

# One

Spencer's morning went to hell when some asshole on a dirt bike swerved in front of Mom's Subaru.

Mom slammed on the brakes and flung her arm across Spencer's chest, despite the fact that he was wearing a seat belt, and even if he weren't, it's not like her arm would keep him from hurtling through the windshield and becoming sausage meat.

At least she'd already finished her coffee. The last thing he needed was to spend all day smelling like the inside of a Starbucks.

"Is everyone okay?" Mom twisted around to check on Theo in the back seat, but his eyes remained glued to the nature show playing on his tablet. Spencer was impressed by how nothing seemed to faze his little brother.

"Maybe we save the vehicular manslaughter for tomorrow," said Spencer. He didn't want to be known as the kid whose mom ran over someone at drop-off. He wasn't sure he wanted to be known as *anything*. As far as he was concerned, the less he stood out, the better.

Mom ignored him as she steered the car more carefully up the tree-lined drive and parked at the curb. “Promise me you’ll make an effort today. Talk to people. Smile sometimes.” She tugged on one of his earbuds, pulling it out of his ear. A muffled *da-da-da-dun-da-da-da-dun* from the song he was listening to trickled out into the car. “It wouldn’t kill you to be more social.”

“It might.”

Mom’s jaw clenched. “That’s not funny, Spencer. Not after last year.”

“Too soon?” said Spencer. If he turned it into a joke he could pretend that he didn’t still wake up in the middle of the night, heart racing, drenched in sweat thinking about The Incident. He called it “The Incident” so he wouldn’t have to remember it all in excruciating detail: the threatening email, the picture of his face in crosshairs stuffed in his locker, the call to the school that prompted a lockdown, huddling in the corner of a dark classroom, the cold tile leeching heat from his body, and knowing that if someone got hurt, it would be all his fault.

“I’m serious, Spence. We don’t have other options if this doesn’t work.”

“I know. I’m sorry.” The back of his neck grew hot and prickly like it had whenever he was awakened in the small hours of the day by the creak of the staircase as Dad crept up to bed after spending all night preparing for the extra college courses he was teaching that summer to pay for Spencer’s tuition.

Even with the extra work, it didn't take a math genius to figure out that Dad's paycheck was barely enough to send one kid to private school, let alone two. So after two years in a Montessori program his little brother, Theo, who was autistic, had to go to public school for the first time.

Theo had spent his summer stretched out on the living room carpet in front of the TV watching anything and everything with the word *planet* in the title. Spencer wasn't sure how well an encyclopedic knowledge of the mating behavior of amphibians (called *amplexus*, according to Theo) would go over with other eight-year-olds.

"Hey, what's with the face?" asked Mom. "This is going to be a great year. For both of you," she added, reaching around to pat Theo on the knee.

Spencer picked his backpack up off the floor and squeezed it to his chest. He reached out to open the door when Mom said, "Are you sure you want to keep that there?" She pointed at the *I'm here, I'm queer, get over it* pin on the front pocket.

Spencer's fingers brushed over the pin. He'd had the same conversation with Aiden over the phone last night.

"Think of it as a test," Aiden had said. "If someone makes a big deal out of it, you'll know to steer clear. Besides, how else will you find the other queers?"

"I'm just saying," continued Mom, "it's a bit . . . provocative for your day one. Why don't you wait and see how the QSA meeting goes first? That's today, right?"

Spencer nibbled his bottom lip. Last night he had agreed

with Aiden, but now, seeing the glittery, rainbow letters sparkling in broad daylight, the idea of walking into the building with it on felt like sticking a target on his back. Sure, Oakley might brag about being the most liberal school in the county—after all, that’s why they’d chosen it—but it was still in rural Ohio, where just that morning they’d passed by half a dozen churches, one of which had a sign that said: *Don’t be so open-minded your brains fall out.*

He undid the clasp and tucked the pin in his backpack, hoping Aiden didn’t ask him about it when they debriefed after school.

“All right, do you know where you’re going?” asked Mom.

“I think so,” he mumbled.

“If you’re not sure, you need to ask for directions.”

“I know.” He tried to keep the tinge of annoyance out of his voice. When Mom got anxious, she tended to treat him like a baby. But this was a big day for all of them.

“Here,” said Mom. She rolled down Spencer’s window, and leaned over him, calling, “Hey, you with the bike!”

Spencer slouched lower in his seat as several kids, including the boy on the dirt bike, turned to stare at them.

“Mom, what are you doing?”

The boy on the bike reversed, rolling backward to the car and stopping outside Spencer’s window.

“I’m sorry about cutting you off earlier, ma’am. I didn’t want to be late.” His voice was low and gravelly and muffled inside his retro motocross helmet.

“That’s quite all right,” said Mom, clearly charmed by his slight Appalachian twang. Her own accent, courtesy of a childhood in West Virginia, came out stronger. “This is my son Spencer. He’s new this year.”

“Nice to meet you.” The boy stuck a gloved hand through the window. The worn leather was as soft as a lamb’s ear against Spencer’s palm.

“Do you think you could show him to his first class?” asked Mom.

The helmet visor hid the boy’s expression, but Spencer imagined the amusement in his face at being asked to play babysitter. “It’s okay—” he began, longing to turn around, go home, and try again tomorrow, but then the boy lifted off his helmet and Spencer’s words died in his throat.

He was cute—all farm boy tan in a navy polo and Wrangler’s. But what really made Spencer’s insides feel like he’d just been dematerialized and rematerialized in a transporter was that this kid, with his brown eyes and megawatt smile currently aimed right at Spencer, was a dead ringer for Wesley Crusher from *Star Trek: The Next Generation*.

Spencer’s nightly ritual was watching *Star Trek* with his dad, who would disown him, not as a son but as a fellow Trekkie, if he knew that the only reason he put up with the cheesy special effects was because of his teeny-tiny crush on acting ensign, wunderkind, Wesley Crusher.

Mom gave him a little nudge. “I have to go put Theo on the bus. Have a good day, sweetie.”

Spencer climbed out of the car, careful not to trip over himself, and slammed the door behind him. Did she have to call him sweetie? In front of *him*? What was wrong with bud? Or sport? Bike Boy's parents probably didn't call *him* sweetie, especially not at school.

He waved them off, watching the Subaru disappear around the corner, and trying to ignore the hollow feeling in his chest.

"So, what grade are you in?" asked the boy, parking his bike and waiting for Spencer on the sidewalk.

Spencer's thoughts became all tangled up in his head as he tried to shape them into words.

"Are you a first year?" Bike Boy prompted.

"No," said Spencer, a little too forcefully. He pulled himself up to his not very tall height of five feet. He wasn't insecure about it, not really, but it would be a long year if everyone, *especially* cute boys, thought he was a middle schooler who got lost on his way to class. "I'm a sophomore."

"Cool, me too."

He followed Bike Boy up the path to the gated entrance. On the way the boy waved to a couple kids and high-fived another, but he didn't introduce Spencer. Then again, what would he say? *This is the kid whose mom almost ran me over and then made me walk him to class?* Not exactly the first impression Spencer wanted.

"Let me guess, you were kicked out of your old school for

talking too much.” Bike Boy shot Spencer a wide grin. His two front teeth overlapped slightly, which Spencer found oddly endearing considering that most of his friends had been put in braces as soon as they hit double digits.

Spencer searched for something witty to say back. Something to show Bike Boy that he wasn’t a complete weirdo, but his words got lost again.

The smile on Bike Boy’s face slipped off. “Wait, were you actually kicked out? I’m sorry, I—”

“I wasn’t kicked out.”

“It was just a joke.”

“I know,” said Spencer, growing frustrated that even the most basic of conversations left him flustered.

Not wanting to prolong the agony, he made a decision when they reached the entrance. He knew where he was going. Sort of. He had taken a tour earlier that summer when signing up for classes.

“So what’s your first class?” asked Bike Boy.

He opened his mouth to respond when someone going past pushed him from behind, and he fell into Bike Boy, who reached out a hand to steady him.

Spencer pulled back his arm like he’d been burned. “It’s okay. I know where I’m going. But thanks for your help.”

Bike Boy searched his face as if trying to see if he was telling the truth. “Are you sure?”

Spencer nodded, scuffing his foot against the floor.

“All right, then. I’ll see you around, I guess,” said Bike

Boy, his voice lilting slightly like he was asking a question. He hitched his backpack higher and turned to join the swarm of students on their way to class.

Spencer watched him leave, not with relief, but with something that felt a little like guilt. Maybe he should be a touch nicer to the guy who had offered to help him, despite narrowly escaping death at the wheels of his mother's Subaru. Hell, Spencer didn't even know who he was.

Before he could stop himself, he called out, "Wait, what's your name?"

Bike Boy turned and flashed Spencer a smile. "Justice. Justice Cortes."

Justice Cortes. Spencer silently mouthed the name before another wave of students knocked into him. He shook his head. The last thing he needed was to think about Justice Cortes, or any boy, really.

What he needed was to keep his distance. If he didn't get too close to people, they wouldn't find out his secret. If they didn't find out, they couldn't use it against him. Nobody at Oakley knew he was transgender.

Spencer needed to keep his head down, study hard, and escape Apple Creek, population 1,172, where the only traffic jams were caused by tractors and Amish buggies.

But first he'd have to survive PE.

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After a few wrong turns, he finally found the locker rooms just as the warning bell rang.

When he opened the door the nauseating stench of body spray mixed with floral air freshener blasted him in the face, invading his nostrils and making him light-headed.

Spencer hovered awkwardly at the door as a few stragglers in various stages of undress glanced up at him from the wooden benches lining the room. Maybe he should change in the nurse's bathroom like Ms. Greene, his guidance counselor, had suggested. Private stall, a door that locked, and nobody who'd snap him in half like a twig if given the chance. But then someone might wonder why he didn't change with the rest of them. First rule of passing: Don't be different.

He found an empty corner and untied his shoes, avoiding eye contact. He wiggled his toes as a chill from the concrete floor seeped through his socks. After a minute the only sounds in the locker room were the thumping of his heartbeat and the dripping of a leaky faucet.

Alone at last, he jumped into action, wriggling out of his jeans and pulling on shorts from his backpack. He tugged on his T-shirt, grateful, not for the first time, that he hadn't needed top surgery or to suffer through wearing a binder. Starting hormone blockers at thirteen prevented too much growth and almost one year on testosterone replaced whatever fat there was with smooth muscle.

The late bell rang and he slipped into sneakers, shoved his clothes and backpack into a locker, and hurried out the door.

With its towering oak trees and ivy-covered walls, the Oakley School looked impressive on the outside. But inside, the lemony scent of disinfectant and the squeak of his shoes against the linoleum as he jogged down the hallway connecting the locker room to the gym told Spencer that this was more like the charter school Miles Morales attended than the Xavier Institute. The hallway, which had teemed with the hustle and bustle of chattering students five minutes ago, was empty. He snuck into the gym, where a dozen or so boys were flinging foam balls at each other. One sped toward his face, forcing him to duck. Where was the teacher?

“You’re late.”

Spencer jumped and twisted around to see a man in a baseball cap standing beside him. The man wore saggy sweatpants and a ridiculous-looking cardigan with a hood—a hoodigan?—and had a toothpick dangling from his mouth.

“Are you Coach Schilling?” he asked, slightly out of breath. “Sorry, I—”

“Name?” Coach Schilling cut him off.

“Spencer Harris.”

“Harris, eh?” He surveyed his clipboard, rolling the toothpick from one side of his mouth to the other.

Sweat pooled clammy and moist under Spencer’s armpits.

The principal, Mrs. Dumas, had assured him that his school records would have the correct name and gender, but that didn't stop the panic rising in his chest. If someone had made a mistake, he'd be outed in his very first class, and all of it—his dad working overtime, Theo switching schools—would be for nothing.

“You're new,” said Coach Schilling. It wasn't a question. With a school this small, new students must be easy to spot. “Make sure you're on time tomorrow.” He pulled a magazine from the back of his sweatpants and began thumbing through it.

“Could you tell me what's going on?” Spencer sidestepped as another ball hurtled toward him.

Coach Schilling, preoccupied with uncovering the secret to getting rock-hard abs in thirty days, barely glanced up from his magazine and said, “Dodgeball.”

“Right,” said Spencer. “But what should I actually be doing?”

Coach Schilling raised a bushy eyebrow and gave three sharp bursts of his whistle. A hush fell across the gym. Spencer's face burned as all eyes turned on him. Coach Schilling picked up a loose ball and shoved it in Spencer's hands. “Take this and throw it over there.” He pointed across the painted line in the center of the gym. “No head shots, no crotch shots. Got it?”

Spencer nodded.

“Good. Have fun.” Coach Schilling blew his whistle to start the game then went to sit on the bleachers with his magazine.

Spencer’s knees knocked together as he joined his teammates. At least if it was a total disaster he could probably duck out after attendance tomorrow and Coach Schilling wouldn’t even notice.

After a few minutes of playing, Spencer’s pent-up anxiety about the first day of school dripped away with the sweat. He might be small, but he was nimble on his feet. He ducked, dived, and even got in a few hits himself, until he was the last man standing on his team and found himself outnumbered, two to one.

His first opponent, a tall boy with shaggy brown hair, chucked a ball at him. Spencer did a clumsy pirouette and it whipped past. He grinned as his teammates called out encouragement from the sidelines.

His second opponent threw a ball, which Spencer caught. His team erupted into cheers as the player moved to the sidelines, out of the game. Now it was Spencer and the shaggy-haired kid.

The boy launched the ball into the air. Spencer used the ball in his hands to deflect it back, then threw his second ball, forcing the kid to defend both shots simultaneously.

To Spencer's shock, his opponent reached out with hands the size of Spencer's face and caught both balls. Spencer was out.

Coach Schilling blew his whistle. "All right, game over."

Spencer threw his head back. He didn't consider himself a sore loser, but he disliked losing enough to make sure it didn't happen very often. When it did, it was like a kick to the shins: incredibly painful, but unlikely to cause any real damage.

He forced his grimace into a smile as his opponent approached him, hand outstretched. "Nice moves out there, Twinkle Toes." He winked at Spencer.

Spencer's cheeks ached with the effort of keeping his smile from falling. He took the kid's hand, squeezing it limply. He couldn't tell if he was making fun of him or not.

As the kid turned around and started walking back to his buddies, Spencer's pulse raced. He imagined him telling them what he'd just called Spencer and the nickname spreading around the school. His eyes fell on a ball in front of him, and before his brain caught up with his body, Spencer pulled his leg back and let loose. The ball made a perfect arc in the air before smacking the kid in the back of his head.

The kid whirled around, his cheeks flushed and eyes flashing. Spencer's brain finally caught up. *Oh, shit.*

"Who did that?" shouted the kid.

All eyes turned to Spencer. Even the girls playing

badminton over on the other side of the gym with their own teacher stopped their game.

The kid rounded on Spencer.

Spencer flinched.

“Did you throw that at me?”

Spencer couldn’t exactly lie, not with a room of witnesses.

“No, I kicked it.”

“With your right foot or your left foot?” asked the kid.

“I— What?” asked Spencer, wondering what the hell that had to do with anything.

The kid took another step toward Spencer, who found himself backed up against the wall. “That shot. Did you make it with your right foot or your left?”

“Left. My left.”

To Spencer’s surprise, the boy smiled and turned to Coach Schilling. “Did you see that, Coach?”

Coach Schilling was also staring at Spencer with a curious look on his face. “That I did, son, that I did.” He paused, looking thoughtful. “Macintosh, why don’t you head to the nurse and get an ice pack. You.” He pointed his whistle at Spencer. “Harris, right?”

“Yes, sir,” said Spencer.

“You’re coming with me.”