

*Nursing a*  
**GRUDGE**



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Chris Well



BARBOUR  
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For my mother—hope it was worth the wait!

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## CAST OF CHARACTERS

**Earl Walker** has given up: on God, on the world, on himself. A resident of Candlewick Retirement Community in Mt. Hermit, Kentucky, Earl hasn't left his wheelchair since a bullet put an end to his career as a bus driver. In the years following the death of his beloved wife, Barbara, Earl has been alone. And he prefers it that way.

College student **Jenny Hutton** is determined to bring Earl out of his shell. A member of New Love Fellowship Church, Jenny sees it as her spiritual duty to reach out and help the old man see his need for God and the world.

## THE VICTIM AND THE SUSPECTS

**Dandy Anderson** has a gambling problem. How desperate was he to get out of debt?

**Sally Brouwer** has a little problem with stealing. How far would she go to keep it quiet?

**Mark Conroy** has a history with the victim that goes back some sixty years. Did they share some horrible secret?

**George Kent** was a bully who didn't care who he pushed around. But he must have pushed somebody too far. . . .

**Gloria Logan** was always fighting off unwanted advances from the victim. Just how badly did she want to be left alone?

**Ed Nelson**, managing director of Candlewick, is scrambling to engineer a cover-up. But to avoid publicity—or for some darker reason?

**Ray Stanton** was bullied for years. What was he willing to do to make it stop?



## CHAPTER ONE

Earl Walker twisted in his wheelchair and took his eyes off the small television screen long enough to point. “You missed a spot over there.”

Feather duster in hand, Jenny Hutton wrinkled her nose. “You know, Mr. Walker, I didn’t come here to dust. I’m not your maid.” She stood there awkwardly.

Earl leaned forward in his chair, rubbing his hand over his closely cropped gray hair. “You told me that you wanted to be useful.”

“No, I said I wanted *you* to be useful.” She stopped, her eyes widening. “I mean, I’m here to help you be useful. That is, I. . .” She gave up, pushing her glasses up the bridge of her nose. “Um, where did you say that dust was?”

He pointed. “Over there.”

Jenny resumed dusting. “This apartment is twice the size of my dorm room.”

Earl’s living arrangements at Candlewick Retirement Community included a living room, bedroom, kitchenette, half dining room, and bathroom.

Jenny made another attempt at conversation. “My name is

Jenny Hutton. *Jenny*. And I'll be visiting you here at Candlewick every Saturday." She scooted the small television on the dresser to the left and began moving dust around. "I'm a volunteer from my church."

She scooted the television back into place and looked at Earl again. He supposed his red flannel shirt clashed with the afghan across his knees, but he didn't bother with appearances—even for a young female visitor.

"And I appreciate it." Earl glanced over from his TV. "How about getting that behind the dresser?"

"Where?" Jenny squinted. "Oh—I didn't see that because I was standing over here." She glanced at his wheelchair, and her face turned red. "Oh! Wait! I didn't—" She went to a chair and sat. After a moment she spoke again in a soft voice. "Maybe we could just talk." She looked at his television show. "What are you watching there?"

He grunted. "It's pro wrestling. They have it on every Saturday."

Jenny watched the TV a few minutes. Then she glanced over at Earl, who quickly feigned riveted attention to the action onscreen. "How can you watch this stuff? You know it's all made up, right?"

"Of course. It's television." He pointed to the fracas on the screen. "Like this right here. The Annoyed Aztec and Joe 'Voodoo' Mortimer are having—well, let's just say—their differences."

"He hit the guy over the head with a chair."

"Like what I said: 'differences.' "

Wrinkling her brow, Jenny got up from the chair and went to the television. "Would you mind if we didn't watch this right now?" She shut off the set.

"Hey! Idol Hanz is going to be in the next match!"

“Please.”

Earl’s shoulders sagged. “Fine.”

Jenny smiled and went to the curtains, tying them back. Light burst into the room. “There! That’s better. You need sunshine—it’s got vitamin D.”

He grunted. “I don’t know if I believe that.”

“Of course it does. They did a study.”

“Pfft. That what they teach you in college?”

“Um, no. Actually, I’m studying to be a counselor.” Returning to the chair, Jenny looked at the collection of framed photographs on the coffee table. She grabbed one of them and picked it up for a closer look. “Is this you with your wife? She’s pretty.”

Earl smiled. “That’s Barbara. We were married just a few years in that picture. We were so young then.”

Jenny looked at the other frames on the table. “I don’t see any pictures of kids.”

“Barbara and I never had children.” His voice cracked. “We thought we had all the time in the world.”

Changing the subject quickly, she grabbed at a framed certificate. “What’s this for?”

“That’s a commendation. I was a metro bus driver for twenty-five years.” Earl grunted. “It was right after that I got shot in the leg.”

“I’m sorry.” Her voice was so soft Earl could barely hear it.

“You didn’t do it.”

“I’m not apologizing. I’m sympathizing.” Jenny placed the frame back. She latched onto a stapled document, which turned out to be the official newsletter of Candlewick Retirement Community. The headline across the top blared RESIDENTS GIVEN 30 DAYS. “What’s this about?”

Earl shrugged. “A state inspector came around, and I guess

Candlewick failed inspection. They say residents have a month to find another place to live.”

“What?” Jenny jerked upright. “It seems like such a nice place! How could it not be up to code?”

He shrugged again. “You’d have to take that up with the state.”

“This issue is already a couple of weeks old—do you know where you’re going yet?”

He studied the carpet. “I do not need a babysitter.”

“I’m not trying to be your babysitter. I’m just a friend.”

“I don’t need one of those, either,” Earl grumbled. He folded his hands on his lap, set his jaw, and gazed at her with stony eyes.

Jenny changed the subject again. “What do your friends here at Candlewick do?”

“I wouldn’t call them friends.”

“Okay then, your acquaintances.”

“I wouldn’t call them—”

“People. What do people here at Candlewick do?”

“We watch TV. In fact, *Wheel of Fortune* is on soon.”

“Television is no substitute for real people.” Jenny leaned forward and put a hand on his knee. “Mr. Walker. . .” At his sharp glare, she yanked her hand back. “Mr. Walker, we all need people. God made us that way.”

“I don’t know about that.”

“Here, I’ll show you.” She went to her backpack by the door, dug through it, pulled out a leather-bound Bible, and returned to her chair. “Let’s see.” Adjusting her glasses, she thumbed through the first few pages. “Ah, here! ‘It is not good for the man to be alone.’ ”

He snorted. “I’m flattered, but I don’t want to marry you.”

“I didn’t mean *that*.” Jenny blushed. “Sorry—I mean, I’m sure

you're a very nice man. But I'm not ready to—um—” She bit her lip and looked down at her Bible again. “Let's see. . .oh! Here! ‘Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work: If one falls down, his friend can help him up.’” She looked up from her Bible and beamed at Earl. “That's in Ecclesiastes.”

“Uh-huh, that's great. Look, if I let you wheel me on down to the recreation center, will you stop preaching at me?”

Jenny's face lit up. “The recreation center—that's perfect! So, I guess Candlewick residents do a lot of activities there?”

Earl's shoulders twitched. “Your guess is as good as mine.”

“You've never been?”

“I got the tour when I moved in five years ago.”

Jenny gasped. “Five years!” She got up and gripped the handles on the back of Earl's wheelchair. “Well, what are we waiting for?”

Outside the apartment, Jenny pushed the wheelchair to the end of the hall and through the glass door outside to the common garden area, a circular open area surrounded by the big Candlewick building. She stopped and breathed in the crisp air. “That smell is so sweet. What is that?”

“Honeysuckle. Barbara loved the stuff.” His voice was wistful.

“It's so peaceful out here.” Jenny looked at him. “Do you ever just come out here to contemplate God's beautiful creation?”

“I can contemplate from inside the apartment.”

“But this garden is so beautiful.”

“It could use some work over there.” Earl pointed out some of the rough patches of weeds. He turned his attention back to the girl. “Now, to make sure we're on the same page, you wheel me down there for a few minutes, say hello to a few people, and you promise to get me back here in time for *Wheel of Fortune*. Right?”

“You’ll get some fresh air, and you’ll meet some people. It’ll be great.”

“That doesn’t sound like a promise.”

Without answering, Jenny gripped the handles on the back of the wheelchair and looked around to get her bearings. “Let’s see, which way to the recreation center?”

“You promise to bring me back, right?” Earl’s voice was shaky. “Right?”

“Fine.” The young lady pushed the wheelchair toward the glass doors back into the main building. “Now, which way do we go? This place is like a maze.”

Earl pointed down one hall, and they ended up at the Candlewick library. It was a warm and inviting medium-sized room, with worn but comfortable chairs surrounding a big reading table. The shelves were chock-full of books. A selection of magazines lined one wall.

Jenny wanted to ask for directions, but Earl was adamant. “We can find it ourselves.”

“But if you don’t know where it is. . .”

He pointed down another hall. “Just go that way.”

At the chapel, they were too late for the Saturday morning service and too early for the Saturday evening service. During these middle hours the chapel was open for anyone who wanted to pray or meditate. Visitors had their choice of rickety wooden chairs.

“Nobody here,” Earl grumped. He pointed down a third hall. “That way.”

Down another hall, they reached a dead end that was the Candlewick general store. It was a small room with faded paneling along the walls.

“I really thought we had it this time,” Earl said.

“Well, I’m asking for directions.”

“Suit yourself.” Earl tapped his watchless wrist. “Just remember, we’re on a schedule.”

Despite the room’s small size, it still seemed to hit all the necessary highlights—from paper goods, greeting cards, and pre-packaged foods to clothing and toiletries. There were two men at the counter, talking. Jenny stepped around the customer and got the attention of the man behind the counter, who gave her a friendly smile. “Yes ma’am, how may I help you today?”

She pushed her glasses up on her nose. “Hello! We’re trying to find the recreation center. Can you give us directions?”

Taking a deep breath, the man scratched the back of his head. “Oh sure. Just go out this door, and hang a left—”

“No Clem,” the shopper butted in, setting his canned goods on the counter. “They want to head to the right.”

“I’m telling this, Alfred.”

“But you’re telling it wrong.”

The clerk shook his head emphatically. “No I’m not. You go out that exit there and take a left. . . .”

“Oh,” the shopper countered, “you mean that door over there. I thought you were sending them out this door over here. That’s different.”

“I know that.”

“But they can get there faster without—”

“But it’s so much easier if you just go straight through—”

Trying to follow the directions, Earl and Jenny got turned around and ended up at the computer room. Inside, two long tables were set up with privacy partitions every few feet. Each workspace

offered a computer monitor, keyboard, and mouse. Muted light from curtained windows aided the bright florescent lights. The stations were manned by Candlewick residents browsing the Internet, checking their e-mail, and updating spreadsheets.

A rich male voice from behind them asked, “May I help you folks?” Earl turned to see a young man in a striped blue shirt and tan pants.

Jenny blushed. “Yes, please, um. . .” She glanced at his nametag quickly. “Grant Caine.” She curled strands of blond hair behind her ear. “I’m Jenny. We’re trying to find the recreation center.”

“Hello, Jenny.” The young man grinned broadly at Earl. “So, is this your grandfather?”

“We’re not related.” Earl fidgeted. “Can we just get the directions and be done with it?”

Jenny made an apologetic face. “This is Earl Walker. He’s, um, on a schedule.”

Caine spoke with calm understanding. “Don’t be embarrassed, sir. A lot of our residents here have certain, um, *medical* conditions that make them have to rush home.”

Earl was mortified at the suggestion. “I’ve got a TV show to watch, young man!”

Jenny repeated the apologetic face. “He just wants to stop in at the recreation center first.”

“And he’s having trouble remembering his way around?”

“I never knew my way around!”

“Here, I’ll print you a map of the complex.” Caine went to one of the nearest computers. He clicked open a document and soon had the floor plan of Candlewick Retirement Community. “Here’s a map of the whole place.” *Click, click.* He pointed to the machine

against the wall. "It should come out there in a second."

"Thanks." Jenny smiled, twirling strands of her hair again. "This is a great computer room."

"All the equipment was donated. Not top-of-the-line, I'm afraid, but they do the job."

"So. . .does everyone have access here?"

"Sure. Mr. Walker can check his e-mail, go online, design his own personal stationery—the works." Caine led her across the room to the printer. "And this also works as a copy machine."

"So, people can just—"

"Wait." Caine squinted at the printer's digital screen. He pressed a few buttons, but nothing happened. "Weird. It was working this morning."

"Don't worry about the map," Jenny said. "We'll find it."

"Hey, I know." Caine looked at her, flashing pearly whites. "I'll show you to the recreation room myself."

Jenny's eyes lit up. "Would you?"

"Yes," Earl gushed in mock glee, "would you?" As Earl wheeled down the hall, he saw the young man and Jenny trade several amused glances.

Finally the boy led them to a large carpeted room. "Here we go, the recreation center." Caine bent to offer Earl his hand. "It was good meeting you, sir. I hope you have a great evening."

Earl grimaced and kept his hands to himself. "Same to you."

Caine flashed another grin at Jenny. "Hope to see you again soon."

She blushed. "Me, too." Jenny watched him walk away.

Earl cleared his throat and tapped his wrist again. "Tick-tock."

"Oh! Yes sir."

“Now, remember—just a few minutes, and we go back for *Wheel*, right?”

“Don’t be such a grump.” Jenny squeezed his shoulder. “What’s the worst that could happen?”