
Chapter 1

ROSE MCNULTY LOOKED up from her computer and sighed with barely concealed boredom. It was only one o'clock. *What a slow day at work*, she thought, then immediately felt guilty. She was an emergency room nurse. An empty emergency room meant good news to the community, but it sure didn't help Rose polish her nursing skills.

The doctor on duty misinterpreted her sigh of boredom.

"Nice, easy day," he commented. At seventy, this was exactly the type of day Dr. Lucas enjoyed. An empty E.R. was fine with him. He wasn't as spry as he had once been.

"Too easy," Rose admitted, running a hand through her hair, coal black and thick like her mother's had been.

She stifled a yawn by hiding it behind a smile. She genuinely liked Dr. Lucas, but he was a good friend of her aunt, Minnie McNulty. If he told Minnie she was bored, his words could precipitate another lecture and argument from Minnie. Since she lived with her maiden aunt, Rose wanted to avoid that at all costs.

Rose pulled out a medical journal on her desk but, today, it couldn't keep her attention. She was the day nurse in the

emergency room of Ridge Valley Hospital. It was really an urgent care facility, but the town board liked the way "Ridge Valley Hospital" sounded, so they put the fancy name on the letterhead.

"Not every little farming town in Ohio has a hospital!" the mayor had boasted on opening day, and the proud residents who had bothered to come to the opening had all clapped and cheered.

But reality was different. Whether you called it hospital or urgent care, not many people came in for help. When something serious happened, the ambulance drivers knew from experience to drive right to Eastwood, the large hospital in the county. Life threatening events were automatically airlifted to Columbus University Hospital, one of the best hospitals in the world.

So, where did that leave Rose?

Well, today, after six hours on duty, there had been only one patient, the town hypochondriac, Mrs. Wells, who tottered in every Thursday after a week of watching CNN. Rose swore she could set a clock by Mrs. Wells. She was as regular as rain, convinced she was dying of every disease covered on television. Today, it was the bubonic plague.

"There's an outbreak in India," the ninety-year-old told Rose and Dr. Lucas.

"Have you been to India lately, Mrs. Wells?" Rose asked, although she knew the answer.

"No, but I have all the symptoms!"

"Really, Mrs. Wells," Rose had soothed the ninety year old, "there hasn't been a case in the country—"

Dr. Lucas broke in, "Give her the yellow pills, Rose. One week's worth."

"Thank you, Doctor," Mrs. Wells sniffed, glaring at Rose. Taking the pills in a gloved hand, she carefully put them in

her purse. "See, Rose. Dr. Lucas doesn't think it's crazy to be worried about the bubonic plague."

Before Rose could reply to Mrs. Wells, she was gone, moving out the door faster than any ninety-year-old should attempt.

Rose turned to the doctor and gave him a rueful smile. "You do know it's unethical to give out sugar pills and tell patients it is medicine?"

"It is medicine!" he protested, chuckling. "That whole side of the Wells family is crazy. Her mother was the same way, but she took to gin in her old age and terrorized the town. Better for everyone if Elvira takes her sugar meds and thinks she's being treated for bubonic plague."

"What if she finds out?"

"Elvira Wells is my first cousin. She would never sue me. Where would she go for Christmas dinner?"

"Well, perhaps you are right." Rose sighed. "Why are you frowning?"

Dr. Lucas was a wise man, but he was mystified by computers, and, if truth were told, a great deal of modern medicine, but he refused to take courses to update his skills or listen to advice.

He continued to grumble until Rose got up and strolled over to his desk.

One glance told her the problem.

"You haven't charged your computer." She knelt and pushed the charging plug into the wall socket. In a minute, the computer came back to life.

"Thank you, Rose." Dr. Lucas looked sheepish.

"No problem."

He was unusually pensive. After a moment, he finally spoke. "I remember you when you were a little girl, always patching up your dolls."

"I wanted to be a pathologist and help solve crimes!"

Rose laughed. Everyone thought of her as meek and quiet, a girl easily overlooked. But the truth was different. She longed for excitement and adventure.

"Never in a million years, would I have guessed that about you. You were always so shy and quiet. And in your aunt's shadow."

The old doc gave her a long, measured look and Rose flushed. His next words surprised her. "I think you and I are both in the wrong place."

This must be a game. "Where should we be?"

"I should be playing golf with my poor wife at the country club. This job should be open for a younger doctor."

"Fat chance!"

But he nodded his shaggy white head. "I'm serious. It's time I retired. My wife wants to take a cruise around the world, and, you know, I think it would be fun."

He was serious. Rose clapped her hands together. This was wonderful.

"And where should I be? Working in Eastwood?"

"Bigger than Eastwood. You should be using your skills in a big city hospital, an emergency room with lots of action. Your skills are wasted here."

"Aunt Minnie..."

Rose, surprised at his honesty, brought up the barrier to her freedom.

Dr. Lucas dismissed Aunt Minnie with a wave of his hand. "Minnie, Minnie, Minnie! Minnie McNulty is a good, Godfearing woman, but not one I would hope any young woman like you would model herself after. Why, she's only in her fifties and looks like an eighty-year-old woman. When she meets her Maker, she's going to have some explaining to do."

Rose tried to explain. "I owe her so much. And she's an invalid, you know."

"You do owe her a lot," the doctor agreed. "But you don't have to sacrifice your whole life for her. And she will be just fine. I'll bet she lives to be a hundred. And this is a small town and word gets out about people. Minnie isn't exactly what she appears to be."

Rose was dumbstruck. She'd always thought that Aunt Minnie and the doctor were in accord.

He read her mind. "I've kept my tongue with you, but I argued strenuously against your coming back here. But Minnie has enough clout in this town to override me."

"The great McNulty name," Rose said softly.

To Rose's amazement, the old man stood up and stretched. "She is a lonely woman and a bit of a drama queen. You have filled her life with joy and you owe her absolutely nothing. Ridge Valley is great for people like me and Minnie, but not for the likes of you!"

"What are you doing?" Rose asked.

"I'm going to follow my own advice for once. Off to the golf course and dinner with my wife. Can you handle things here?"

It was a joke. She could handle everything that came through the door, and then twice more.

Left alone in the empty clinic, Rose felt a strange elation. Dr. Lucas' words confirmed that her desire to want more out of life wasn't silly or selfish. Still, how would—how could—she escape? She owed her aunt so much.

Rose was just seven years old when her parents died in a barn stormer plane crash at the county fair. Minnie, her father's sister, had immediately taken charge and raised Rose with the best of intentions. Rose would be a carbon copy of herself, religious, overly proper, and fearful of the world

outside of Ridge Valley, a small town set smack in the middle of Ohio farm country.

Minnie didn't know it, but she had failed.

On the outside, Rose looked conservative and proper, but inside, she was dying to get away and see the world. On the few occasions she had dropped the mask, Aunt Minnie had quickly lowered the boom.

The message was clear—if you leave me and Ridge Valley, something terrible will happen to you. Or even worse, something terrible will happen to me and you will be to blame. Guilt, Aunt Minnie knew, was a powerful control tool.

When Rose voiced her desire to go to medical school in Chicago and become a pathologist, Minnie McNulty, keeper of the family finances, tanked her dream. Minnie would absolutely *not* pay for it. If Rose insisted on doing something fool hardy like leaving Ridge Valley, she could go to school in Columbus. She had two choices for a career, nurse or teacher. And when her schooling was done, she was expected to come home.

So, she was trapped at this incredibly boring job. Her mood sunk. If the entrance/exit room door hadn't opened with a bang, she might have started to cry.

Instead, she jerked herself together and looked through the large window separating the waiting room from the treatment room. Two men were in the waiting room. One was a familiar sight—Jack Brady, the town wino, who was famous for his alcoholic benders, was staggering and dragging his feet. He had a nasty cut on his forehead. His bulk was supported by another man.

Rose was amazed. Brady's Samaritan was someone she didn't know. He was looking straight at her. His gaze was compelling and she couldn't look away.

"I found this man on the street. I think he fell and cut his head on the curb."

Rose stood up, grabbed the wheelchair, and walked slowly into the waiting room. Pushing the chair ahead of herself, she took the time to observe Brady's rescuer. For some reason, she couldn't explain, there was something very powerful about the man.

Tall and thin, dressed all in white, he was extremely pale, with high cheekbones. His amazingly long-fingered hands held Brady effortlessly, and Brady was well over two hundred pounds. Now, all that fat was being pulled downward by gravity, but it didn't seem to bother the younger man. Or was he younger? There were no lines on his face, but something made him seem ageless. She had never seen anyone like him before. She tried to pull herself together.

"I think you can ease him into the wheelchair," Rose instructed. She braced herself to take some of Brady's bulk, but it wasn't necessary. The man lifted, then placed Brady into the chair as if the wino was a feather.

"Thank you." Now close, she looked more carefully at the stranger, whose skin was eerily pale, almost translucent. He was the palest man she had ever seen outside of a morgue.

"It was not a problem," he said a little formally. Was he a foreigner?

Brady began to slip down.

"Oops!" Rose leaned in to strap Brady into the chair.

Without thinking, she touched the rescuer's hand and immediately felt a tingling.

Zing! It almost felt like an electrical shock. But it wasn't unpleasant! To her acute embarrassment, she felt her nipples tighten and strain against the lacy material of her bra. Her face flushed with confusion. She fought to take a deep breath.

"Is something wrong?" the stranger asked. His metallic-grey eyes seemed amused at her confusion. His gaze was penetrating and unsettling but, strangely, delicious.

"No. Y-you just surprised me," Rose stuttered. "I mean, you gave me an electric shock."

"I'm sorry." He reached out and touched her arm and, again, she felt the most delicious sensation.

"Just a little electric shock. I guess it's from our shoes rubbing the floor or something."

Rose rubbed her fingertips together and tried to regain her composure. She had better concentrate on her patient. She began to push the chair out of the waiting room and into the care area. The stranger very politely opened the gate for her.

"Thank you."

"Not a problem." Without asking, he followed Rose into the care room.

"This is the work area. Easier to assess him here."

The stranger looked around with real interest. "Amazing!"

Amazing? Where is this guy from? Rose wondered.

Before she could ask, he turned his attention on Brady.

"Is he all right?" the stranger asked, following Rose.

"Better than he should be." She felt she had to explain. "Jack Brady is one of our regulars. He's calm today. I'm surprised you found him so accommodating. He's usually using his fists at this point."

The man in white made a sound that was suspiciously like a chuckle. "Well, he wasn't this calm when I approached him."

Rose picked up a new chart and wrote Brady at the top. She needed to establish her control. "Your name?"

He smiled. "Galen. You can call me Galen."

"Last name? First?"

"Both."

Rose tried not to look startled. "Galen Galen?"

"Yes." The man seemed fascinated with the care room.

Weird, Rose thought, wondering if he was telling the truth.

"Where did you find him?"

His large, metallic-grey eyes with dark pupils returned to study her face. "Not far from here. He was sitting on the curb, holding his head. As you can see, he has a cut on his forehead."

The man who called himself Galen had a low and melodious voice, and there was an inflection that Rose couldn't place. The man was staring at her in the most intense way. She blushed under his scrutiny and looked away.

To distract herself, Rose parted Brady's hair. Yes, there was a cut, but nothing too deep or nasty.

"May I observe?" the stranger asked politely. He smiled and, for some odd reason, his smile lit up something deep within her.

Technically, she should say no, but Rose couldn't see the harm. "Sure. Just don't touch anything. How do you know Jack Brady?"

"I don't. I have observed him on the street a couple times. He is loud."

Rose laughed. "Loud, he certainly is. But please elaborate."

"Elaborate. What does that word mean?"

"Tell me more."

"About what?" Somehow, he conveyed genuine puzzlement.

"Why were you observing Jack Brady?"

"No reason. He just seemed an interesting specimen."

Shocked, Rose burst out laughing. "Interesting specimen. Yes, I agree."

She leaned down to take a quick pulse, then straightened up.

"Is this going to be difficult?" the stranger asked.

"Not at all. You should have seen the stuff I dealt with when I was training in the big city hospital."

"Which do you prefer?"

"Prefer? I don't understand."

"The exciting job or the quiet job."

Rose didn't have to hesitate. "The exciting one for sure!"

The stranger nodded to himself and seemed to smile.

Rose went back to her job, using the stethoscope around her neck to listen. Then she checked Brady's oxygen level and blood pressure. Moving smoothly, she lifted his eyelids and shined a light into his closing eyes. It was all routine. Throughout her work, Galen never took his eyes off her. It made her flushed and warm all over, but she tried to hide her confusion.

His skin was almost white, a shade usually seen in corpses, but this man was very much alive. And the eyes looking down at her were an intense metallic-grey. The rescuer seemed more interested in Rose than the man he had brought into the ER.

"You work quickly," he observed. "And well, for such primitive care."

"Primitive!" Rose bristled and shot him a look.

He was quick to see his mistake. "I mean, this small hospital."

Rose chose to be mollified, but her outburst evidently aroused the semi-comatose Jack Brady. The drunk jerked awake and, without warning, bit Rose on her bare wrist.

"Ouch!"

Galen's response was instantaneous. With a flick to Brady's head, the drunk was out cold, and he grasped Rose's hand and brought it to his face, examining it closely.

"It's nothing," Rose breathed out quickly.

Finally satisfied, he lowered her wrist but didn't let go.

"Your skin. There isn't any loss of life energizing fluid."

"Do you mean blood?"

"Yes, blood. You see, I have studied what you call medicine."

"What do you call it?" Rose asked.

"Healing," the stranger repeated. "It is a process that involves the entire life form. Does your protective barrier hurt?"

"Protective barrier?"

"Your skin." He pulled up her wrist and the indentations from Brady's teeth were clear.

Without asking permission, he began to slowly rub her wrist and, almost instantly, the pain disappeared.

"Wow!"

Rose jumped back. There, literally, had been a spark between them.

"Better?" he asked, his eyes lingering on her breasts.

"Amazing! Where did you study medicine... er... healing?"

"Healing."

He released her wrist. All traces of the ugly bite mark were gone. She looked back up and the expression on the man's face made her body tingle with a warmth she didn't quite understand.

"Better?" he asked again, taking a step closer.

"Completely!"

What the hell is going on? she wondered. Never, did she come across anything like this in her medical training. Trying not to stare at Galen too closely, she began to prepare to treat the cut on Brady's forehead.

She felt his hesitancy, as if unsure to speak.

Then he appeared to make a decision. He looked into her eyes and blinked slowly. "I studied at a school far away from here. That is where I studied." It was clear he didn't want to divulge anything more. The man was fixated on her,

especially her round, firm breasts. Impertinent of him, but Rose felt a surge of warmth course through her body. He glanced at Brady. "He's all right," the stranger said. If his strange lips had formed a smile before, now they made an expression that was clearly disgust. "This human isn't long for this world. I can see that his liver is very diseased."

"How can you tell?" Rose was intrigued but not surprised. No tests had been done on Brady to confirm the state of his liver. "Are you guessing?"

"I think you must know I am someone who would never guess." He picked up a piece of gauze and stared at it. "Fascinating. May I have this?"

Weirder and weirder. Rose nodded.

The man watched with intensity as she washed out the wound, applied antiseptics, and began to bandage the cut with another piece of gauze.

Finally satisfied, Rose stepped back, then pushed Brady into a corner.

"He'll sleep it off and the cop will take him home later. They come around on their rounds, to check on us."

"Then I must go." Galen jumped up and was already half out of the room.

"Wait," Rose cried. "I need to have you fill out some forms and—"

He paused. "And?"

"Well, you are a little pale. Actually, very pale. I thought you might want me to check your vital signs..." she trailed off.

Did he laugh? No! Impossible!

He said something unintelligible, then he was gone and she was alone.

A quick check of the parking lot didn't reveal anything. The stranger called Galen had disappeared.

Rose slowly returned to her desk, bewildered. What had just happened?

Her whole body felt warm and eager, but for what, she had no idea. She had never felt quite like this before. It seemed that all the nerves in her body were coming alive. She rubbed her wrist where the stranger had massaged her skin, and the feeling was intensified. Rose looked down at her wrist. All traces of the ugly bite mark were gone. But before she could think more about the stranger, her next patient arrived.

A workman from the town sewer department came in with an enormous splinter in the palm of his hand, followed by a four-year-old and his mother. The four-year-old had managed to jam his hand into a small bottle and was crying miserably in fear.

"Kids are curious." Rose soothed the mother *and* the son as she expertly removed the child's hand from the hole. Problem solved; she sent them both home with lollipops.

Next, was a little boy from the fifth grade who had a bead stuck in his nose.

His mother was irate. "Billy's stupid, just like his father!" the mother whined.

"Not stupid, just being a little boy," Rose murmured. "Kids are curious."

She heard a chuckle and turned around. Evidently, she had an audience. It was her night shift replacement, honorary aunt, and go-to person for advice, Nurse Angie Brown.

Long ago, Angie had been Rose's mom's best friend. That friendship had carried over from mother to daughter. Both women held each other in special regard. She carried two coffees and plopped her ample bottom in the chair vacated by Dr. Lucas. Her gaze drifted over to Jack Brady, still slumped over and out of it.

"I brought you coffee."

"Thank you." Rose inhaled the aroma of the coffee, took a long sip, and smiled.

"I see Brady's back again?" Angie jerked her head toward the corner.

"Yes! And that's why this day was better than most." Rose's bright expression immediately had Angie Brown's full attention.

"Do tell!" Angie was all ears.

Rose grinned from ear to ear. This was a surprise. She leaned forward and eagerly confided in Angie about the pale man with silver eyes. She finished with a nod. "I swear, he just seemed to float out of here and disappeared."

"So, did this stranger seem like a possible boyfriend?"

In Angie's opinion, it was high time this Rose was plucked.

Rose shook her head. "Angie! He was so strange. I was wondering if I should give him a transfusion, he was just that pale! And his eyes..." Rose hesitated, trying to pick the right words. "His eyes were silvery... metallic."

"Do you know what I think?"

"What?"

Angie reached out and tapped Rose's hand to get her attention. Her voice was stern, but her blue eyes were kind behind the thick glasses she wore. "He might have been pale, but something in him excited you."

Rose blushed. "No way!" But she remembered the way she had felt when the stranger rubbed her hand.

"Admit it! Wasn't there a spark?"

"Yes! Literally! I felt electric shock waves!"

"I knew it," Angie cried out, half spilling her coffee. "Find out from the records who he is and call him for a date."

"I can't. It isn't what you are imagining," Rose protested.

"You need some romance in your life."

"I can't call him because he didn't sign the logbook and didn't fill out any papers."

"He was supposed to. Anyone who brings in a patient needs—"

Rose cut her off, "I know that. But he just laughed and left." Rose was thoughtful. "But I must admit Galen was very exciting. I felt an electric spark when he touched me."

"His name is Galen?"

"Galen Galen," Rose confirmed.

Angie pursed her lips thoughtfully. "Galen was the name of an ancient Greek physician and philosopher. My son did a report on him for a world history class. His ideas were very respected in the ancient world."

"Well, he said he was a healer." Rose nodded her head.

This guy might be more than she and Rose had bargained for, Angie thought. Still, he might be the answer to her prayers. Besides moving to Florida, Angie had one other goal in life, and it was to see Rose set up with a romantic partner. She owed it to Rose's mother, who had been her best friend.

"I just want you to have a social life."

"I do have a social life!" Rose protested. "I'm going out with my friends tonight."

"The girls!" Angie snorted with disgust. "I don't mean your Thursday pizza night with three best friends!"

Rose giggled. "I can't imagine what my aunt would say if she met Galen. All that white, and the accent! You know how she hates foreigners."

"Your aunt is selfish... and a hypocrite."

"Hypocrite?" Rose put out her hand. "Don't say it, Angie. I owe her so much."

"Not as much as she owes you. And you need a wild night out on the town!"

"I need a date for that kind of fun," Rose sighed. The truth was, no healthy, red-blooded man came near her. Aunt Minnie had seen to that.

"When you see your chance, Rose, escape this town. Your parents loved adventure."

"But the plane crashed," Rose said dully, quoting her aunt.

"Do you know what I see?" Angie leaned forward. "I see a beautiful, petite, sexy girl with shiny black hair and lovely blue eyes wasting away in a mausoleum on "the hill". Girl, you need a male in your life, and you need to get your virgin ass out of Ridge Valley."

"Ask that alien man... to take... you," Jack Brady slurred.

Rose and Angie both jumped. They had forgotten Jack Brady slumped in the corner,

"Alien man?" Rose asked. "He wasn't an illegal from across the border..."

Jack interrupted with a belch. "I don't mean them folk. I mean a *real* alien... from the sky."

"Your brains are pickled, Jack!" Angie was forthright. Brady was her third cousin once removed.

"I know that! But I didn't walk here. I didn't crawl. That creature picked me up like I was a feather and flew me down the street and into the parking lot. I may be a drunk—"

"Not may be, you *are* a drunk," Angie said flatly.

Jack Brady looked entirely too sober.

"I don't deny that. But I know a human when I see one, and that... that... whatever it was... wasn't a human."