

Chapter 1

September 1967

Summer cicadas screeched softly in the warm summer afternoon as a gentle wind tousled the uppermost branches of the ancient oak trees on campus. Nervously, Molly Spencer hoisted her overnight bag from the trunk of the blue Buick Skylark and followed her parents to the college dorm. She was uneasy about living away from home. But, remembering her mother's tears from the night before, Molly had decided to be strong. Forcing a smile on her face, she found a surprising sense of delightful anticipation in spite of gnawing anxiety.

The freshmen girls' dormitory looked primeval. At one time it must have been white, as the chipping paint along the corners revealed. Now it seemed more like a faded cream. Three stories tall, the sight of it from the bottom of the wide stairs was humbling. It seemed to snag the clouds that bounced along in the pale blue sky like runaway balloons. Overgrown holly bushes with glossy leaves stood like sentinels beside the turned posts at the foot of the steps.

Molly's father, Bradley, glided up the steps easily, his arms loaded with suitcases and tote bags in several shapes and colors. Molly watched him proudly and again admired, as she always did, how he had kept himself trim and in good physical shape even at the ripe old age of forty-four.

The steps led up grandly to a wide porch with two sets of dark French doors. At the far left, a porch swing swayed in the wind. The doors beside it were open, and through them the warm smell of fried eggs and french fries beckoned. A low murmur of voices, the clatter of silverware, and the clap of trays being stacked drifted onto the porch.

"That must be the cafeteria," Brad told his daughter unnecessarily, and she nodded. Her mother, Kate, joined them, and they scanned the room quietly from the door, then moved to the sparkling French doors beside the cafeteria and entered the dorm lobby.

It was a warm, nostalgic lobby, like something out of a movie. Dark red mahogany door frames matched the solid, polished banister and the wainscoting along the walls. A crimson fringed rug lay on the floor in front of the sweeping stairs, threadbare in places from the thousands of feet that had pounded over it day and night through the years. To the right, an opening had been cut into the wall and surfaced with marble to serve as a reception desk. Behind this counter, the monitor was busy with the day's mail, sorting it into the mailboxes to the left of the desk.

SINS OF THE FATHER

She was a stringy-looking girl with green, gooseberry eyes. No doubt her long, brown hair had been caught up in a ponytail earlier that day; but now, long strands hung around her face and over her eyes. One piece was hooked to her eyelash and bobbed up and down when she blinked.

The hallway passed in front of the mailboxes and led through glass doors into a large, oak-floored sitting room furnished with palms and plump, pastel couches. A few enamored couples sat there, visiting quietly.

Kate glanced up at the heavy chandelier in the ceiling and swallowed hard. "I can't believe my little girl is actually in college already," she said. "All the dreams we've shared about your future are actually coming true."

"I was thinking the same thing," Brad admitted. "Where have the years gone?"

Kate adjusted her bulging gray purse from one arm to the other. With more eagerness in her voice than she actually felt, she asked Molly, "What's your room number?"

"I can't remember," Molly replied with an embarrassed grimace.

Kate nodded in the direction of the girl sorting the mail. "Shall we ask her?"

When they asked, the girl looked up somewhat carelessly. "Molly Spencer?" She picked up a dirty clipboard and consulted a paper with curling edges. "You're in room 222," she said, "straight up the stairs, and turn left. It's the first door."

"Thank you." They found the room easily and discovered that two other girls, Vicki Smythe and Leona Miller, had already been assigned to it. The girls were busy setting the room in order, and they froze in surprise when Molly announced she was joining them.

"We've been planning to room together since we were freshmen in high school," the girls told her. "We even bought curtains and bedspreads together."

Molly, noticing that the ruffled curtains were pink, said tactfully, "My bedspread's pink." After a pause, she allowed them a graceful way out. "But if you don't think it's the right shade, I'll just keep my white blanket on top and get pink pillows."

Vicki stuck out her hand and walked over to Molly, swinging her hair out of her eyes. "Hey, no sweat. It's OK. The color scheme's not that important. It's nice to meet you."

SINS OF THE FATHER

Leona observed them without moving, and Molly felt a chill in the air. Excusing herself, Leona brushed past Molly and her parents and hurried down the stairs to the lobby. With a quick wave and a worried frown, Vicki followed on her heels.

"I don't think Leona's very happy to meet me," Molly murmured, busying herself with unpacking.

Her mother said, "She'll warm up eventually."

Molly lifted a grape-colored mohair sweater out of her suitcase and hugged it to her. It was one of the many treasures her mother had found for her at Goodwill, and it had quickly become one of her favorites. "What would I do without parents like you?" she said, meaning it. She knew that on her father's slim salary as a pastor, it was difficult eking out college payments for her and her older sister, Linda—who was attending a college in Michigan. But her parents had insisted that they go to a church college. "We want you to meet Christian young men and marry into good families," they had said. "It's more likely you'll have a happy future if you marry someone you meet on a Christian campus."

Now Kate was blinking back tears.

"No tears today, Mom," Molly said, reminding her of their agreement.

"No tears," her mother agreed with a nod.

Too soon, the suitcases were unpacked, and it was time for prayer and tearful goodbyes. Molly walked her parents back to their car and waved for as long as she could see them, till they rounded a corner and disappeared from sight. In that moment, loneliness seemed to crush her. She felt as insignificant and invisible as a tiny ant as she made her way past clumps of people she didn't know who didn't seem to notice her. She knew nobody! But this was the closest Christian college that offered a two-year medical secretary course, so here she was. It was her choice; she shouldn't wallow in self-pity.

The stairs swam before her, but somehow she lifted one foot after the other and found her way to the bathroom. She was sure nobody would interrupt what she had to do. Her choice or not, she was lonely. She needed a good, cleansing cry.

When Molly awoke the next morning, the room was awash in creamy, yellow light. Seeing her roommates still asleep, she slipped quietly into her jade-green tent dress. She loved its black velvet collar and the long pleat in the back that started at the shoulders and was

SINS OF THE FATHER

bisected by a sewn-on belt. It was comfortable, and she felt good in it. She hoped it would help her make a good first impression.

Brushing her straight, auburn hair from her face, she suddenly noticed that Vicki was watching her in the mirror.

“Oh, hi! You’re awake!” Molly exclaimed with a laugh.

“If you’ll give me a minute,” Vicki responded, “I’ll wake Leona, and we can eat breakfast together.”

“Thanks! I’d like that.”

The cafeteria was warm, its atmosphere fragrant with the familiar smells of a country breakfast. “Let’s sit in the middle,” Vicki said. “We can see the whole cafeteria from there, and I’ll introduce you to the kids we know as they pass by.”

Leona clearly did not enjoy sharing her friend with Molly. But Vicki was having a good time. Before Molly had finished her scrambled eggs and potatoes, Vicki had introduced her to eight of her friends. Already Molly felt more at home.

Then, as Molly lifted her glass of orange juice to her lips, Vicki let out a gasp that nearly made Molly choke. “What’s wrong?” she managed to ask.

“He’s here! Look! Over there. See the guy coming in the door? The blond one with the blue jeans and cardigan sweater?”

“He’s cute,” Molly observed.

“Cute to boot and unattached. You’ve got to meet him.” Vicki stood to her feet and waved, and the boy returned the greeting and made his way through the tables to theirs.

“Hey, Vick. Good to see you!” he said, punching her arm.

Vicki said, “I didn’t know you were coming. I thought you were going to work with your dad.”

“I was, but Mom talked him into letting me come here instead. Thought I’d give it a try.”

“What are you taking?”

“I don’t know. General stuff. And you?”

“Same.” With a graceful sweep of her hand, Vicki gestured toward Molly. “My roommate here is going to be a medical secretary.”

“A secretary, huh?” Steve looked down at her, and the corners of his eyes crinkled warmly. “How fast can you type?”

“Fast enough,” Molly said modestly. She smiled confidently, her dark eyes twinkling in a frame of auburn hair. “Nice to meet you. I’m Molly Spencer, and you’re-?”

“Steve Bowker.”

SINS OF THE FATHER

"I'm sorry," Vicki said, "I should have introduced you. Steve. Molly."

"Is that 'Broker'?" Molly asked, wanting to be sure she said it right.

"No. Bowker. Bow-ker," Steve explained. "Like a bow in your hair."

Molly laughed self-consciously, and Vicki cut in. "Don't worry. He's been through this before. Happens all the time, doesn't it, Steve?"

"Yeah. Someday I'll probably break down and change my name to 'Broker' to make life easier on everybody." He paused, seeming uncomfortable with such personal conversation. "So you're roommates?" he asked, bringing the topic back around to Molly. "Fortunately," Molly replied, "Vicki seems to know everybody; I only know people she's introduced me to."

"Where are you from?"

"I'm from Idaho."

"I see." Steve seemed charmed by her confidence. "Well, maybe we'll have a few classes together, and we can get to know each other better."

"Maybe so," Molly agreed.

"Did you get that job with the choir?" Vicki cut in. "I saw it posted when I registered and thought of you."

Steve nodded. "I saw it too, and got it-fortunately."

"What job is that?" Molly asked.

"I'll be accompanist and reader for the choir director, Dr. Fitzgerald."

"I'm impressed," Molly said with a smile. She was surprised at the wonderful warm feelings this handsome man had stirred up inside. "Maybe I'll see you there. I'm taking choir as an elective."

Steve seemed happy to hear that.

Vicki told her, "He's really good."

"Aw, it's nothing," he said with a wave of his hand. He pushed up the cuff of his sleeve to look at his watch, revealing a tanned, muscular arm. "Oh, look at the time! I gotta run. See you later. Molly, nice to meet you. 'Bye, Leona. Sleepy this morning?"

"She'll wake up eventually," Vicki said lightly.

Molly nodded and gave a small wave.

When Steve was out of earshot, Molly said, "He is cute." She was unable to stop smiling as she watched him leave the cafeteria, admiring the square cut of his hairline just above his shirt collar and the natural wave of honey-colored hair at his temples.

SINS OF THE FATHER

"His dad's weird," Leona said dryly. "My folks went to school with his folks-right here. He's probably like his dad; thinks he knows everything."

"Leona-" Vicki began, but Molly cut in, "That's OK. I don't have to date his dad. What kind of work does his dad do?"

Leona answered, "He's a landscaper. My folks said he used to be a teacher. But when he was fresh out of college, he sort of got into trouble with some kids... and kind of lost his job. So he started up his own business."

"What kind of trouble are you talking about?" Molly wondered. She found it difficult to believe that a person as cultured and nice looking as Steve Bowker could have creepy parents.

Leona fixed Molly with a cold stare. "We're talking touchy-feely kind of trouble," she said, raising her eyebrows, "if you know what I mean."

"Leona!" Vicki reprimanded her firmly. "That's just mean gossip. The Bowkers are classic 'pillars in the church.' They hold church office. They attend faithfully. They're at every church picnic and rummage sale. Sometimes they keep little kids at their home on weekends so the parents can get away. They've even provided all the flowers for the Mother's Day service. Everyone loves them." She paused as though searching for more ammunition. "I'd like to know how many other families reach out to others as much as they do!"

Leona shrugged. "Well, your folks haven't known the Bowkers as long as my folks have. My mom said to watch out for him. And I have." She turned to Molly. "Don't say I didn't warn you."

"Thanks," Molly said, suddenly feeling a little uncomfortable-not with Steve's family but with Leona's. What bothered her the most was that Leona's parents would hold a grudge against the man for so many years. It didn't speak highly of them. His "trespasses" must not have been all that bad if he was allowed to hold church office and was held in such high esteem by Vicki and her parents and other members in the church. Molly still wasn't sure what kind of a family Leona came from; perhaps there was some long-standing feud between her parents and Steve's that fueled this undercurrent of slander. It seemed impossible that Steve's family was anything but first rate.

The girls finished eating, returned their trays to the carts, and hurried upstairs to prepare for their first classes. While Leona was in the bathroom and Molly was alone with Vicki, she remarked to Vicki's

SINS OF THE FATHER

reflection in the mirror, "Steve seems so nice. Do you really think his family is odd?"

"I think Leona's jealous of his attraction to you, is what I think," Vicki replied. "Steve has a tendency to be arrogant at times-like his father-but not too seriously. I think it's just nervousness that prompts it-or 'older brother syndrome.' He's got a sister a couple of years younger than he is and twin brothers in the lower grades. But I think he's neat. And he's going to break a few hearts."

"What do you mean?"

"I can name at least five girls who are going to flip when they see he's here. They've been trying to catch his eye since he came to our school a year ago, but he hasn't seemed to notice. I think it's too late for them, though. You've snagged him already."

"Oh, come on. He doesn't even know me." Molly forced a light laugh, hoping Vicki's words were true.

"He doesn't know you-yet," Vicki said. "You just wait. I know a look in a man's eye when I see it."

The morning passed quickly. Molly ate lunch alone. As five o'clock neared, she found her palms beginning to sweat and her heart pounding at intervals as she thought about seeing Steve again. This is silly, she told herself. It's just a choir, and he just plays the piano. I don't even know him, for Pete's sake. The thought that there were at least five other girls on campus whom he already knew and who wanted his attentions made her stop her daydreaming. He knows them; he doesn't know me. Besides, I've never had a boyfriend before. What chance do I have? He was just being polite.

A sudden, late-summer squall burst upon the campus during Molly's last class before choir, turning the sky to slate and saturating the flower beds. When she glanced out the window, her heart felt for the rows and rows of cavorting flowers, their heads bent against the torrent. It was still raining when the class was over. But, as she dashed across campus to the music building, it was Molly's head that was bending against the rain.

By the time she got there, she was drenched. Her shoes made squishing noises as she walked down the hall to the bathroom for a quick pick-me-up. Making a face in the mirror, she realized there was little she could do to make herself look better. Her hair was plastered against her face in strings that resembled the yarn hair on a rag doll. Pulling her dress away from her skin, she attempted to dry it, fluttering it against her chest with her fingertips, but it was useless. Molly hoped

SINS OF THE FATHER

everyone else in the choir had been caught by the storm too and looked as bedraggled as she did. She sloshed down the hall and entered the choir room, feeling as conspicuous as a mouse on stage at a convention of cats.

It took a few minutes for Dr. Fitzgerald to take roll and divide everyone by parts. "Would those of you who think you sing soprano or tenor please take your places on my left, and those who sing alto or bass over here." He directed the latter group to his right.

Molly moved to the far end of the front row of altos, her shoes making embarrassing sucking noises as she did so. From where she sat, she had a direct view of Steve's face at the piano across the room. She glanced over at him, and her heart skipped a beat when she realized he was watching her. A slow grin spread over his face. He winked charmingly. Smiling self-consciously, Molly looked down and ran her fingers through her hair, pushing it back from her face. Dr. Fitzgerald handed her a clipboard and announced that each person was to sign in. She did so and then took the stack of music he gave her, feeling relieved for the distraction. She took one copy of each piece of music and passed the stack on.

The practice began. First a run-through, to find the difficult parts. Molly's heart swelled with admiration as Steve's skilled fingers brought life to the music. His was a rare talent, there was no doubt. No wonder so many girls wanted to be his "special one." Molly wanted the music to go on and on, but Dr. Fitzgerald insisted they learn their parts section by section, so Steve lined out the parts one note at a time. Whenever Molly's eyes roamed over to his, he caught her glance, and his own eyes warmed. The electricity that only they felt shot across the room.

The rehearsal was over too soon. Molly stayed in her chair to allow Steve the freedom of leaving with whomever he wanted to. When Dr. Fitzgerald began going over some papers with Steve, Molly decided it was safe to leave. She hurried to the door and out into the hall, noting with dismay that it was still raining. Taking a big breath, she was working up the courage to make a dash for the dorm when she felt a tug on her belt. Instinctively, she put a hand to her waist to find who or what was holding her, and a warm hand surrounded hers. She turned to look behind her. Steve had her right hand in one of his, the crook of his umbrella in her belt.

"I seem to be hooked on you," he said with a smile. "Mind if I walk you home?"

SINS OF THE FATHER

Molly let out a laugh. “Oh, you’ve got an umbrella. Thanks! I’d love to be walked home.”

Steve pushed the door with one strong arm, popping his umbrella open as the door swung out. He held out his arm, and Molly took it, breathing deeply the lemony scent of his cologne. He was warm and strong, and she felt very protected. It seemed they were in a magical world of their own.