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CHAPTER ONE



FIGHTING THE NOVEMBER gloom, Wendy Carey winked at the gray-haired woman who sat beside her in the front seat of Wendy's station wagon. "I saw Bruno Havlecek flirting with you—with my own eyes."

"What would I want with that old fool?" Ma Ukkonen snapped.

"I think he's cute, Ma," Wendy teased. Everyone loved this woman and called her "Ma."

As Wendy turned off Highway 27, the wagon fishtailed. *Oh, Lord, keep us safe*, she silently prayed. Easing off the accelerator, she hugged the middle of the slick Wisconsin county road. The windshield wipers flicked away tiny snowflakes. She glanced at Ma. Ma's blood pressure had certainly worried her yesterday. Ma still looked worn down. Another dreary, gray morning offered no cheer. Wendy decided to go on teasing till Ma smiled. "And I love those little bow ties he wears."

With a humph, Ma folded her arms over her generous middle, padded by an outmoded wool coat. "If you keep talking like that, I'll paddle you like I did when you was little."

The older woman's blustery answer pleased Wendy. She'd get Ma to laugh before she had to leave her this morning. "You never paddled me. You fed me pancakes and maple syrup!"

Ma chuckled. "You sure could put away my pancakes. Now why are you asking about me and Bruno? I want to know who you're sweet on."

Wendy shook her head, trying to ignore the flicker of irritation this question, a frequent one, always brought. She repeated her routine answer, “Nobody around here to date.”

Ma wagged her finger. “If I was twenty-five and as good-looking as you, do you think I’d be wasting my days taking care of a bunch of sick people?”

Wendy picked up the new topic. “Nursing is all I’ve ever wanted to do.”

“I know. When you was little, you read me that book—”

“*Nurse Nancy*.” Wendy grinned with real pleasure at the memory.

“A million times. So now you’re all grown up, Nurse Wendy. Time you find you a man.”

Wendy shrugged. Back to that! *I should be used to this by now, but can’t everyone just let it go?* But she kept her voice light. “I have plenty of time for that.” She turned up Ma’s rutted drive. “Now I want you to promise me you’ll take your blood pressure medicine every day. High blood pressure is nothing to play around with.”

Ahead was Ma’s white farmhouse with its large bay window in the front. An image flashed in Wendy’s memory—a little towheaded girl looking wistfully out the bay window, waiting for her tardy mother to come and pick her up—long after all the other children had been taken home. Remembering the loneliness jabbed Wendy like a dull needle.

Ma’s voice interrupted Wendy’s thoughts. “I hope Jiggs didn’t miss me last night. He’s getting too old to be left alone.”

Wendy gave Ma a sly grin. “Jiggs is a sharp old dog. He probably entertained some old hounds he hadn’t seen in a while.”

Ma slapped Wendy’s arm. “Hush.”

Parking the car behind Ma’s house, Wendy glanced at the back door and froze. The beaten-in door hung open on one hinge. Another burglary! Dear God!

“Oh no!” Ma gasped.

Protective fear rushed through Wendy. “Stay here. I’ll—”

Heedless, Ma turned the handle and kicked open the car door. She lurched toward her house over the frozen ground.

“Ma! Wait!” Wendy raced after her. She caught up, took Ma’s arm, trying to slow her.

Ma shook her off. “Jiggs! Jiggs!” She shoved against the splintered door.

Wendy crowded close behind her. Just inside on the scuffed linoleum, the black-and-white dog lay motionless, silent.

“Jiggs! No!” Ma staggered.

Wendy threw her arm around the older woman, who slumped weakly against Wendy. Supporting Ma, she guided her through the kitchen into the living room, where she eased her onto the sofa. Wendy didn’t need her blood pressure cuff to see that Ma was in bad shape again. Her own heart quickened at the sight of the disarray around her. She took Ma’s pulse—one hundred and fifty and threadlike. Worse than yesterday. Ma tried to speak, but her words came out garbled. Suddenly Wendy’s fear became reality. Stroke!

Wendy pulled out her cell phone and ordered the ambulance. Then she quickly dialed the sheriff’s number and tersely told dispatch about this third break-in. A sick feeling settled in her stomach. Finding Jiggs like that had been a shock. She knelt beside the sofa and chafed the old woman’s icy hands. Poor Ma. Poor old Jiggs. Wendy blinked rapidly to ward off tears that wanted to fall. “Don’t worry, Ma. We’ll get you back to the clinic right away.”

The mantel clock ticked loudly in the stillness. Ma moaned on and off. Praying for the ambulance to hurry, Wendy checked Ma’s vitals and tested her limbs for weakness. All the while she tried to avoid looking at the mess that the thief had left behind. She would have gladly strangled the person responsible.

Finally she heard a siren coming up the lane. She rushed to the front door and peered out the frosted window. The sheriff’s Jeep Cherokee swerved to a stop, scattering snow-cruusted gravel against the steps. What? The sheriff? How did he beat the ambulance here?

As Sheriff Durand bounded up the steps, she threw wide the door. The cold made her gasp. He shouldered his way in, and she slammed the door behind him.

The sheriff's formidable presence drew her like shelter in a storm. She stepped near him—her cold hands clasped together. Where were the EMTs? “Did you pass the ambulance?”

He glanced around at the disarray, then laid a reassuring hand on her shoulder. “They radioed dispatch. They swerved to miss a buck.” His deep voice wrapped itself around her raw nerves. “They slid off the road south of here, but no one was hurt. They're just waiting for the wrecker to pull them out.” Nodding toward Ma, he murmured, “What's wrong with your patient?”

“I think she's having a stroke,” Wendy whispered. “The shock . . .” She collected herself and led him back to Ma. “I just brought her back from spending a night at the clinic.”

From the sofa, Ma reared up, her jumbled words sounding her distress. Wendy put an arm around her. “We've got to get her to the clinic for medication—right away!”

“I'll drive you in.” The sheriff bent to lift Ma into his arms. “Get the door, please.”

Wendy scrambled ahead of him, opening the front door, then outside, the car door. “I'll get in first. You lift her in and I'll cradle her head in my lap.”

“Fine. Fasten your seat belt first.” He eased Ma into the backseat with Wendy, then hurried to the driver's seat.

Wendy's heart beat a rat-a-tat. The roads into town were slick. The snow-splattered roadside weeds spun by the car window. Clutching Ma to her, Wendy remembered all the times Ma had wrapped her soft plump arms around her.

The sheriff glanced back at her, asking her wordlessly how Ma was doing. Her heart in her throat, Wendy looked into his ice blue eyes. Their depths—so clear and calm—steadied her. She nodded, telling him just to get them to the clinic. Ma would get the medication she needed there.

She gave Ma a gentle squeeze and prayed to get to Steadfast safely—without running into a patch of glazed ice or another buck. It was hunting season and the deer were on the move. *Lord, keep us safe.*

The miles flew past. At the outskirts of town, he radioed ahead to the clinic. At its entrance, a nurse wearing a heavy white sweater burst through the emergency-room doors, pushing a gurney ahead of her. The sheriff gently lifted Ma onto it.

Wendy slid across the seat to him. He lifted her out, too, as though she didn't weigh anything at all. His touch—or her worry—made her breathless. “Thanks, Sheriff,” she managed. Then, her feet on the ground, she hurried after Ma. She felt his gaze follow her inside.



SHERIFF RODD DURAND watched the automatic doors close behind Wendy. The young nurse's angelic, anxious face lingered in his mind. Keyed up, he felt drawn to follow her to see the end of the drama they'd just shared. Instead, he climbed into his Jeep. He had another burglary investigation to conduct and sick cattle at home.

Four miles out of town back at the Ukkonen property again, he bumped along its rutted road and pulled in, parking next to the nurse's dark station wagon. He radioed his location to dispatch, then got out.

Dread clumped in his midsection. Examining a crime scene here hit him harder than it had in Milwaukee. Here, the people who depended on him were individuals, not just the law-abiding public. As Steadfast's new sheriff, he'd expected drunkenness and disorderly conduct, petty theft, minor drug offenses, and the occasional drunk-driving case—stuff like that. He'd never expected a string of burglaries aimed at the most defenseless—the infirm, the elderly, the poor. Pathetically easy targets.

The thief—whom he'd nicknamed “the Weasel”—had used the same simple MO again—hitting the isolated house of an older person away from home.

Shivering in the brisk wind, Rodd paused next to the back door and glanced down at the footprints. The pretty nurse and her patient had trampled over the same brand-new, generic men's boot prints he'd seen twice before. The thief must have bought them just to use in the burglaries. They showed no unique wear patterns.

With his toe, he nudged the remnants of the door open and walked

into the shadowy kitchen. He stopped short, the body of an aged black-and-white mixed-breed dog blocking his way. Out of habit, Rodd knelt and felt for a pulse. But the old dog had been gone for hours.

A picture from the past flashed into his mind—Bucky, his father's hunting dog and his own first pet. How many times had he wakened and found that Bucky had become his pillow for the night?

He ruffled the shaggy fur at the dog's neck. "Poor old fella."

A sudden spurt of anger whipped through him like the icy wind outside. An old widow living all alone and now her dog killed. And all for a few lousy bucks! Rodd felt himself steaming with the callousness of it.

Then Uncle George's words came: "*Ride your anger. Don't let it ride you.*" Rodd sucked in air and rose. *You won't get away with this again, Weasel. I won't let you. This is your last job.*

With that pledge pulsing inside him, even and true, he began the first methodical examination of the crime scene, routine to him after more than ten years in law enforcement. Room by room, section by section, he viewed the upheaval—furniture upended with the bottoms slit open, old books dashed helter-skelter on the floor. Alongside the worthless bric-a-brac, expensive antiques lay shattered and scarred—one, a smashed, green-glass hurricane lamp over a hundred years old. A perp with brains might have taken this and fenced it successfully, but not the Weasel—a thief in a hurry, who took only cash. Rodd let out a sound of disgust and quit the house.

Outside, he scanned the snow-covered ground around the house and behind the precariously leaning barn looking for—there! Snowmobile tracks under the new snow.

The Weasel always traveled on a snowmobile. At the first two burglary scenes, Rodd had followed the machine's tracks, but each time the tracks had led him to a popular snowmobile trail where many snowmobiles had already crisscrossed. He'd lost the trail then, in the morass of tracks.

And using the cover of trees, this thief worked after dark. That explained the lack of leads. At night, a snowmobile was only a headlight and a roar—impossible to identify.

Icy wind whistling around his ears, Rodd stared at the bleak horizon. He went over the first two crime scenes in his mind and compared this one to them. Wearing snowmobiler's gear, complete with face mask, helmet, and gloves, meant that the thief left nothing—not even a hair—behind at the crime scenes. Rodd would supervise a couple of his new deputies in examining this latest crime scene and lifting a few latent prints, even if they wouldn't be the thief's. The experience would be good for them. He tromped back into the house.

In a kitchen drawer, he unearthed a used blue-gingham vinyl tablecloth. Kneeling, he gently wrapped the old dog inside its flannel backing, then carried him out to the barn. There, he carefully secured the long bundle up high across the open crossbeams, where it would be untouched until someone could come out and dig a grave in the frozen ground. He rested his gloved hand on the bundle. "Good-bye, old fellow," he whispered.

Back at the house, while he reinforced the splintered kitchen door to keep wild animals out, he thought of one constant that hadn't seemed significant to him until now: Wendy Carey, Harlan Carey's granddaughter. In only that scant time together, she'd caught his attention—as though he read her heart through her clear, honest eyes. He usually wasn't very attracted to women with such short hair, but her appealing face held a rare sweetness.

Suddenly his thinking cleared. He needed to talk to her, and she'd need a ride back to her car. As he headed back to town, he radioed the clinic and told them he was on his way to pick her up. He hoped she'd be able to tell him what he needed to know. But questioning a woman always put him on his guard. Raised by a father and a great-uncle, he considered women a mystery. He'd need Miss Carey's cooperation. Would he know how to get it?



WENDY WAVED GOOD-BYE to the clinic receptionist and stepped outside into subzero chill. She scurried down the snow-packed path to the

waiting sheriff's car. Her head bent against the wind, she couldn't see him until after she opened the passenger door and jumped in.

Her breathing came quickly—not merely from running in the cold. Hearing that Sheriff Durand was coming back for her had set her all on edge. She avoided looking at him directly, afraid making eye contact would rattle her even more. “Thanks for coming to take me back to my car.”

“No trouble. How is Mrs. Ukkonen?”

Taking strength from his matter-of-fact tone, she steadied her nerves. “We got her here in time. Thanks for arriving just when I needed you.” A shiver shook her. Feeling the warmth blowing from the heater, she shook off her brown parka hood and braved a glance at him.

“Just part of my job.”

Why was she feeling so fluttery all of a sudden? She never reacted like this to a man. Were her jitters due to all the anxiety over Ma? She tried to settle herself comfortably on the seat.

The sheriff started down the drive. “I need to ask you some questions.”

She nodded, fighting her awareness of the long, lean man just inches from her. His presence filled the small space, making her breathing shallow. *What's gotten into me?* She drew in a calming breath. “You have me as long as it takes to reach my car, Sheriff.”

Taking refuge in her role as nurse, she glanced at her watch. “I'm running behind. I've got quite a list of patients to visit today.”

“I just need some details for my report. After paperwork, I have cattle to take care of myself.” He drove out of the clinic parking lot.

Turning her head only slightly, Wendy studied the sheriff's profile, trying to analyze what was causing her unusual response to him. Sheriff Durand possessed good regular features, an honest face. Healthy skin and black hair. Vertical scar on his jaw. Looked like a deep one that had taken a lot of stitches to close.

Fighting the urge to trace the scar with her finger, she busied herself latching her seat belt. What was going on with her? From a distance, she'd seen him around in the few months since he'd moved

up here to take over his great-uncle's place. Each Sunday she'd noticed him at the church, where he sat in the back and left immediately after the service ended. He just hadn't struck her as anything but what he was now—the county sheriff. Not a man she'd do more than notice.

But being alone with him now, she understood the buzz of interest he'd garnered among the unmarried women in the county. She wished them luck. Stiffening her resistance, she straightened her short hair by running her fingers through it.

The sheriff glanced sideways at her, catching her looking at him. “How many visits do you do a day?”

His catching her looking at him had warmed her cheeks, but she acted as though it hadn't. She unzipped her jacket and let out a long sigh. *Great. An easy question.* “It depends. Some visits are just med checks. Some take longer, like dressing changes.”

The briefest of smiles touched his mouth. “You sound like the old-fashioned country doctor, Miss Carey.”

Wendy let herself give him a cautious half smile. “Call me Wendy. Yes, Doc calls me his eyes, ears, and feet. In a rural county like ours, we're lucky to have Doc and his grandson. Without their clinic, we'd be driving more than an hour to get care.”

She began to warm up. The uncommon flutters were calming down. Good. “Did you find any evidence at Ma's?” She relaxed against the seat, assessing him further from the corner of her eye.

He wore a khaki-and-brown, fleece-lined jacket over a starched khaki-and-brown shirt and matching slacks. A polished star on the jacket marked him as sheriff. But his self-assurance was just as evident. This was a man who took charge.

“You took Mrs. Ukkonen away from home last night?” His voice, unruffled and matter-of-fact, struck a note deep inside her, drawing her from her private observations.

She chose her words with care. “Ma's blood pressure was sky-high yesterday. Doc wanted to check her himself.”

“So she'd been away for only one night?” he asked.

The mood in the Jeep altered. This ride to her car was more than just a courtesy. Wendy shifted in her seat. Outside the window, the snow flurries had picked up—showers of white flakes dashed themselves against the windshield as though committing mass suicide.

Uneasy, she tucked one leg under her. *Where is this leading, Sheriff?* “Yes,” she said slowly. “Doc called me to take her home as my first stop today.”

He nodded. “You called in the Leo Schultz burglary, too, right?”

The mention of the second of the three burglaries puzzled her. What was he getting at? “Yes, but Leo’s nephew came to the clinic and drove him home himself that morning,” she said, carefully spelling out each fact in order, the same way she reported vitals to Old Doc. “When they found the house burglarized, the nephew called me first because Mr. Schultz looked so pale and shaky. I told the nephew I’d call your office and report it for him.”

“But you didn’t come out to help Schultz? You didn’t think he needed you?”

His question hit her wrong. What was he implying—that she’d let Mr. Schultz down? She sat up straighter. “Doc is his nearest neighbor—didn’t you know that? And that morning Doc hadn’t come into the clinic yet, so I called him to go over there. Doc could do more for Mr. Schultz’s weak heart than I could.” She lifted her chin.

“But you did take Schultz to the clinic the day before and had expected to drive him home?”

So? Is that a crime? “Yes,” she replied, keeping her tone measured in spite of her growing tension, “and I’m visiting him later today to do another checkup.”

He persisted. “You were also at Fletcher Cram’s house when the burglary was discovered, right?” His unemotional tone unnerved her.

Why was he forcing her to go back over her patients’ burglaries? Maybe they were just strangers to him, but not to her. She’d known them all her life! She blinked away tears. How could someone hurt old people like this? The crimes didn’t just rob them of cash. They robbed them of their feeling of safety in their own homes! Worrying her lower

lip, she gazed out at the snow-laden pines lining the highway. Emotion clogged her throat.

“You called that one in too,” he prompted her. “But I didn’t see you there.”

Not trusting herself, she wouldn’t look at him. “I couldn’t stay. And Mr. Cram wasn’t so ill that I couldn’t leave him.”

“But today you couldn’t leave.”

His question sounded like an accusation. It sparked her temper. “You saw Ma! Finding Jiggs like that . . .”

He nodded.

The roadside pines gave way to a harvested hayfield. Propping her arm by the window, Wendy faced away. She felt tears coming again. Poor old Jiggs. She murmured half to herself, “Only a sick person would kill a helpless old dog.”

“Yes, a nasty, little weasel.”

The unexpected but controlled anger in the sheriff’s voice caught her up short. She glanced at him. A wary silence blossomed inside the police car.

“Miss Carey, you were the one who reported all three burglaries.”

She twisted sideways and gave him a reproachful look.

“Before each burglary you took the patient to the clinic for the night; then the next morning you were supposed to be the one who brought the patient home.”

He was connecting her to these crimes! How?

“I have to ask myself—why do burglaries happen only to patients you take to the clinic one day, then take home the next?”

His question stunned her. Of all the insults she’d taken over the years, this was the first time an accusation had stung her so personally. Just whom had the sheriff been listening to—Veda McCracken?

She’d reacted to this man in a way she hadn’t reacted to anyone before, and now he was accusing her of hurting her own patients! “You think I take people to the clinic—” her voice shook—“rob their homes, then drive them back to see my handiwork?”

“No. I don’t think you have anything to do with the burglaries, but

your connection to these victims is my only lead.” His police radio crackled. “Miss Carey, there’s no reason to take this personally—”

“You connect me with three heartless crimes, and I’m not supposed to take it personally?” Outrage pulsed at her temples.

“I’m just following correct investigative procedure—”

“It’s just a coincidence,” she interrupted him.

“I don’t admit to coincidence unless I’m forced to. Now think; did you tell anyone that you’d taken these patients in and when you would be bringing them home?”

“Of course not! I don’t gossip about my patients. But this is a small town. Everyone has ears and a mouth, and they like to use them!” Unfortunately, Veda came to mind again.

He’d turned down the county road leading to Ma’s property. Wendy zipped up her parka—she couldn’t wait to get out of this car! Why had she thought the sheriff attractive? She wouldn’t let him insult her anymore!

He pulled up beside her wagon.

She unhooked her seat belt and let herself out of the Jeep. The cold hit her like an ice wall. Slamming the door, she ran to her car.

The sheriff got out and called to her, “We need to talk!”

She didn’t trust herself to look back. A tangle of emotions—hurt, anger, and fear—swirled inside her like snow flung about in a cross-current of winter wind.

He called after her, “I didn’t mean to upset you. But I have to find out what the connection between you and the burglaries is.”

The sheriff had stirred up the muddy depths of the past. And she didn’t appreciate it.

She halted and spun around. “Sheriff, you’re new here. Let me give you some words of advice. First, don’t believe everything you hear. Second, you need to get to know folks before you go around asking loaded questions. We’re not strangers here like the people you worked around in Milwaukee. Here it matters what you ask and whom you ask.”

Her tone became gritty. “But most of all, you need to know some people around here never forgive . . . or forget.”