



Carol

Chapter 1

Christmas Carol

Fall, 1956

Boys, sooner or later a girl will come along whom you will find breathtaking. You will fall head over heels for her, do everything in your power to win her affection, and then she will break your heart. Here's what happened.

I was in love the minute I saw her. It wasn't just the blue eyes, blond hair pulled back in a long flowing ponytail, flawless complexion, rosy lips, or her stick-straight figure. There was more. Her wardrobe was flawless. She wore a blue sweater over a white blouse and a plaid skirt complemented by saddle shoes and bobby sox. Her posture was perfect and she held her head high; if Miss Cribbs had set a book on her head as she strode into the classroom, it would have balanced perfectly. She was cool and confident, much more so than any second grader deserved to be, even someone as pretty as Carol. I suspected she was somehow out of my reach but to my eight-year-old eyes, she was perfect in every way; the girl I had been waiting for.

Only one desk remained unclaimed in Miss Cribbs' second-grade classroom that cool early fall morning, and it was the one in front of mine. Miss Cribbs introduced Carol to the class and directed her to the open seat. I couldn't believe my good fortune. The newest and prettiest girl in second grade was sitting only inches away from me.

As one of the tallest boys in the class, I sat in the last seat in the row next to the windows. Chuck was the tallest, already taller than Miss Cribbs. Not that being taller than Miss Cribbs took much, but still it was significant for a second grader. Chuck sat in the last chair in the row immediately to my right. Chuck and I were friends. We exchanged a look when Carol walked to her seat. Even as second graders, we knew she was something special.

Chuck was tall and thin while I was less tall and more round. I was painfully aware that I was the heaviest boy in the class. On the Saturday before school started, in search of back-to-school clothes, my mother had taken me to buy jeans at Eaker's Department Store. The saleswoman had steered us, in what to me was an over-amplified voice, to the "Husky" section. "Huskies are over here, dear," she yelled announcing to the entire and very large assembly of Saturday shoppers — including many of my classmates — that I was fat and in need of special clothing. My friends shopped for Slim or Regular, while I was humiliated in Husky.

While Dr. Goad said it was baby fat and I would outgrow it in a few years, I suspect my diet had something to do with my weight. This suspicion was reinforced by a large poster in our classroom proclaiming a healthy breakfast as the most important meal of the day. Despite carrying home mimeographed communications extolling breakfast and healthy eating, that message didn't sink in with my mother. (Mimeographs were the Xerox copies of the 1950s. The print was purple, smelled like ammonia and faded to invisible in a matter of days.)

Mom was one of only a few second-grade mothers who had a job. She was the secretary to Mr. Parfet, who ran Parfet Estate, a local clay-mining enterprise. She still managed to serve as Classroom Mother. My father worked fifteen miles away in Denver for the public utility, Public Service Company, and he left early in the morning. The only bathroom in the house was separated from my bedroom by a thin door. I was normally awakened by the annoying buzzing of my father's electric razor followed by the sweet-clean aroma of Mennen Skin Bracer. Soon thereafter, Dad would try to wake my mother, who had a difficult time waking up, prior to setting out on his commute to Denver. "Jerry, you are going to be late," he shouted in the direction of the bedroom. His departure was punctuated by the slamming of the screen door.

Sometime after that Mom would rise with barely enough time to get dressed and ready for work. She would hurry around the kitchen in her slip, drinking a cup of coffee with a cigarette hanging out of her mouth, looking for something for me to call breakfast. Something that was quick, tasty, and often sweet was the usual solution. My mother had a serious sweet tooth, and she willingly passed it on to me. A piece of her homemade chocolate cake or a Long John, a store-bought, cream-filled, maple-iced pastry, were just the ticket.

The second-grade Breakfast Club campaign poster included each child's name in rows on the left-hand side opposite columns for healthy food groups including milk, eggs, meat, fruit, cereal, and bread. Eating something from one of the food groups earned the student a star in the appropriate box. Chuck led the class in healthy eating. His row had stars in every category. Other children did well, but were not up to Chuck's high standard. I tried to convince Miss Cribbs that I should get stars for eggs and milk at least, because I did see my mother put them in her chocolate cake, but Miss Cribbs would not be moved. I finished dead last in Breakfast Club.

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One of the nice things about having a seat at the back of the row next to the window, in addition to sitting just behind Carol, was that I could look out the window and watch my mother walking down the sidewalk on her way to the post office. She was very pretty, her brown hair was done in the style of the day with soft curls falling to just above her left eye and cascading to her neck. She wore just enough makeup including mascara to highlight her eyes, a touch of rouge to add color to her pale white skin and red lipstick. Her clothes were fashionable, especially so given our modest income. The seams on her nylons were meticulously straight, and if the classroom windows were open and if I strained hard enough, I could hear the faint click, click, click as her high heels struck the sidewalk.

Her journey took place precisely at 9:45 every morning and seeing her walk by gave me a nice, secure feeling. I would watch the large clock on the classroom wall and the moment it hit 9:45, I would turn my head to the left, look out the window and there she would be, arms full of to-be-mailed items. Ten minutes later, I would see her heading the opposite way with an arm-load of incoming mail, which she would drop at the Parfet Estate office before meeting her friends at the Foss Drug coffee shop for their morning coffee break.

My parents met at Golden's North School in first grade and were boyfriend and girlfriend from that moment on. Thirty years before I sat in Miss Cribbs' second-grade classroom dreaming of a life with Carol, my parents had sat in her classroom on a path to life-long commitment. At least, that's what I thought. Given my parents' example, I knew I was destined to meet the girl of my dreams in grade school. In fact I was behind schedule; my parents sorted it all out as first graders. And now, here Carol sat in the desk right in front of me.

A few months into second grade, my plans for a long life with Carol were going nowhere. I did my best to capture her attention, pulling her ponytail and poking her back with the eraser end of my #2 pencil. These futile attempts were met with absolutely nothing. She ignored me. She did not acknowledge my existence.

Gaining Carol's attention in Miss Cribbs' class was no easy task. Miss Cribbs ran a very tight ship. She didn't tolerate messiness, horseplay, talking, or disturbing fellow classmates. While small, she was in total control and brought untold misery on

those who didn't tow the line. Her reputation for a hot temper and swift justice had been duly earned over a long teaching career. My parents still told stories of unruly classmates who had met with Miss Cribbs' volcanic fury and cruel punishments for seemingly small indiscretions.

After weeks of being invisible to Carol, I could take it no longer. During spelling practice, a very quiet time in Miss Cribbs' highly disciplined classroom, I renewed my attempt to gain Carol's affection with multiple pulls and pokes. Finally, she turned to look at me through squinted eyes full of contempt. Not wanting to risk Miss Cribbs' infamous ire, she never uttered a word. The "look" was followed by an explosively quick turn of her head back to the front of the class. The ponytail, following the head to which it was attached, snapped like a whip and slapped me across the face, ensnaring my glasses. Carol, feeling the added weight of the glasses, turned and wrenched them free from her hair, looking in disgust first at me and then at my glasses. She uttered a low sound from deep in her throat that suggested to me that she was going to retch violently. Simply looking at me and touching my glasses had brought on this reaction!

Chuck, and Bobby, who sat in front of Chuck, and opposite Carol, found the goings-on hilarious and soon their peals of laughter disrupted the dead-quiet classroom. Carol could no longer tolerate holding the glasses, and threw them to the floor directly in the path of the now-rampaging Miss Cribbs, who had started her charge at the first sound of laughter. When Miss Cribbs reached the back of the room, I was on the floor on all fours trying to save my glasses. I snatched them up just in time to save them from being crushed under Miss Cribbs' brown, hard-soled, lace-up oxfords. As I looked up into her face from my position on the floor, I felt the fear that a rabbit, or in my case a piglet, must feel when it looks upward to see the beady black eyes and outstretched talons of an eagle about to attack.

Miss Cribbs assessed the situation quickly, assigning total blame to me. Seething, she reached down, grabbed the front of my shirt, and yanked me upright. This was no small act given my weight and her small stature, but was surely fueled by rage and adrenaline. The resulting stress sent two shirt buttons flying across the room. One ricocheted off Chuck's forehead before spinning slowly to a halt on Bobby's Big Chief tablet. The other flew over three rows of desks before bouncing to rest at Dude's feet. (His real name was Mike, but we called him Dude.) Conditioned to quick changes in Miss Cribbs' unpredictable and often-volatile mood, Chuck, Bobby, and the rest

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of the class immediately returned their attention to their desks and the week's spelling words. By then, the only sound in the classroom was my wailing as Miss Cribbs crushed my arm in her talon-like grip.

Miss Cribbs yanked and pushed my desk to the back of the room, directly facing the breakfast poster, and instructed me to sit facing the wall and the poster. Bent over and with her lips nearly touching my ear, she hissed that I would remain in this location until Christmas break — if not the rest of my worthless second-grade life. I sat choking back sobs with my back to the class, trying to straighten my bent glasses, with nothing to look at but my starless row on the breakfast poster. I turned to watch Miss Cribbs march back to her desk and noticed Carol looking straight ahead, her ponytail returned to perfection, hanging down her back, shining in the sunlight from the windows. Carol and her perfect ponytail knew what they had done.

Six weeks later, snow was flying and Christmas was fast approaching. My poster-facing sentence had been commuted for good behavior, and I was back in my usual location at the end of the row adjacent to the windows. Carol remained in the seat in front of me, but the terms of my early release program included a restraining order forbidding me from having any contact with her, verbal or physical. To ensure compliance, Miss Cribbs had inserted her yardstick between our desks and told me not to get one inch closer — or else! Carol smiled smugly; poking and pulling were out of reach.

A snowy day always made recess questionable. Would Miss Cribbs allow us to venture outside knowing it meant valuable class time lost to putting on boots, coats, hats and mittens prior to the 20 minutes of actual time outdoors, and then more lost time once we returned to put coats and mittens back in lockers and mop up pools and drips that accumulated under our desks from sodden clothes? On this particular day, she'd apparently had enough of us and, hoping for a few minutes of peace, instructed us to don our winter wear and line up at the door for recess. I couldn't wait to get outside and away from Miss Cribbs' constant scrutiny.

Mitchell Elementary fronted on 12th Street. The playground was behind the school in a low basin 20 feet below the first floor. Reaching the playground required going downstairs to the basement level, out the doors to a plateau level, then down a series of concrete steps to the playground.

Six inches of snow waited for us when we set foot on the playground with more piling up by the minute. Chuck, Bobby, Dude, and I threw a few mandatory snowballs at the girls. I was careful not to throw any in Carol's direction. Then we began working our way toward the far end of the playground, where a large crowd of students had gathered.

We could see a small group of fifth- and sixth-graders at the top of a twenty-foot high wall that separated 12th Street from the playground below. A narrow alley descended steeply from 12th Street to a small plateau, and then plunged steeply again to the playground. The fifth- and sixth-graders had flattened cardboard boxes and were about to use them to sled from the top of the alley down to the playground.

One by one each boy moved to the crest of the path, peered over the edge, and then pulled back in fear. We watched in anxious anticipation, much as a stock-car crowd waits for a wreck. Certain death — or at least a broken bone — awaited anyone foolhardy enough to attempt the ride to the bottom on the cardboard rocket sled. At last one of the boys pushed the others aside. “You’re all chicken shits,” he called to them. Then while clucking loudly, he sat on the box and pushed himself forward to the crest with his hands. With one last cluck, he topped the crest and headed down the steep path. He gained speed quickly and by the time he reached the plateau, he was moving very fast — and backwards. The cardboard started spinning as he grasped and pulled the sides, seeking a handhold. A slight upward curl at the plateau sent him airborne like a ski jumper in the Olympics. Somehow, in mid-flight, he managed to turn around before crash-landing in soft powder at the bottom, sending snow billowing in every direction.

The accumulated crowd gasped, shouted, and then fell silent. We inched closer to where the cardboard rocket sled pilot lay covered in snow, not moving. Was he alive? As we inched closer he sat up, pulled off his snow-covered stocking cap, put his head back and yelled loudly, “Daaaammnnn, that was fun!” The swearing kamikaze was my cousin Fritz.

Fritz was in sixth grade, four years ahead of me. By all accounts, he was the toughest, most feared kid in school. It's a testament to Fritz that he'd already held that honor as a fifth-grader. His reputation was hard earned: winning fistfights on the playground, beating older kids and sending them home crying. Now as a sixth grader, his position was indisputable. Fritz didn't pick fights and was not a bully. He just didn't put up with anyone trying to push him, his friends, or relatives around. He had a very simple code, “Don't mess with me, or mine.”

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Fritz looked the part. He had a crew cut, cold blue eyes and a thick muscular body, for a sixth grader. He wasn't especially tall, but he was wide and intimidating. As he surveyed the crowd, he spotted me somewhere near the back. "Hey Chop," he called out. "You ready for a ride?"

Fritz had two older brothers and one older sister and they all called me "Choppy." In fact, I was "Choppy" or "Chop" to my entire family. Apparently I couldn't pronounce Jeffrey when learning to speak, and it came out "Choppy." Unfortunately, it stuck.

I wasn't ready to risk life and limb on the cardboard sled, but I knew I couldn't say no to Fritz. Chuck, Bobby and Dude were staring at me with their mouths hanging open as I replied, "Uh...I guess so."

We trudged back to the top of the hill, and then amid cheers and heckling, Fritz put me on the cardboard and climbed on behind me. Seconds later we were flying down the path, facing forward this time. Fritz had figured out how to keep it heading straight. We hit the plateau curl, flew into the air, and then, once again crash-landed in a billow of fresh-fallen snow.

As the bell rang signaling the end of recess, my friends looked at me differently, "Chop?" they asked. I sensed that my social standing had risen significantly. They struggled to believe that infamous Fritz and the fat kid were cousins and that I had faced the cardboard rocket challenge and lived. I searched the crowd for Carol. Surely she had seen my breathtaking ride with the most feared kid in the school, and would look at me differently now. When I couldn't find her in the crowd, I looked up to the large windows in the west wall of the school that afforded an excellent view of the sled run. Carol was standing in the window and had seen everything, but when I raised my hand to wave, she turned away. Minutes later, when I returned to my seat, it was as if I had risked life and limb for nothing. She didn't even look up.

It was the week before Christmas break, and Golden was decorated for the holidays. Santa, his sleigh and reindeer, were perched atop the "Welcome to Golden, Where the West Remains" arch that spanned Washington Avenue, Golden's main street. The street lights lining Washington Avenue were hung with Christmas lights and wreaths from 11th to 14th Streets and every store front, including Foss Drug, Hested's, Meyer's Hardware and the Ben Franklin were decorated with painted win-

dows and blinking lights. I always took great pride in the lights and decorations since Dad, given his position at the power company as well as being president of the Lions Club, put him front and center for decoration installation, and he usually let me tag along. Even the Ace Hi Tavern put up a single string of Christmas bulbs, throwing an unwanted light on the row of regular patrons sitting at the bar in the usually gloomy interior.

Late Thursday afternoon of that last week before Christmas, Auntie Boots, Fritz's mom, invited Mom and me to collect a box of hand-me-downs and other items she was sure would fit and from which I would get some wear. After sharing some Christmas cookies and hot chocolate, Fritz took me to his room and presented me with several large boxes. The first contained miscellaneous model cars parts for which he no longer had any use. Building model cars was a passion for my friends and me. I was honored to have Fritz' leftover parts and began thinking of ways to put them to use.

After pointing out the high value and extreme rarity of the mismatched plastic wheels, tires, fenders, and spot lights, Fritz turned his attention to the other box sitting on the bed. He opened it slowly and carefully. I knew it probably contained clothes, but I was unprepared for its contents. Inside the box was a red corduroy shirt and pair of white corduroy pants. I was dumbfounded! I had seen Fritz wear this outfit to family birthday parties and holidays and always wished I had a red corduroy shirt and white corduroy pants so I could look like him. In fact, I had seen the exact same outfit on Paul, and Mike, Fritz's older brothers, and that made it even more valuable. What great fortune — and just in the nick of time! I couldn't find the words to thank him, and after I'd rambled on for longer than was necessary, Fritz looked at me and said, "Well, you don't need to thank me like a little girl."

With my composure regained, Mom and I said goodbye to Auntie Boots and Fritz and headed for the car, a '52 Chevy with a maroon body and black fenders. On the way home, I asked Mom if she would iron the shirt and pants so I could wear them to school the next day. I didn't tell her, but since it was the last day before school ended for Christmas, it was my last attempt to win Carol's heart. She hesitated at first, but finally agreed.

The next morning, I donned the freshly ironed tattered red shirt with front flap pockets on either side and the worn white corduroy pants, complete with pleats and cuffs. I found a black belt to run through the belt loops and around my ample

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waist. I finished the look with my black engineer boots that had a strap across each arch and a bronze buckle just above each thick lugged sole. I put a glob of Brylcreem in my hair, parted the slick strands, and then cleaned my glasses for the first time in weeks. I was ready; how could Carol resist?

Mom was up earlier than usual that morning and offered up French toast, her new version of a healthy breakfast. Apparently she'd read some of the mimeographed reminders about eating healthy. Even though French toast contained milk, eggs and bread, I doubted if Miss Cribbs would part with any stars. Nonetheless, it was an auspicious beginning for what promised to be a wonderful day.

Mom dropped me at the entrance to the playground. It was cold and snowing softly. I was wearing a too-big, too-long blue car coat that fell below my knees, from another hand-me-down box from another set of cousins. The car coat prevented any sneak peeks at my ensemble. I marched to the top of the concrete steps, across the plateau, into the basement, then up the stairs to the second floor and the banks of lockers just outside Miss Cribbs' classroom. The hall was crowded, and as I hung the car coat in the locker, I noticed students starting to look at me. Perfect, I thought.

All eyes turned to me as I entered the classroom. I smiled at Miss Cribbs, unaware of her stare or the snickers that were starting. I marched toward my desk. As I strutted down the row, shoulders back and head held high, I noticed that Carol was actually looking at me with wide eyes and an open mouth. I realized that she was about to speak the first words she had ever spoken to me. As I stood before her in all my splendor, she stood up, put her hands on her hips and in a voice that can only be described as dripping with disdain, asked, "Who do you think you are, Santa Claus?"

The entire class found this vastly amusing and the snickers turned to full, out-loud laughter. Chuck and Bobby turned away, but I could see them holding their sides, rocking back and forth. Even Miss Cribbs was looking at her desk with a small smile on her face. I sat down. At that moment, I knew that Carol and I were not to be. I couldn't wait for the day to end.