

## CHAPTER ONE

**AT FIRST, SHERIFF STRYKER** thought it was a bear roadside. It was well after 2 a.m. and he'd just finished defusing a domestic dispute at the Plunketts, the second one this fall. Hester hadn't wanted to press charges even after her desperate call to the department that Otis was brandishing his granddaddy's Remington, yelling that she was unfit to be his wife. He had warned Otis: One more call like this and he would have to arrest him. Otis had gotten all sheepish, hung his head and mumbled that he didn't know what got into his head sometimes.

"She just frustrates me sometimes, Spike. I mean I want a good meal in front of me, a cleaned up house, maybe a little poke now and then. Is that too much?" Otis was red in the face, watery-eyed, and Spike knew he'd been drinking. He was this close to taking him in, but he knew Otis was basically a good man, hardworking. Work was scarce for the semi-skilled, uneducated folks who lived up in the hollows. Otis was a part-timer with the Highway Department, cut back from full-time last spring, and made ends meet by picking up the odd paving job, hoping for snow removal work in the coming winter. Hester took care of their two young grandchildren while their daughter, Sissy, worked at Belks', thirty miles away.

*Some of these folks have it pretty rough*, he thought. Their roots were in the Welsh and Irish clans that had come to work the mines in the 1800s, stayed, turned to farming (some) or the trades, and intermarried (many). They were a stubborn, fiercely proud lot, loyal to kin and friends, quick to temper and suspicious of perceived outsiders. Their insular pockets in the county were the most run-down; not poor exactly, just untidy. Sheriff Stryker had shaken his head at the vehicles and parts of vehicles strewn across the Plunketts' front yard as his patrol car headlights illuminated the scene when he

finally turned into their place after the long ride up the gravel road to their ridge-top house. He could have ticketed Otis for that too, but decided it wasn't worth the ordeal of having Otis vent his anger at him for all eternity. His sort never forgets a thing, especially an affront.

"Otis, look, get to bed, it's late. Tomorrow you and Hester have a nice talk over coffee. Everything will look better in the morning." He pushed himself up heavily from the lumpy gap in the sofa into which he had sunk, and gave Otis a pat on the shoulder, Hester a wink. "I'll check in with you later this week, but I don't want to have to come out here again in the middle of the night. You got that?" He flipped his notepad closed and stuck his pen into his breast pocket. He'd have to go back to the station to write this up instead of going straight home. With a tired puff of air, he picked up his hat and positioned it carefully on his head.

"Thank you, Spike," Hester whispered, her eyes filling with tears. "I'm sorry about this."

"Don't be sorry, just work this out, 'kay? I'm countin' on you two acting like adults here." He forced a final half-smile and made his way out the door to his car. He squeezed into the driver's seat — *Jesus, gotta lose some weight* — and nosed the car back down the mountain, out of the hollow and onto the main two-lane highway that cut through the whole county. He was tired and still had a couple of hours of patrol left though he longed for bed. He sped up as though that would make time pass faster then eased off the accelerator. Deputy Talon had hit a deer a couple of weeks ago around this time and it almost totaled the vehicle — \$10,000 worth of damage and a month in the shop. Deer, raccoon, fox, and weird rodents scurried across the roads at all hours of the night. Someone's horse had even gotten out of its paddock one night and stood right in the middle of the highway. It had scared one of the weekenders coming out late on a Friday night near to death. That had been fun, trying to corner it in a neighboring field, tie it up and figure out where it belonged.

Sheriff Stryker listened to the soft crackle of police communications on his two-way radio. It was standard stuff tonight, speeders and DUR's, mostly from the state police band the next county over. He radioed his location to dispatch and noted the time. Two more hours until he could call it a night. He actually didn't mind being

out in the wee hours. He'd minded when he'd been a small-town cop, but out here in the countryside where crimes, really, were few and far between, he often relished cruising the empty roads alone, late. Now, in the early fall, leaves scuttled across the highway as periodic gusts swirled through the wayside thickets of goldenrod, thistle, and black-eyed Susans. The sound of the leaves blowing across the asphalt made the sheriff think of that Bruce Springsteen song, — *what was it?* — “Lonely Valentine” or something, where the guy’s out late, alone and driving, missing his girl. He sighed, wishing he was younger, fifty pounds lighter, had more hair. He and Pearl were happy together, but he had to admit desire was pretty much a thing of the past. Pearl was a good woman, he couldn’t complain; she’d been a real knock-out once. But first her back went, then her shoulder blade hurt and she’d gotten a little doughy in the arms — “my cafeteria lady arms,” she’d laugh. And then her neck had filled out just like her mother’s. Well, nothing to be done about it, it’s just the way things roll on. But still, it’d be nice for once to feel that old rush, that...

*What the...?* The sheriff slowed his patrol car and strained his eyes to see what his headlights illuminated at the base of a string of mailboxes affixed to wooden poles: a mound, bunched-up and blackish. Bear? A contractor’s giant-size garbage bag that took wing out of the back of a pickup? Puzzled, he rolled to a stop several feet behind the strange heap and flipped on his flashers and side light beam. It looked like something was covered up or inside some kind of dark canvas.

If this is a bear, why would someone cover it up? Illegally hunted maybe, or hit and killed, an act of empathy? It wasn’t big enough to be fully grown. Killing a bear cub wouldn’t be something you’d want everyone to know you’d done.

Spike checked his rearview, but the ribbon of road behind him disappeared in complete obscurity, threading back into the darkness of the mountains and its hollows. No one on the road at this hour. He hesitated, thinking he might call for backup. If it was just a pile of construction garbage, though, he’d look silly, wouldn’t he? If it was a bear, it was more than likely dead so there wouldn’t be any use getting a deputy over here at this time of night. Once he got back to the station to write up his visit to the Plunketts, he’d leave a note for

Ronnie Swiggert, one of the deputies pulling the early morning shift today, in case he missed him. He'd ask him to call MDOT right away and they'd pick it up, hopefully before the school buses came by.

He checked his gun but left it in its holster, felt for the flashlight attached to his waistband and left the patrol car running.

"God, I hate to see this," he muttered as he pushed open his door and slid his legs around to get out. It took two heave-hos, but he stood and clicked the door shut quietly. After all, it *might* not be dead yet. If it was a bear.

Poor guy could have been heading up the right-of-way to Ed Marconi's farm to attack his hives and gotten hit or killed somehow. Marconi'd been complaining all summer that the bears were getting into his honey and ruining his hives. Since the feds had put a stop to bear poaching in the county and the adjoining park over the past few years, the population had increased dramatically pushing them down from the mountains in search of food. Now, in the fall, they were boosting their intake for winter and getting into peoples' vegetable patches and garbage cans.

Spike shook his head. He'd never been a hunter, believed in live and let live. He knew bears could cause lots of trouble; his neighbor's cherry orchard had been devastated this year by bears. But part of him figured they were here first so what right had he to disparage the animal? 'Coons did a lot more damage anyway, digging up Pearl's bulbs, and rabbits managed to get into his garden and eat his lettuce until he spent a small fortune on fencing.

He clicked on the flashlight and took a few steps towards the dark shape a few yards away, the shoulder gravel crunching beneath his boots. He began to make out the contours of what looked like a sleeping bag. It was not a canvas or tarp but a forest-green sleeping bag, laid out there with something exposed at the top and on one side. Spike edged closer as quietly as he was able. *That definitely don't look like fur*, he thought as he moved a little closer. *Holy shit!* Spike sucked in his breath in surprise and stopped short, his pulse quickening. His eyes were now accustomed to the dark and the contrast with the brightness of the flashlight and spotlight. Protruding from a rip or tear in side of the bag was a human foot, shod in a bright yellow flip-flop. At the far end, the top of a human head was exposed. There was no sign of movement and Spike feared whoever

was inside was probably not alive.

Spike's heart was pounding as he backed away, retracing his steps, setting the flashlight on the hood of the patrol car all while not taking his eyes off the dark mass. The headlights were trained on the area and his flashers were on, but Spike felt swallowed up in the dark, black all around him, black like the inside of a burnt skillet, despite the clear, starry night and waxing moon.

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