

PROLOGUE



CARLY

*April 1965
Chapel Hill North Carolina*

No one wanted to work with the man in the wheelchair. “There’s something strange about that guy,” one of my fellow students warned me in the hall outside the PT ward. “If they try to assign you to him, say no.”

I remembered his warning now as I stood in the doorway between my supervisor, Betty Connor, and the ward’s director, Dr. Davies. Still, I was curious about the man who sat in the wheelchair by the window, a cast on his lower leg and foot. Crutches rested against the windowsill next to his chair. He was about a decade older than me, maybe thirty or so. He looked unkempt, his blond hair on the short side but tousled. His facial features were slack, his eyes half closed. I could see the shadow of stubble on his cheeks and chin.

“How about that patient for Caroline?” Betty asked Dr. Davies. “Broken ankle, is it?”

Dr. Davies nodded, light from the ward’s windows bouncing off his

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glasses. “Displaced fracture of the lateral malleolus,” he said, “followed by surgery.”

Betty turned to me. “You haven’t yet worked with a broken ankle, have you?” she asked, and I shook my head with some reluctance. I’d been a student intern in a private rehabilitation facility for the last two months, but this was my first time in the hospital ward and although I was excited to get started, my fellow student’s warning echoed in my ears. *Say no.* Still, the man in the wheelchair looked harmless enough.

“I think it would be a good case for her,” Betty said to Dr. Davies.

“I think not,” he said. He was holding several manila folders in his hands and he tapped the top one with his knuckles. “The fellow’s name is Hunter Poole,” he said. “He sustained the broken ankle falling off a three-story building, or so he says, but we think he intentionally jumped. He’s alive only because some shrubbery broke his fall. He refuses to learn to use crutches. None of our PTs have been able to get him to talk, much less engage in any therapy. He’s suffering from depression and—”

“Oh, I think I heard about him,” Betty cut him off. “Didn’t he say he was working on the roof and just slipped?”

“That’s what he told the driver of the ambulance, but his explanation doesn’t hold water.” Dr. Davies tucked his free hand into his pants pocket. “It was nine o’clock at night, for starters, and there were no tools found on the roof or the ground, so you tell me if that sounds like he was working. We have him on suicide watch. Next stop for him is the psychiatric unit if he doesn’t begin to come around today or tomorrow.”

“Well, you’re right that he wouldn’t be a good patient for Caroline,” Betty said. She looked at me. “You need to focus on building your skills right now,” she said. “You don’t need an unmotivated, clinically depressed suicide risk, for heaven’s sake.”

I nodded in agreement.

“There isn’t anything you can do for someone who won’t cooperate,” Dr. Davies said. “I plan to try to work with him myself today. Everyone else has given up.”

The man raised his head slowly in our direction as if he knew we were

talking about him and I felt his gaze lock onto mine. His eyes widened, brows lifting. Suddenly, he broke into a smile.

"You!" he nearly shouted, his voice so loud that several people in the room turned to look at me. "You're a physical therapist, right?" he asked. "I want to work with *you*." It was unnerving, the intensity of his gaze. The sudden disarming smile.

Oh, God, I thought. Just what I needed. A crazy man for a patient.

"Me?" I said, almost to myself.

"You!" he said again. Then in a calmer voice, "Yes, please. Please work with me."

"I didn't know he could smile," Dr. Davies said to us under his breath. He turned to me. "Are you willing?"

"Is he . . . dangerous?" I asked in a whisper. I was hungry to work, but not to be murdered in the middle of the PT ward.

"If you're asking if he's psychotic," Dr. Davies said, "we don't think so, though he's so closed off that it's been hard to evaluate him. You're the first person he's responded to. It would be wonderful if you could get him to open up."

"I don't know about this." Betty looked concerned.

"Hey," the man called across the room, his voice softer now. "I didn't mean to scare you." He actually chuckled. "I'll do whatever you say," he added. "I promise."

He sounded harmless enough. "I'll do it," I told Dr. Davies, holding my hand out for the man's chart.

Dr. Davies handed me the top folder. "Main priority is getting him to use the crutches." He spoke quietly. "See what you can do."

"All right," I said, and I crossed the room toward the possibly suicidal man who was now grinning at me in a way that made me nervous. What did this guy want with me?

The large room had an almost electric atmosphere, very different from the somber private facility. WKIX played rock and roll over the loudspeaker and the Temptations sang "My Girl" as I dragged a chair from against the wall and placed it in front of the man so I could sit facing him.

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"I'm Caroline Grant," I said, lowering myself to the chair. "Most people call me Carly."

He nodded, almost as if my name was no surprise to him.

"Hunter Poole," he said.

"Why me?" I asked.

"You remind me of someone," he said. "Someone I knew briefly. Dark eyes and the exact same hair—long and blond, only she wore hers parted in the middle. It was nothing . . . romantic or intimate." He flashed that grin again. "Nothing like that, so don't freak out. Just . . . it feels good to see you." His accent was Northern. New Jersey or New York, maybe.

"I remind you of someone you liked, then."

"Yes." He chuckled again for no reason I could discern.

He is crazy, I thought. And hopefully harmless.

"I didn't know you . . . I mean *her* . . . well," he said, "but I—"

"You realize I'm not this person," I said firmly.

"Yes, of course. I'm not crazy. Though I know everyone here thinks I am."

"No, they don't." I tried to sound reassuring. "They just think you're depressed."

He nodded. "I am that," he said, suddenly very solemn.

"They have medication that might make you feel better," I said. "It could help lift your spirits."

"They have nothing that can help me," he said, "and the side effects of the medications are too great now."

This man was not suicidal. I doubted a suicidal person would care a lick about side effects.

"What do you mean, the side effects are too great *now*?"

He shook his head. "I don't know. Don't pay attention to anything I say."

"Is it your injury that has you so down?"

He looked away from me and I thought I saw the shine of tears in his eyes. "I lost someone I loved," he said.

"Oh." I sat back, surprised that he'd confided in me. "I'm sorry," I said. "Is that why you tried to . . . to hurt yourself?"

He turned to face me again. "Can we not talk about it?" he asked, dry-

eyed now, and I wondered if I'd imagined the tears. "It's too hard to explain the truth and I don't want to lie to you."

"Of course," I said, touched by that explanation.

"Tell me about you instead." He looked at my left hand. "You're engaged?"

I looked down at my ring. Joe promised me a bigger diamond someday, but I wanted this one. I wanted this one forever. We would both be graduating next month, me from the University of North Carolina, Joe from NC State, and our wedding would be the week after. Joe would graduate as a second lieutenant in the army after being in ROTC for four years and we'd move to Fort Eustis, Virginia, where he'd be stationed. I hoped I could get a PT job up there.

"Yes," I said, "I'm marrying a wonderful man. But we're not talking about me. We need to talk about *you* and how we're going to get you well again."

He sighed. "I'm not very motivated," he admitted.

"I understand," I said. "But you said you like me. Or at least, you like the person I remind you of, right?"

He nodded. "Very much," he said.

"Then help me succeed," I said conspiratorially, wondering if that was a terrible ploy. I would never tell Betty Connor I'd used it. "You're my first patient in this rehabilitation ward," I said. "Make me look good to my supervisor, all right?"

He laughed and I saw a sparkle in his blue eyes. A few heads turned in our direction. *The new girl got the suicidal guy to laugh.*

"All right," he said. "It's a deal."

We got down to business then. I demonstrated how to use the crutches without putting weight on his ankle, and after a rough start, he got the hang of it. He was cooperative, doing everything I guided him to do as he practiced hobbling around the room. I led him to the ward entrance and taught him how to open and close the door while balancing on the crutches and his good right foot. Despite the discomfort he had to be experiencing, he remained cooperative, almost upbeat, and I felt excited, not only because I was doing what I'd trained to do but because I seemed to have magically brought him out of his shell when no one else had been able to. He actually

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sang along with a few songs on the radio as he practiced with the crutches, causing some of the people in the room to look at him, chuckling, and I smiled to myself as I walked next to him. He was probably a real charmer when he wasn't grieving.

He was getting winded from our circuits around the room, and I decided to let him have a rest before I taught him how to negotiate the stairs. As I helped him back to his wheelchair, the voice of the WKIX DJ, Tommy Walker, came over the loudspeaker.

"And here it is, as promised!" Tommy said. "The brand-new Beatles song! It's called 'Ticket to Ride.' Be sure to tell everybody where you heard it first. WKIX!" Tommy Walker had been talking about the new song all week as if WKIX was the only station in the world allowed to play it. My sister Patti was going crazy with anticipation and it seemed unfair that I would be able to hear the song before my Beatlemaniac sister. Patti was teaching her fourth-grade class right now and had to keep a professional air about her, which I couldn't begin to picture, because even though Patti was twenty-four to my twenty-one, she was like a teenager when it came to the Beatles. She planned to drive directly from her school to the record store on Henderson Street to snap up the new forty-five.

To my surprise, Hunter began singing along with the song as I took the crutches from him, leaning them against the windowsill again. He knew every word as well as the melody, which simply wasn't possible, since "Ticket to Ride" hadn't yet been played in the United States. He seemed oblivious to the fact that I was staring at him in awe as I took my seat across from him again.

"How can you possibly know this song?" I asked. "It's brand-new, just released today. No one's even *heard* it yet, much less had the time to memorize it."

He looked briefly perplexed. "I have no idea," he said. "Obviously I heard it somewhere. Maybe a different radio station?"

"That's impossible."

"Apparently not." He shrugged with a sheepish smile.

"You're not . . . you're not connected to the Beatles somehow, are you?"

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He laughed. "I wish," he said.

"Have you been to England recently?" The song had probably been released in England first.

"Nope," he said.

"Are you a Beatles fan?"

"Isn't everyone?" he said, then added, "I own every one of their albums."

"But 'Ticket to Ride'?" I queried. "I just don't get it."

He shrugged again. "It's a great song and I guess I must have somehow heard it and subliminally picked up the lyrics."

"That's crazy," I said, but I was thinking about Patti. Wait until I told her about this guy!

I glanced toward the side of the room where there was a five-step staircase. "We should get back to work," I said, knowing my job was not to sit and talk about the Beatles with him. "Are you ready to try the stairs?"

"If you insist," he said. Turning around in the wheelchair, he took the crutches from the windowsill and struggled to stand again.

"Have you been to a Beatles concert?" I asked as I walked next to him toward the stairs.

"I wish," he said again. "But alas, no."

"My sister took the train to New York to see them twice last year," I said. "August and September. And she's already saving up to go to their August concert this year."

"She should see them as much as she can," he said. "You never know when they're going to just pack it in and say 'enough is enough.'"

"She would die if they did that," I said.

I taught him how to ascend and descend the stairs using the crutches, but my mind wasn't on the task. Patti had recently stopped seeing a guy who was a boring stick-in-the-mud and now she was at loose ends. Would it be unethical to introduce her to Hunter? I didn't know. I tried to picture how I would broach the subject with her: "Hey Patti, I met this strange, really depressed guy with a broken ankle at work today and I think you'd make the perfect couple!" Joe would tell me not to meddle. *Patti will find her own guy when she's good and ready*, he'd say.

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When we were done working together and Hunter was settled back in his wheelchair, he caught my hand. Looking into my eyes, his expression turned suddenly serious. "Thank you," he said. "This was a treat. You have no idea."

I was taken aback by the intensity in his eyes, the sincerity in his voice. "You know," I said. "I'd really like you to meet my sister."