa," John replied. "Right." Ben turned abruptly, heading to the showers. "Next time."

"Yeah, yeah."

"Don't be a dick," Adrian yelled after Ben. "He approached her first." John looked at Adrian, who sat on the bench, taking off his shoes. "Don't worry about him." Adrian said.

"He probably has a thing for her too," Jason added.

John looked back and forth between them, and then threw up his hands in frustration. "What the hell?" he asked. "I start talking to Lisa and now everyone likes her?"

"She is hot," Tom interjected.

Rolling his eyes, John grabbed his book bag and shut the locker. "Coach W also yanked him out of the game," Chad slurred.

John's eyebrows furrowed, thinking. Coach W had pulled Ben out during halftime, but not because he did something wrong. He certainly wasn't yanked. There were twelve guys on the team. They had to let everyone play somehow. Coach W alternated players to give the team a breather. "He didn't yank him."

"You played the entire game." Tom slammed his locker shut. Hard. Too hard. It echoed through the room, silencing everyone.

All eyes turned to the two of them. Was that anger in Tom's voice? Their gazes met briefly. John started to say something but stopped, realizing Tom was right. He had played the entire game. But it was the first game. Didn't mean it would be this way for every game. So Ben was angry because he played only half?

"That's not my decision to make."

The guys knew it too. Coach W decided who played. Tom turned his back on him and entered the showers. John looked at Jason, Chad, and Adrian. They shrugged. First Ben, now Tom. He ran a hand

through his hair. There wasn't anything he could do about it. Besides, Lisa was waiting. He swung his bag over his shoulder.

"All right, you guys," he made his way toward the door. "I'll see you next practice." "You better get some for me!" Adrian yelled out, and the guys started hollering.

John shook his head, throwing the towel in the dirty bin. "Maybe if you take after him, you would get some," Jason said.

The shouts drifted through the open doorway, where he emerged from the locker room.

CHAPTER 2



John scanned the gymnasium until he spotted Lisa waiting for him. She stood near the side of the bleachers with the same group of guys and girls who she sat with. He walked over to her, and they surrounded him. He had been anxious to get back to Lisa, not wanting to keep her waiting long. But the varsity game had already started.

“John, this is Sarah, Tony, Meg, and Martin,” Lisa said.

“Hey, what’s up?” He shook hands with Tony and Martin. Now that John saw the group up close, he recognized them from school.

“That was a good game, man,” Tony said, putting his arm around Sarah. He was tall with short, spiky dirty-blond hair, blue eyes, and beige undertones.

“Thanks.”

“Yeah, congratulations,” Meg added. She had brown undertones like Lisa, but short, dark curly hair and wore glasses.

“That was funny how you smacked that guy,” Martin said. He had short, wavy brown hair with a light brownish complexion and was muscular in his upper body.

The group laughed.

“I didn’t want it to hit Lisa.” He met her gaze briefly, and she smiled.

“You guys going to state this year?” Sarah asked. She had sandy-brown hair pulled back in a bun, highlighting the freckles on her face and matching her light complexion.

“Hopefully,” he replied.

“When is the next game?” Meg asked. “Next Friday.”

The girls stepped aside and formed their own little group, allowing the three guys to continue talking. Stealing a glance over at Lisa, he

saw her whispering to the other girls and laughing, while periodically looking over at him. She's talking about me to her friends.

Definitely a good sign.

"Dude," Martin stepped closer, lowering his voice, "is that your chick?"

"Not yet." John shook his head. I wish she was. "This is our first time going out." "Go for her," Tony said.

"Yeah, I'm trying to."

"Oh yeah, man, that's cool." Martin slapped his hand.

"We'll leave you two alone." Tony started walking over to the girls, raising his voice again. "We'll see you at the next game."

"Yeah, we'll definitely be there."

Martin joined Meg's side, and Tony stood by Sarah. John also walked over to the group, but Lisa was the furthest one away. She stood between the two couples, so he wasn't able to stand next to her.

"Nice meeting you, ladies." He waved to Sarah and Meg. "Bye, guys. I'll see you at school."

"Bye," the four of them replied in unison. "Bye, Lisa."

He moved closer to Lisa once the others left. She seemed quiet all of a sudden, looking down at the ground. He lifted up her chin to where he could see her eyes. "Your friends?"

"Sarah and Meg are my two closest friends." Lisa nodded. "That's cool."

"Tony is Sarah's boyfriend, and Martin is Meg's boyfriend."

John nodded, figuring as much. "So, where's your boyfriend?" He looked around the gymnasium.

"Hey."

He smiled and wrapped his arms around her. Jason, Adrian, and Chad appeared. They each slapped his hand and patted his back again, before sitting on the bleachers to watch the next game.

"Quite the popular one, are we?" Lisa asked.

"What?" he said. "Not really. They're from the team." "Sure, whatever."

"Come on, let's go." He shook his head. "I'll walk you home."

John steered her from the bleachers and along the side of the gymnasium amid the crowds, where a few people called out to him,

cheering. Lisa clung to his side as they pushed their way through the crowds. Smiling, he offered his elbow, and she grabbed it. The stares came again from several students who were seated in the bleachers or standing in corners talking, but he ignored it and kept going.

They exited the gymnasium, walking among the quiet school grounds and over the parking lot. Hoisting the book bag to his other shoulder, John lowered his elbow and grabbed Lisa's hand. She glanced at him and smiled. He stopped and looked around the vast parking lot, where they had almost reached the edge. All the cars were parked near the school, away from them. She glanced up at the dark, clear sky. Nighttime had already approached. He watched her until she noticed his locked gaze. Meeting his eyes, she smiled and looked down, blushing. It was the perfect moment to be alone with her—and he chickened out, hesitating too long until the moment became lost.

Don't want to rush it and scare her away, he thought. "Where do you live?" "Oh, this way." She nodded her head to the right.

They turned in that direction and continued walking on the sidewalk, outlining the streets and along the school grounds.

"I live this way too." He glanced at her. "Which subdivision?" "Deer Creek."

"I know where that is," John said. "It's across my subdivision."

"Thanks for inviting me to your game."

"No problem." He squeezed her hand.

"I liked how you passed the ball under that guy's legs," she said, laughing.

"That was the only way I could pass it." He laughed as well. A silence washed over them. "Tell me—what do you like to do? Hang out with your friends?"

"Well, of course," she answered. "Although I'm not as popular as you."

"I'm not popular." Surprised, John looked over at her, studying her face, but she seemed nonchalant.

"You ever thought about becoming a professional basketball player?" she asked. "Hmm, I don't know." He shrugged. "Haven't really thought about it."

That was only half the truth. He had thought about it several times but didn't want to get his hopes up too much. He figured he would play his best throughout high school and see what happens. If anything, he hoped to get an athletic scholarship for college.

"You should," Lisa confirmed. "You're really good at it."

"Thanks. I also know a lot about computers. If it doesn't work, I can become an engineer or something." He looked at her. "What about you?"

Lisa thought for a minute. He steered her across a street. "I honestly don't know. I mean, there are several things I would like to do."

"Such as?"

"Maybe become a fashion designer or go into public relations."

"Public relations." He rolled the words over his tongue. "Like communications?"

"Yes." She glanced at him, surprised. "You can go into either field or a number of fields, but I would be a more behind the scenes person in communications. Work for a company to promote them or their product."

"What about mass communications?"

He smiled when her eyes widened. "That's more television or radio, like broadcast journalism or news media. It's interesting, but I prefer to create rather than report. Anyone can report what's happening. Boring."

They both laughed at her bluntness. He dropped her hand and moved to the other side of her when they reached another intersection, so he would remain on the outside by the street.

"Such the gentleman," Lisa interjected, and he grabbed her hand again.

"And the fashion shows?" John was on a roll. The questions flew out before he even thought about them.

"It'll be an either or." Lisa shrugged. "Right now, I need to concentrate on finishing school, but then I want to see the world."

"You could do both."

"Yeah?" Lisa questioned, raising an eyebrow with her head turned at an angle.

Man, she's hot. "Why not?"

"I guess it could work," she mumbled.

"That would be cool," he insisted, stepping in front of her and forcing her to stop. "Think about it. We could travel together while I play basketball games, and you could have a fashion show in each city."

"Yeah, I like that," she agreed. "And we would always be together."

He caught her gaze while smiling. He was really glad that he had worked up the nerve to talk to her. So far things were going great between them. They resumed walking down the street toward her neighborhood. The moon and stars lit the dark sky, but the temperature had only dropped a few degrees, giving them a little relief, though no breeze. The long, hot days could seem like torture sometimes, but he liked it here. There were a few streetlamps on so they could still see their surroundings.

It can't be that late, he thought, looking around.

"Let's take a shortcut to my house," Lisa suggested, glancing at her watch.

"OK."

She led him toward some trees and bushes that outlined the subdivision from the rear.

They walked, still holding each other's hands tightly. Together they climbed over fallen tree branches, stepped over rocks, through patches of tall weeds, up dirt hills, and down grassy trails. He could see backyards of houses visible on the far left side behind fences.

"Careful," John said, grabbing her waist to guide her down a steep path. She was thin, so it was easy to carry her. But the moment was too short. She was on steady ground again, and he had no choice but to let her go. His hands had already lingered too long, itching to wrap around her completely. To pull her close to him and hold her in his arms.

When she looked at him, he reluctantly dropped his hands and looked around, seeking a way out. I know where we are, he thought.

He recognized the area, though not entirely familiar with it. He knew where they were, but he didn't know which house Lisa lived in. By taking this path, they should reach the rear of her house or come

up along the side of it. The streetlamps on their left provided enough light to maneuver without any difficulty.

This looks like a good place to play a trick. An idea popped into his mind. "You sure you know the way?" he asked. "I think you got us lost."

"Yes, I know the way."

"OK." He headed off in a different direction. "Hey, where are you going? John."

He jumped behind some bushes, crouching down low and clutching his bag to him to minimize the noise. Holding his breath, he heard her footsteps crunching over the leaves.

"John, this isn't funny," Lisa called out.

When the footsteps stopped, he peeked over the top of the bush and saw that she had her back to him. He slowly stood up, shifting his bag on his back and coming out from behind the bush. He tiptoed around the trees slowly, trying not to make a sound. He crept up behind her.

"Aauugggh!" he said, grabbing her waist.

She screamed flinging her arms around, and he burst out laughing. Lisa turned around. "You dork." She started to playfully hit him, and he blocked the hits by grabbing hold of her hands.

It was now or never. He leaned over and kissed her on the cheek. Her eyebrows shot up, and then she burst into a smile. He held on to one of her hands, and their eyes locked. "Come on." He led her through the bushes. "Which way now?"

"This way. No, wait. I don't want to go home." Lisa stopped walking and grabbed his arm, making him stop in his tracks. "No, I eventually have to."

They started walking again toward where the backyards stood. He looked over at her, wondering what she meant. Maybe she enjoyed his company and didn't want the date to end. Here was his chance to ask her out again. After all, they were still holding hands.

"Want to go on a real date?"

"Oh, uh," Lisa stammered. "Yes. That would be great." "Want to go to the movies tomorrow?"

"Oh, I thought you meant tonight," Lisa said softly.

"Well," he fumbled, trying to think of a reply. "I would, but it's

late.” “Tomorrow’s fine.”

“Sorry.” He felt like an idiot, not knowing what else to say. But it was late. They couldn’t do anything now.

“That’s OK,” Lisa said reassuring him. “I can’t stay out much later tonight anyway.” “You have a curfew?”

“Something like that,” she mumbled. “It’s just ... nothing.” “What? What is it? You can tell me.”

“Do you have any siblings?” she asked instead. “Nah, just me and my parents,” he replied. “Oh.”

“Why?”

“Oh, never mind.” She stared at the ground while they walked. An uneasy silence fell over them.

“You have siblings?” he asked. “How many?” When she didn’t reply, he continued. “Let me guess. They get to stay out later than you.”

“No ... I mean, yes.” Her voice tapered for a split second.

“Oh,” John stammered, wondering what she wanted to tell him, but decided to drop it. Better to change the subject. “Are we still up for tomorrow?”

They walked along the side of a house, and she pulled on his hand, stopping him by the fence, before reaching the front lawn. He looked around the fence at the house, noticing that they remained out of view from anyone, and he turned back to her.

“Is this your house?” He nodded his head toward it.

“Yeah.” A smile appeared on her face again. “So, what time tomorrow?”

“Noon. I’ll meet you at the mall by the food court entrance.”

There was only one mall in Rorertown. If only he was old enough to drive, then everything would be better.

“Sounds good.” Lisa dropped his hand and retreated a few steps back. “I have to go now, but I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Bye,” he called out.

She turned and disappeared behind the fence. John peered around it, watching her dash over the lawn and on to the front porch. Fishing a key out of her pocket, she hurried inside, looking flustered and anxious. She closed the door quickly, and John remained by himself on the side of the lawn. He glanced at the surrounding subdivision so

he could remember where she lived. He located the crossing streets, jotting the names to memory, and then took off toward his house.

He smiled briefly, but his eyebrows furrowed by her actions just now. She appeared apprehensive about getting home promptly and unnoticed. John shook his head and shrugged away his thoughts. He had another date with her tomorrow, so no need to worry.

She probably had a curfew, he thought, pulling out his watch from his book bag.

Glancing at it, he quickened his own pace. More time had passed than he initially thought.

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