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## Chapter One

I couldn't believe it. Not until I was standing there along with the rest of the town in the cemetery did it really hit me. She was dead.

It'd been a drunk-driving accident and she'd been the one drinking while driving her dad's Lexus. The ironic part was her mother headed the town's MADD program. No one seemed to think the irony of it was too awfully funny, though.

Her best friend, Jill, wasn't there. She was laid up in the hospital thirty miles away with a broken hipbone and other injuries. She'd been in the passenger's seat. But pretty much everyone else had shown. Even the Wallaces made an appearance, and they were the couple who'd sideswiped her when she'd run the stop sign and pulled out in front of them. They'd managed to come through the accident with only minor bumps and bruises. Mrs. Wallace held her arm in a sling and her husband, the town's dentist, sported a black eye.

I couldn't look at the closed casket with its mountain of flowers piled on top. So I stared down the street to where the school sat only a block away. From where I stood, I could see the massive brick walls rising above house and tree.

The path from Fitz's Funeral Home to the cemetery went directly past the school. As I stared, I could remember when I was younger and a funeral line would pass by during recess. All the children,

me included, would line the edge of the playground and count the number of cars in the procession. If the number was too few, we'd shrug and say, "Guess no one liked Old Man Roper much, did they?" or something to that effect. Then we'd go back to playing tag or jumping rope.

When I was in second grade, my Grandfather Burke died. I was still too young to think much of death back then—or understand it—but I remember looking at my friends from the back seat of my parents' Suburban and wishing the kids at recess would count the biggest number of cars yet.

Standing at Grandpa's graveside service, I could hear my friends at recess. The squeak of swing sets and the laugh of children playing echoed down the street. I tried to be still in my scratchy black wool dress but was incredibly bored. I watched Grandpa's face and wondered why he wasn't snoring like he usually did when he napped. I didn't want to be there in that dreadful dress, in those tight shoes and watch him sleep. I wanted to be down the block, playing at recess. When I grew impatient enough to ask Mom if Grandpa was going to wake up soon so I could go back to school, she clutched my fingers hard and hushed me.

"Stop it, Carrie. You're embarrassing me," she'd said. Then she dipped her hand into her pocket, pulled out a tissue, and began to cry.

But this time, I didn't ask if anyone would wake. Instead, I stared at the school building and blocked out what was being said up front. I couldn't hear the squeal of children because school had closed for the occasion. The rest of the student body stood with me, crammed into the cemetery like sardines, huddling close to their families because one of our own was being put into the earth this time.

I stood between my parents and knew this funeral motorcade had been the biggest yet.

The ground under me felt soft. Even though it

was December, the earth definitely wasn't frozen yet because I sank down every time I switched weight from foot to foot. And every time I descended another inch, I had this fleeting sensation I was plummeting into the ground with my dead classmate.

The school's choir lit into "Amazing Grace." At the second verse, one girl stepped forward and sang a solo. And as I listened to Brenda Newell's clear, solid voice, I remembered the first time I realized everything around me was changing.

The wind whipped up, fluttering my skirt around my legs, and I lifted the collar of my coat over my chin. I hugged myself tight just like I had that night. It might've been only weeks before. But standing in the cemetery between my parents, it seemed like a century ago.

It'd been a cool October night, and rain the day before had made the game slippery and sloppy with mud. Football Homecoming showered down on my school with fortune and victory.

The Math Club had worked the concession stand. The cheerleaders had finished their celebration dance, flipping and twirling across the sidelines. The band was hyped from their full-throated rendition of "Peter Gunn." And I, editor of the school's journal, was cursed with the assignment of interviewing coach and quarterback after their conquest.

Popcorn and cups littered the still-lit, deserted stadium. The field was torn to shreds. One big puddle completely wiped out the fifty-yard line.

I leaned against the frosty brick wall of the gym and tried to shield myself from the October chill. But the cold sneaked in with every breath I took. It froze my lungs to my ribs and had me sucking in air through chattering teeth.

One geek in the Math club had thought to be funny and served me a diet soda when I'd ordered a

regular. So there I was, nasty aftertaste clinging to my tongue, waiting for the jocks to arrive. I watched the line of red taillights as the parking lot cleared. A few people lingered, grouped by their cars, laughing and talking. My brother was among one of those crowds, waiting for me to finish my interview.

Marty didn't live at home anymore but he'd been going to the game anyway and had reluctantly let me ride with him. He'd graduated a couple of years before but since he was immature and had been a class clown, my generation still remembered and welcomed him into their clutches.

The opposing team shuffled onto their bus with their heads lowered. And here came the champs. Braying like a bunch of coon dogs, they looked pumped and riled. The ground rumbled under my feet as their stampede approached.

Still huddled together in one lumped mass, they came, charging toward the side door of the gym that led to their locker room. Cleats click-clacked on the asphalt parking lot, reminding me of my Great Aunt Kay's dog, Chigger, who liked to run across her linoleum floor, creating as much clatter as possible. The team blew by me, smelling of musty earth, sports cream and sweat.

I couldn't spot Coach Newell, but there *he* was, trailing at the end, grinning with the rest of the idiots: quarterback Luke Carter.

I rose onto my toes and waved my hand. "Luke," I called, and quickly dropped my fingers when I realized I probably looked like some overeager groupie.

The chanting was too loud, though. One player did glance my way, but moved on without speaking. All he saw of me was a long brown trench coat with a mop of fuzzy blond hair sticking out the top. Nothing worth pausing over, I'm sure.

"Carter!" I put a little more gut into the call and finally caught his attention.

In his red jersey smeared brown, he faltered a step, his head swiveling my way. Then with a quick sidestep, he slipped from the group and came toward me. The streetlights played the shadows like a puppeteer, dangling darkness over his torso and down. When he emerged from the shadows, I sucked in a breath. The football pads made his shoulders seem wider and his chest twice as broad, while thigh pads made his waistline look especially slim. He moved like he was made of cardboard, stiff and ambling.

He towered over me, a looming six feet two inches tall (according to the football roster) to my five feet seven. His helmet was off, hanging at his side, and he'd wrapped his fingers around the face guard. A cut across his right eyebrow sliced toward the corner of his eye. Tiny etches of blood filled the cracks and defined the spot where he'd have a healthy showing of crow's feet someday. His wet black hair curled slightly down his forehead and around his ears. And his eyes were a blue so clear that if they'd been a lake, I could've seen right to their rocky bottoms.

Finally, he smiled...and I wanted to kick him. He had a row of bright white teeth with a bit of an overbite, and a dimple I could've fallen into.

I hated him for that grin. I mean, how dare he look at me with those blue orbs and display such a genuine smile? I didn't want it. I didn't want to step into line behind every other girl in school whose heart went into double-thump for this boy. He had no right to give me that busted-ice feeling.

Yeah, busted ice. It's like making instant gelatin the fast way with ice instead of cold water. When the ice cubes drop into the boiling gelatin they crack and sometimes bust into a hundred pieces. Well, my stomach was full of a dozen of those cubes, busting and cracking all over inside me because Luke Carter was a vision.

“Yeah?” he asked, resting his helmet against his hip.

“Carrie Paxton,” I said, sticking my hand in the space of air between us. I tried to keep it professional despite my irritation over the busted ice in my gut. “Editor of *The Central Record*.”

“I know.” He took my hand. Compared to his, my fingers were small and weak. “You’re in my Trig class.”

His handshake was cold and slightly damp. He squeezed my palm before letting go. My mouth dropped open.

He wasn’t supposed to know that about me.

I’m sorry. But no girl, despite how much that girl doesn’t care about popularity and all that junk, can remain calm when someone like Luke Carter shakes her hand and actually knows her name. OK, I admit he should’ve known my name. We’d gone to the same school since kindergarten. But noticing me enough to realize we shared a class? No way.

“Oh,” I said. If I’d had any air left in my lungs, I might’ve been able to continue, but I did a fairly decent job of making a fool out of myself as it was. “Well. I...I...I mean, is it OK to talk to you, er, ask you a few questions about the game? For the paper, that is.”

“Sure.” A bead of muddy sweat trickled out of his hairline and down his temple, mixing with blood before moving on. Fascinated, I watched it drool a crooked path down his cheek and neck and then into the collar of his jersey.

As if catching my entranced stare, he lifted the hand that held his helmet and wiped the sweat away with the back of his palm. “What do you want to know?”

I cleared my throat and dropped my eyes. “Umm, well...” I yanked a notebook from the inside pocket of my trench coat. The wind caught a few sheets, making the lined pages flail and thrash like

they were drowning in the ocean or something. I tried to get a hold of them and rein them in but only succeeded in wrinkling most of the pad.

“Sorry,” I muttered, and dug deep into my outer pocket, frantically searching for my pen. I couldn’t find the irritating thing there, and switched hands on the notebook to search the other pocket. I didn’t dare look up. I could feel *him* watching and it made my cheeks hot.

He coughed, trying to get my attention, and my head flew up—long bangs falling into my eyes. He motioned toward my right ear with his index finger. I frowned, wondering if there was a twig or something in my hair and reached up, patting the area. And the pen, which had been securely tucked behind my ear, stabbed me.

“Ouch!” I yanked the pen out of my hair and set it firmly to the flapping paper.

“You OK?” he asked. I could see the amused crinkling at the corners of his eyes where he tried not to laugh at me.

I sniffed, more fueled with anger at his mockery than with embarrassment. “So Mr. Carter,” I started. What could I say to really upset him? I tossed my head to get the hair out of my eyes. “How does it feel to be Stillburrow’s poster child?”

His eyebrows drew together and his forehead wrinkled. He was just as appealing frowning as he was smiling. I swallowed, and more busted ice crackled in my guts.

“I wouldn’t say I was Stillburrow’s poster child. I wouldn’t say that at all.”

I lifted one eyebrow as if to disagree, when, well...OK, I totally disagreed. “But you’re the one everyone cheers for.”

To this day, I don’t know what possessed me to be so rude to him. My blood was still pumping to the wrong parts of my body, bypassing the pathway to my brain, I guess. If only he had some flaws. Then

maybe I would've let up. But the impact he had on me felt so alarming my "fight or flight" instincts kicked in. So I fought the feeling. Frantically.

"It's *your* name written on all the posters on Main Street, and you're the one who's mentioned in the headline of every football article. It's you who—"

"Hey, you're the editor of said paper, not me." He took a step toward me, pointing a finger at my chest, looming even taller. "If you don't want me in every article then you should—"

"I don't usually write the sports section," I said through gritted teeth. "And as I was saying before you interrupted, this town's never paid so much attention to football until this year. It all adds up. You're the quarterback, the team captain. And tonight we beat Valley, which we haven't done since 1996."

"It wasn't one against eleven out there tonight. It was *eleven* against eleven. We all played our hearts out. I couldn't have done anything without my teammates. They," he paused to jab his finger toward the locker room door, "are the ones who made me look good, not the other way around. I don't like how you're making me out to be so self-centered. We played like a team, won like a team, and I was just a part of that. It wasn't me. It was everyone. And I'm proud of every guy that stepped onto the field. We deserved that win." He was shouting by the time he'd finished.

His lips trembled, and I wondered what they'd feel like. Right then, they'd be hot and moist and passionate. My breath caught, and I made myself calm down, made myself think logically. I took a step back. I'd never kissed anyone before or been kissed. And whatever force had caused me to dream about a little lip action right then, and with Luke Carter at that, really freaked me out.

I glanced down at the notebook and realized I'd copied what he'd said.

"Is that your official quote?" I asked after a long, steady breath.

He shook his head as if to clear it. "What?"

"That was a good speech, Carter." I tried to ignore the persistent thump in my chest. "Can I put it in the paper?"

He didn't answer, and when I risked looking up, he stared at me with his mouth opened in a surprised O. He stood so close I could feel his heat. He smelled musky, like he'd soaked in the scent of the air right before a warm summer rain. I wanted to run away. And I wanted to move closer.

"Hey, Carter! Great game."

We both jumped and spun toward Coach Newell as he jogged over and slapped a hand to Luke's back. "Best moves I've seen on the field since I started coaching." He looked at me. "Dean Paxton's girl, right?" His voice had an echoing boom to it.

"Yes, sir." I stood up, straightening my back, thinking this barrel-chested man could be a great drill sergeant.

"Doing an article for the paper?" he asked. I nodded. "Well, I've got a load of quotes for you tonight."

Even his smile seemed to roar. He started in, his voice thundering with each statement. I jotted down sentences madly, trying to keep up, but not listening to a word he said. Luke left in the middle of it, escaping inside the gym. I felt an odd mixture of panic and release as he faded off.

When Coach Newell finished, he asked if I had enough for an article. I said I had enough for a novel and he hooted, throwing back his head to let out a resounding laugh. Obviously, he liked the sound of that and asked if he'd get his picture on the cover. I don't remember how I responded but it caused him to chortle again. Then he pummeled me on the back with the palm of his hand, knocking me off balance, and sent me on my way.

With pages full of quotes, I searched for Marty. My shaking hands cramped from gripping my notebook too tight.

“Way to go, Carrie,” I muttered to myself, forgetting Coach Newell and thinking only of the almost-interview before that. “Get a crush on the best looking, most popular, rich boy in school. How original.”

When I caught sight of my brother, I pulled up short. Marty stood amidst a group of people, but it wasn't his normal group. He usually hung out with other class-clown types, goof-offs and dropouts. But this night, he was surrounded by a bunch of cheerleaders. And the main focus of his attention was Abby Eggrow. He'd been working at Getty's General for a few months as the bagger and Abby Eggrow just so happened to be the cashier there. I knew he'd been interested in her, but seeing them together with my own eyes was something else altogether.

I had no idea what was going on in his mind. Why was he putting the moves on *her* of all people? Abby was one of the privileged elite who had money and a future. She was five years younger than Marty, a year older than me, and everyone in town knew her plans. Next year she was going off to college to become a doctor. Marty's big plans involved saving most of his weekly earnings to party with his friends on the weekend.

Yes, what a pair they made. Seeing Abby smile up at my brother was like seeing a full carat diamond set in a plastic ring from a Cracker Jack box. It was like seeing me hooked up with Luke Carter.

I clutched my notebook to my chest and waited until Marty glanced over and saw me. When he did, his smile faded a little. He reached for Abby's elbow and bent over her as he spoke. From where I stood, I couldn't tell exactly what happened next. But Abby

rose on her toes and either whispered something in his ear or kissed him on the cheek. Either way, Marty ogled her like a lovesick idiot when she pulled away. Then he bowed his head and turned toward me.

I couldn't blame him too much, though. I mean, hadn't I just done basically the same thing? I'd spent the last twenty minutes gawking at Luke Carter. Of course, unlike Marty, I knew I had no chance with Luke.

"Done with your little interview already?" he asked, striding past me and hopping into the cab of his truck. He started the engine as I climbed into the passenger side.

"Yes," I said, and slammed the door. "Are you finished flirting with all the cheerleaders yet?" I glanced over and smirked when he frowned.

"Did Carter dazzle you with a bunch of cute quotes?" he shot back.

Refusing to rise to his bait, I faced forward and crossed my arms over my chest. "Don't forget you're taking me into Paulbrook tomorrow so I can turn in next week's paper to get printed."

Marty snickered, probably thinking he'd just scored a major point, and shifted the car into drive. I had to hold onto the door's armrest for dear life as he roared out of the parking spot.

"I've got to work tomorrow," he answered, and lifted a few fingers to wave at the cheerleaders we passed.

I rolled my eyes when a few waved back. "Well, when do you get out?"

He sighed. "Two."

"Then pick me up at two thirty."

"I'm not your chauffeur."

"I know. It's worse. You're my brother."

"At least you ended up with a cool brother. Look what I got for a sister."

Sending him an arch look, I sweetly said, "Give

me a ride tomorrow or I'm telling Mom about that time you broke her—”

“OK, OK,” he broke in a little too quickly. “Geez, brat, you win. I'll give you a lift. Just shut up already.”

We rode home in silence until Marty pulled to the curb in front of our family home. He left the engine running, waiting for me to get out.

I paused. “Coming in to say hi?”

He shifted on the vinyl seat like it had suddenly become too uncomfortable to sit on.

“No.”

I lifted my eyebrows in mock surprise. “Why not?”

He glared. “I wouldn't want to get mud on the carpet with my dirty shoes.”

I shrugged like it didn't matter what he did, and opened the door. “Well, Mom wants to see you.”

When Marty snorted out a dry laugh, I turned quickly to stare at him. His head fell back and rested on the back of the bench seat. My heart broke a little when he said, “Mom doesn't know what she wants.”