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Edited by Lorie Popp

Designed by Kelly Bennema

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## CHAPTER ONE



KEELY TURNER INTENDED to send a clear message. So far, the pranks hadn't resulted in serious consequences, but who was behind them? And where would they end? *I'm not overreacting, am I, Lord?* She frowned. No, at tonight's school board meeting, she'd set a no-nonsense tone for the year.

The tension in her jaw finally leaked its way into her consciousness. A full day at school and now volunteering here. Flexing her jaw and neck, she realized she'd been staring at one page of the dilapidated spiral notebook lying open on the counter. The late summer sunshine glowed through the dusty windows, giving a golden cast to the Family Closet Thrift Shop, a two-bedroom bungalow that had been transformed into a snug store. Its main room, the former living room, was crammed with full shelves and rows of clothing racks. Tonight . . .

A baby toy squeaked. "Sorry, Ms. Turner," a young woman, one of Keely's former students, apologized. She tossed the faded pink bunny back into a large wicker basket full of toys.

Keely smiled and nodded, but inside she grimaced at the

narrow trend of her thoughts. *Sorry, Lord, I'm not remembering the reason for my being here.* She shut the notebook.

Dressed in a wrinkled pink blouse and worn jeans, the very young mother carried her newborn cuddled close in a denim pouch. For over an hour, Keely had tracked the girl's progress as she roamed the shop with its polished maple floors and cheery, pale yellow walls stenciled with a border of daisies.

One by one the other shoppers had made their choices and left, along with the other volunteers who staffed the charity shop, which provided help primarily for single parents. Still, the teen had continued fingering baby clothes and toys along the perimeter of the store. Until only the two of them remained. Keely had seen this pattern before—a young client awkward about asking for help.

Keely spoke quietly in the silent store. "It's almost time for me to close up for the day. Have you decided on anything?"

From behind a stack of baby blankets, the teen walked toward Keely. "I need a lot of stuff, Ms. Turner," she muttered.

A flash of memory arced through Keely's mind—this girl as a belligerent student in her high school English class, Keely's second year of teaching. This thought pulled school back into Keely's mind, but she shook it off. A young mother did need a lot of stuff—much more than baby clothes.

Keely grinned. "Babies have a way of needing things." Single motherhood had deflated this girl's trademark cockiness. The urge to wrap her arms around this child-mother drew Keely forward. *Lord, give me the right words. She's open now, needing direction, love. Don't let me waste this opportunity to slip a wedge in to keep open this breach in her defenses.* But Keely only voiced, "What did you name her?"

“Evie. She’ll be two weeks old on Friday.” A smile of pride and tenderness spread over the mother’s pinched face.

“Bring her closer.” Keely met the girl in the aisle and stroked the infant’s corn-silk, baby fine hair. “Oh, what a sweetheart,” Keely cooed.

Such perfection awed her. The wonder of creation, of new life, never palled. She bent and placed an angel-soft kiss on Evie’s pert nose. “So tiny,” she murmured. “I never get over how tiny, how perfect every little feature is.” She glanced up and smiled.

“That’s right,” the girl observed. “You never had any kids.”

The careless words slapped Keely in the heart. She caught herself and swallowed her automatic reply: *No, I’m not married*. This young mother wasn’t married either. Nearly half the Family Closet clients weren’t married.

“Not yet,” Keely said, smoothing the baby’s collar. To an eighteen-year-old girl, Keely must look well past marriage and childbearing years. After all, weren’t teachers ancient creatures who’d ridden on the backs of dinosaurs?

The round black-and-white wall clock ticked over to 6 P.M., an hour till the meeting. She needed to help this single mom and get out of the shop on time. “Come to the office.” Without waiting for a response, Keely led the way to the small kitchen in the rear that also served as an office and volunteer lounge where they wouldn’t be interrupted in case someone came in.

The nagging thought that the sheriff hadn’t returned her voice mail about tonight’s meeting bobbed to the surface of Keely’s mind again. She pushed it back down. Later.

Motioning the teen toward a nubby brown couch along the wall, Keely sat in the red-vinyl-seated chair by the chrome kitchen table piled high with clothing ready to be

priced or pressed. The peculiar and somewhat depressing scent of the thrift shop—two parts fabric softener and one part musty basement—was always more intense in here.

“Now how can the Family Closet help you?”

The girl didn't answer; she kept her gaze on the donated industrial-grade tile on the floor.

Keely waited, then prompted, “Please?”

The sound of a sob erupted, and the girl's shoulders shook.

Keely slid from her chair onto the couch beside the girl and paused. She couldn't treat the teen like that mouthy freshman she remembered. As Keely patted the baby's back through the denim carrier, she avoided the mother's eyes. “Don't worry, little sweetheart, your mama's just having a little postpartum blues.”

Gasping, the teen struggled with her tears, wiping them away with her hands.

Still not making eye contact, afraid that showing sympathy would embarrass the girl more, Keely continued to murmur to the child—knowing it was the mother who needed her comfort and more. But probably she wouldn't accept any from “Ms. Turner.”

The teen sucked in her tears. “I'm sorry. I've just been feeling blue lately.”

From the local gossip, Keely knew why the girl was feeling a little blue lately. “Now how can Family Closet help you?” she asked again gently.

“I heard you give clothes and stuff . . . if someone needs it.” The mother kept her eyes on the top of her baby's blonde head.

“That's right—if you'd like to be one of our regular clients.”

The girl looked up. “I gotta work here, right?”

“Yes, you have to take your turn helping out here at the

shop, and you have to keep your well-baby checkups at the clinic with the nurse practitioner. And you have to attend the Happy Mother's Class at the church two afternoons a month—"

The front door opened with a bang. "Hey! You ready?"

The young mother flinched. "I think that's my boyfriend. He said he'd pick me up here."

Keeping her opinion of the notorious boyfriend to herself, Keely rose and tucked a donated bag of newborn diapers under the girl's arm. She murmured a subdued thank-you and followed Keely out of the kitchen and to the front door.

"You ready to go?" the young man standing in the doorway demanded. Turning, he tossed his cigarette toward the bushes outside.

Keely motioned the teen through the exit and waved good-bye. "And congratulations," she called after them in an easy tone, "on the baby."

When she closed and locked the door, she had to shake herself. She'd been feeling a little blue lately too.



KEELY WAS LATE. Closing up the Family Closet had delayed her. The teen mother's wan face and uneasiness around her baby's father lingered in Keely's mind. Parking in the nearly empty school parking lot, she noted that no sheriff's car graced the lot and grumbled silently.

The school, built in the small town of LaFollette in the 1950s, was a solid two-story, redbrick building that looked more like a factory than a high school. Entering the glossy kelly green doors, she headed down the quiet, scuffed hallway to the student cafeteria. The long wide room's only adornments were its posters—a chart of the food pyramid

and a few in gold and green announcing upcoming football games and homecoming events.

The custodian had upended all its seventies orange-plastic chairs on the tables except for some grouped around a table near the windows. The LaFollette-Steadfast Consolidated High School monthly board meeting had waited for her.

The school board members—three men and one silver-haired woman—sat around a chipped Formica table. The same five senior citizens and the local newspaper editor, who attended every school meeting and whom Keely privately called “the watchdogs,” sat in a semicircle of uncomfortable chairs in front of the board. Everything was the same except . . . her empty stomach rumbled, giving sound to her tension.

Gus Feeney, a wiry World War II vet and chairman of the board, settled into his chair and patted her shoulder in greeting. Then the door opened, and every head turned to see who else had decided to attend. Keely’s gaze froze on the stranger who entered, her interest quickening.

A little over six feet, he was powerfully, compactly built, and he moved as though unaware of the attention focused on him. He removed his hat, revealing close-cropped tawny hair. Nearing the table, the newcomer looked directly into Keely’s eyes. His were the same shade as a June sky. Blue. Cloudless blue. Then she realized the blue eyes were assessing her—coolly and thoroughly.

As casually as she could, she sat straighter. She hoped no one else had noticed her gawking. Then it dawned on her that he wore a khaki-and-brown sheriff’s department uniform. So the sheriff hadn’t ignored her request after all. Or had he?

The officer nodded in greeting to the room in general. Then with his right hand, he swung down a chair from a

nearby tabletop in one flowing motion and sat down on it at the end of the semicircle.

Caught by this completely natural and particularly male action, Keely frowned. She looked down at the brief agenda in front of her, aware that the law officer continued to scrutinize her. She shrugged off her reaction to his arrival. She'd been expecting the sheriff—someone she knew—not this stranger. That was all.

With a side glance toward Keely that she ignored, Gus brought the meeting to order and opened discussion about whom to hire temporarily to replace a teacher who had just had a heart attack. She slid to the edge of her stiff chair and propped one elbow on the table, an attitude of attention.

But the voices around her got lost on their way to Keely. Her traitorous eyes kept shifting to the newcomer, his tanned-to-golden skin acting on her like a magnet. However, what impressed her most was his unconcern at being among strangers. Sitting easily in the uncomfortable molded plastic chair, his attention never wandered. He didn't fidget. He just waited.

The discussion of possible replacements for the teacher flowed around her. She tried to be interested, tried to oust the stranger from her mind, but failed. She glanced down at the agenda again in confusion. What gives?

After the dismally short list of possible replacements had been exhausted, Gus brought up plans for the homecoming weekend. Topic followed topic until finally the agenda had been covered and all attention turned to Keely, then to the deputy and back to Keely.

Why did she feel . . . as though she'd been overwhelmed? The man had just come to a public meeting. He hadn't said one word yet.

Gus was the last one to glance her way. "Okay, Keely, I take it by looking at you that you invited the new deputy sheriff here tonight?"



Stifling a fluttering in her stomach, Keely sent a pointed glance to the deputy and he stood up. She also rose and offered him her hand. "Deputy, we haven't met. I'm Keely Turner, the LaFollette principal."

"Deputy Burke Sloan, Ms. Turner." A large warm hand enclosed hers briefly.

His touch upset her balance again, but she only showed him a stage frown, meant to register disappointment. She had her plan and she'd stick to it. "I was expecting Sheriff Durand to come to our meeting tonight."

He betrayed no reaction to her negative comment. "Rodd has assigned me to your school—whatever help you need you'll get."

"If that's true, I'm glad you came," she said. When Sloan's blue eyes connected with hers, sparks danced through her veins. She went on with resolve. "I want to make it clear, crystal clear, that we're not going to tolerate any more mean-spirited pranks."

She paused, not knowing whether she should express more of her vague disquiet. Had this rash of pranks started because she'd assumed her new position as principal this fall? Or . . . her brother's sullen face flashed in her mind. Would he be the problem she expected him to be?

"Stuff like this happens every year," one board member said. "You're overreacting."

"Then you don't think," the seventy-something newspaper editor interjected gruffly and without preamble, "that the cheerleader's fall was an accident?"

Everyone turned to look at the man. He'd put his finger on what had ignited Keely's concern. She pursed her lips. Tonight she and the board had avoided mentioning the incident that had taken place this afternoon during cheerleading practice.

"I heard that someone dug some holes in the football

field and concealed them with sod.” Sloan’s even voice heightened rather than softened the challenge in his words. “How could that be an accident?”

“My point exactly.” She tried to match his assurance.

“Fletcher,” Gus growled, addressing the newspaperman by his first name, “you’re just trying to get a contentious headline for Monday morning. We have some smart-alecky kid doing mischief. But I think Keely’s made it clear we’re going to nip this right now. Will someone make a motion to adjourn?” he concluded.

The motion was made, seconded, and carried. The meeting broke up. The crusty newspaperman hurried out without speaking—as usual. The deputy stationed himself at the back of the room, nodding to each person as he or she left.

While Keely stalled, everyone else left. She wanted a private moment to touch base with this deputy. But first, she had to get her unusual awareness of him under control. Still, her unruly gaze refused to obey; she tracked the stranger’s every expression and move. Irritating.

She’d seen handsome men before, but this one was definitely too handsome for his own good—and Keely’s, judging by her reaction to him. Was she especially vulnerable this fall? *I’ve just weathered the first week of the school year—loud chaos as usual. That’s it.*

Finally prepared to meet him one-on-one, Keely gathered her purse and walked with him to the building’s exit.

With a polite nod, he followed her outside into the dusk. They paused under the entrance’s overhang by a redbrick pillar. “So someone dug holes right where they knew the cheerleaders would be practicing?” Sloan’s deep voice rumbled through her.

She was glad of his direct approach. It helped her focus on the topic, not him. “Yes, during their first cheer, one of

the girls jumped high and unfortunately landed in one of the hidden holes. She twisted and severely sprained her ankle." *Just as some twisted mind had hoped.*

"Not exactly a felony." He arched an eyebrow at her.

"I know, but . . ." How to put her unsubstantiated dread into words that this no-nonsense officer would credit.

He waited for her answer—not shifting, not prompting.

She made a face. "It's just that it isn't the usual kind of prank. I mean, a dead skunk left on the front seat of a car would have been unpleasant, but just . . . funny."

"This wasn't funny," he said, straight-faced but watchful.

She eyed him, wondering if he was making fun of her or trying to glean whatever grain of evidence he could from her vague reply. "No, it wasn't." She looked away, momentarily distracted by the birds that were chirping and flitting around the long-needed boughs in the nearby fir trees. "It took some thinking, and it was meant to harm not just embarrass. Embarrassing someone is the aim of most pranks. I can't really explain it better than that." She shrugged, glancing downward. The shadows from the evergreens were at their longest now. Day was nearly done.

He studied her—she felt it, a kind of stirring of her senses, a disquiet rippling through her.

"Rodd said that you've taught here for five years."

"I'm starting my sixth year at LaFollette."

"Aren't you a little young to be principal?"

"Maybe." She met his gaze without flinching or explanation. Soon enough he'd figure out how after a year as village board chair, she'd become principal. Or, at least, what everyone in the county thought.

"Did the cheerleader have any particular enemies?" Sloan asked.

"No, and how could anyone predict which cheerleader would take the fall?"

He nodded. “Do you think some former student might have a grudge against you? Want to make you look bad?”

Considering this, she worried her lower lip. “No.” *But someone could have a grudge against my family.* That was fairly common in the county.

“We’ll be patrolling your school grounds more often. And I’ll be attending most of your school functions. I would anyway. My nephew is one of your new students.”

“Well, that means he must be Nicholas Fleming?” The crickets were singing. She suddenly felt tired.

“Yes. He hasn’t gotten into trouble with you already, has he?”

“No.” Why had he asked that about his nephew? Just teasing or not? Nicholas had struck her as unhappy about being in school, but that was normal. Would she have more than just her brother to worry about? *Oh, please, I don’t need another troublemaker in my school.*

“I need to be going,” she said, cutting off the exchange. “I have to drop off a textbook at the clinic tonight for the cheerleader. Doc Erickson is keeping her overnight, pending some lab test.” She held out her hand and then regretted it when his large palm closed around hers again. She let go. His intriguing combination of businesslike manner and disturbing presence was enough for one night.

“The principal delivers books for students?” He lifted an eyebrow.

“The clinic’s on my way home.”

“I guess I’ll have to get used to this small-town friendliness. Let me walk you to your car.”

This time she raised an eyebrow at him. “Let me guess—you’re from a big city? You must be or you’d know I don’t need an escort here.”

A grin teased one corner of his mouth. "Milwaukee. And my car's parked right by yours."  
 She smiled ruefully. "Got me."



JUST AS KEELY was turning onto Highway 27 to go to the clinic for her injured cheerleader, her cell phone rang. "Keely Turner."

"Ms. Turner—" the young male voice on the line shook—"could you come? Carrie Walachek, you know, my girlfriend—"

"Who is this?" The fear in his voice put her on alert.

"Ma'am, I volunteer in the school store—"

She recognized the voice and interrupted, "What's wrong?"

"Shane gave me your cell phone number and told me to call you. I'm really scared for Carrie. This lady down the street from Carrie's trailer said I could use her phone. Carrie went inside. . . ." The teen was obviously fighting to control his emotions. "There's been a lot of shouting and—"

The line clicked.

Her pulse thudding in her head, Keely looked at the phone and then hung up. She stopped on the side of the road and snapped on her map light. Reaching into her glove compartment, she took out the student directory and located Carrie's name and address.

Resolutely, she turned her car back onto the road. Her student had sounded panicked. She'd go, assess the problem, and then call social services. She sped all the way to the edge of town where a few trailers huddled together.

When she pulled up at Carrie's address, she saw Shane Blackfeather and the teen who'd called her pounding on the trailer door, shouting Carrie's name.

Mounting dread chilled her. Keely got out and

approached the bottom of the metal steps up to the trailer. She could hear things being broken inside—ominous. She asked, “What are you two doing?”

Shane’s friend knotted his hands into fists. “This is all my fault.” He turned back to Shane. “Let’s break down the door—”

“Shane!” Keely snapped, trying to keep the two teens from making matters worse. “What’s happening?”

Shane, tall and dark, ran down to her. “We’re afraid Carrie’s dad is beating her. We can’t get him to open up—”

She held up her hand. Muffled shouts and groans came from inside the trailer, then a thud like something heavy—a body?—hitting the inside wall. This went beyond what she could handle. Her adrenaline starting, she pulled the cell phone from her purse and speed-dialed the sheriff’s department.

The trailer door burst open.

Keely dropped her phone.

“You!” the large man shouted. “Who invited you, Turner?”

“Mr. Walachek—,” she began.

“Get out of here!” Alcohol slurred his voice. “Off my property!”

Carrie appeared just behind her father. She tried to squeeze around him. But the big man pinned her under one arm.

“Mr. Walachek,” Keely spoke calmly, playing for time. Would the sheriff’s dispatcher recognize her cell phone number on the caller ID? Could they do that? “The boys called me. What seems to be the problem? Can I be of any help?”

“I told you! This ain’t your business, lady! Just ’cause you’re a Turner don’t give you the right to meddle! Get off my property—”

Carrie tried to twist out of her father's grip. The man slammed his fist into her face.

Screaming inside, Keely stooped and grabbed up her phone. *Why did I let that deputy get away so quickly!*

The teens made a rush for the girl. The father dragged his daughter inside, but he couldn't get the door shut in time. The boys rushed into the trailer—yelling.

"Get her out of there!" Keely screamed.

A police siren drowned out her voice.

Shane and his friend burst out with Carrie between them. They hustled down the steps, half carrying the girl.

"Get her into my car!" Keely shouted.

"Don't move!" Walachek bellowed at the top of the steps. "Don't move, any of you!" He held a rifle and pointed it deliberately at Keely's head.

The three teens froze halfway down the steps.

Staring into the rifle barrel, Keely couldn't draw breath.

"Mr. Walachek?" a calm voice came from behind Keely. "What seems to be the problem here?"

It was that new deputy, Burke Sloan! His voice shocked Keely out of her paralysis. She gasped for air.

"Get off my property!" the man bellowed again, the sound vibrating inside Keely, making her tremble.

"Mr. Walachek, you know I can't do that," Sloan said in a calm tone. "Not when you're pointing a weapon at Ms. Turner. I can't leave until you put that rifle away—"

"I didn't ask her to come. She's on my property. I got a right to shoot trespassers!"

"I don't want to argue with you, but if you think you can shoot Ms. Turner as a trespasser, you'll find out it won't hold up in court."

"Yeah, but if she's dead, she won't care. And it would serve her father right!" The man cursed.

"Mr. Walachek," the deputy said in the same tone he

might have used to request a weather report, “you still haven’t told me what the problem is.”

“This kid got my girl pregnant! And he’s going to marry her or—”

“This be your first grandchild?” Sloan asked.

The man stared at him. “What?”

“I said, will this be your first grandchild?”

“Yeah! What about it?”

“I just thought you might want to be around when the baby’s born.” The deputy’s tone continued matter-of-factly.

“What’s that mean?” Walachek glared and tightened his grip on his deer rifle.

“That means this is no time to be pointing guns at people.”

“Get that Turner off my property then! Her lousy father has been running this county since before I was born!”

Keely tried to block out the nasty words and the hateful tone. Her father’s high-handed actions were making matters difficult for her once again.

“I don’t see how that has anything to do with Ms. Turner. Now, Mr. Walachek, put down your rifle.”

The intoxicated man glared at Keely.

“Mr. Walachek, my Beretta’s safety is off and it’s racked. I can hit you before you can aim and fire once. This is no time to be firing guns. Your daughter is in the line of fire and she’s expecting a child. Now you wouldn’t want anything to hurt your little girl, would you?”

Keely held her breath. Walachek stared into her eyes, seeing her fear, feeding on it—she thought. But she couldn’t hide it.

“Mr. Walachek, put your gun down.” The deputy’s easy-going tone hardened to forged steel.

The drunken man’s glare turned murderous.