

SEE ALSO MURDER

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A MARJORIE TRUMAINE MYSTERY

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*To Carla Hall, Patrick Kanouse,
Cheryl Lenser, and Ginny Bess Munroe.*

*Without your efforts and support,
I would not have had the opportunity to
discover that I was an indexer or developed
the skills and experience to write this book.
Thank you. You opened a door that changed my life.*

*“We started dying before the snow, and like the snow,
we continued to fall.”*

—Louise Erdrich, *Tracks*

*“She must think everything out for herself with an
occasional question.”*

—Mary Petherbridge,
“Indexing as a Profession for Women,”
Good Housekeeping, 1923

CHAPTER 1

July 1964

I saw a plume of dust through the window over my desk, and something told me trouble was heading my way. We weren't expecting anyone—not that we got much company, and it was too far past planting season for it to be the new county extension agent coming to introduce himself.

I carefully marked the page proof I'd been staring at for an hour, put the lid on my shoe box full of index cards, and gave a thought to running a brush through my hair but decided I didn't have time.

Even from half a mile away, I recognized Sheriff Hilo Jenkins' battered pickup truck.

Hilo had seen me in worse shape than I was at the moment, and I knew this wasn't a social call or him checking in on Hank. The sheriff normally reserved those visits for Sundays, after church and a long nap. It tore Hilo up to see my husband bedridden, a tiny shell of the man he was before the accident, but Hilo always came anyway—rain, shine, or subzero temperatures. Sometimes, I thought, just to fill me in on the latest gossip circulating around town; to remind me that I was still alive and that there was more to my life than nursing Hank the best I could and writing indexes for books nobody in North Dakota would probably ever read.

I took my reading glasses off, stood up, stared at the pile of papers on my desk, the stack of blank index cards next to my Underwood typewriter, then at the pile of books on the floor, overflowing from the shelves. I was in the midst of writing an index to *The Forgotten Tribe of*

Africa and the Myth of Headhunter Civilizations by Sir Nigel Preston. I forced a smile. How odd was it that a farmer's wife in North Dakota would be responsible for such an important part of a book about headhunters? Life, I had decided not too long after Hank's accident, sure takes some funny turns.

With a chill rising up my spine, even though it was midsummer, I slid out of my book-filled office—a spare bedroom that was once reserved for a child who never came—as quietly as I could.

I peeked in on Hank. I could see his chest rising and falling. He slept peacefully, taking his afternoon nap. Nightmares were reserved for the middle of the night.

By the time I got to the front porch, Hilo was stepping out of his truck.

Our dog, Shep, a six-year-old border collie, didn't bother to bark at Hilo's truck. The dog knew the sound of the sheriff's engine from a mile away. Instead, Shep circled around Hilo, trying his best to herd him along to get a reward for a job well done. Shep was a good farm dog, more Hank's than mine since the two of them had spent more time together, but Shep and I had come to an agreeable understanding since the change of our fates. We'd had to rely on each other more than we ever had; he needed to obey me as well as he had obeyed Hank. And for the most part, he did.

The sky was crystal clear, blue as a freshly polished sapphire. No clouds, a little breeze, songbirds celebrating in the distance. It was about as perfect a summer day as you could ask for. Perfect weather was a rare gem.

"Hey there, Marjorie." Hilo nodded and doffed his hat quickly, exposing a bald head with a few wiry white hairs poking out on the sides. Hilo had been the sheriff of Stark County for nearly thirty years.

"I would have made some lemonade had I known you were coming," I said, stopping at the edge of the porch.

"Sorry to barge in on you. How's Hank?"

"The same." To most everyone else, except Hilo, I always responded that Hank was getting better every day. My lie comforted them, made

them feel useful. I always smiled and looked into their eyes a little longer than necessary, so they wouldn't press further. It worked about a quarter of the time.

Early in grouse season last year, Hank had slipped. The shotgun he was carrying had the safety off. He tumbled forward and the gun went off, spraying his face with bird shot, blinding him in both eyes. The blast stunned him but didn't knock him out. He staggered forward and slipped again, this time into a gopher hole. Unable to catch himself, he fell backward.

The fall was the worst part of the accident. Hank fell on a huge rock, fracturing a vertebra and snapping his spine. He couldn't move or see and he was alone, a trifecta of bad luck. It was only by pure chance that Hilo Jenkins found him before he died.

I had gotten worried and called Hilo. We met at Hank's truck and, with a few other deputies, started looking for him. I was grateful that I wasn't the one who found him. I could never have gotten that image out of my mind. Not that I hadn't seen some awful things since . . . but that was the end of one way of life and the beginning of another.

The gloom in our house seemed to extend to the rest of the world a month later when President Kennedy was shot in Dallas. I was sitting in the hospital room when Walter Cronkite made the announcement and wiped a tear from his eye. I was cried out by then. For us, the accident was the end of Hank how I knew him, how I could love him, replaced by a different Hank. One that preferred dying to living. He'd begged for death to take him a million times since *our* fateful day, since waking to find his life so altered, but the Grim Reaper had been stubborn, deaf to Hank's pleas and my guilt-ridden prayers. If there was a bright spot to the accident, it was the fact that Hank couldn't remember a thing about the fall, the pain, or the fear. His memory, like the rest of his body, had been perforated by holes that had yet to heal—and might never heal, as far as the doctors were concerned.

Hilo nodded again, his gaze lowered to the ground. "You got a minute to sit and talk, Marjorie?" There was a quiver in his voice that I'd never heard before. Not even on the day of Hank's accident.

“Sure,” I said, not moving. “Is something the matter?”

“Why don’t we just sit, Marjorie,” Hilo said. He dug into his pocket, tossed Shep a treat, and nodded his head hard to the right, signaling the dog to leave him alone.

Shep was more a reader of people, hand motions and such, than a dog who obeyed words. Another sign that he was Hank’s dog and not mine. Words were all Shep and I had. Hank used hand signals to communicate with the dog. I had never paid close enough attention to learn them all.

Shep took the treat, eased to the bottom of the steps after a quick pat on his thick-coated, black-and-white head, lay down, and enjoyed Hilo’s gift of a half-dollar-sized bone from last night’s round steak.

“I can put some coffee on,” I said. Hilo was making me nervous.

“No, that’s fine. Mighty nice of you, Marjorie, but really, I can’t stay long. I just have a question or two for you. This is police business I’m here for.”

Unsettled by the sheriff’s surprise call and uneasiness, I shook my head and sat down on the wicker settee Hank had built for me on our first wedding anniversary. We’d watched many a sunset from that spot. It seemed like so long ago—when everything was fresh and new.

Hilo leaned against the house a few inches from the front door. A sliver of white paint peeled off the frame and floated to the floor. “There isn’t an easy way to tell you this, but we found Erik Knudsen dead this morning.”

I felt the air leave my chest. That was the last thing I expected to come out of Hilo’s mouth. “An accident?” I wasn’t sure where the words came from. An automatic response.

Hilo shook his head no. “Lida, too. They were murdered sometime during the night.”

Before I could catch my breath, I asked how. It was the same question I’d asked when Hilo came to tell me he’d found Hank in the shape he was in.

You got accustomed to tragedy on the plains, isolated like we were. The Knudsens’ farm was the next one over, ten minutes as the crow flies.

Dickinson was a half-an-hour drive for us in the summer, two hours in the winter, if not more. There was usually no time to flower anything up. I had learned how to get to the point quickly from my father. Some people found it to be an annoying trait, and I'd embarrassed myself on more than one occasion by opening my mouth before I thought things through, but I just couldn't help myself. I suppose I didn't want to change. Didn't see any reason to smooth things over since I spent most of my time with my nose buried in page proofs, writing indexes, tending to Hank, and seeing to the farm the best I could.

"You sure you want to hear this?" Hilo asked. He peered inside the open door, hoping, I suppose, to catch a glimpse of Hank sleeping.

"I'll hear it sooner or later. I'd rather hear it from you so the facts'll be straight."

I gripped the arm of the settee, fending off the urge to run and put a chicken in the oven. Then I chastised myself for running through a list of ingredients, for making sure I had enough of everything in my cupboard to deliver the comfort of a daily meal. I'd always made lists. They helped me stay organized, focused in chaos. I supposed that was one of the reasons I took to writing indexes as easily as I had. Lists came to me as naturally as breathing.

I searched for a way to relieve my own fear and discomfort. I was as human as everyone else was, and I wasn't sure how I felt about Hilo's revelation at that moment.

"All right," he said. "They had their throats slit while they were asleep in bed. No sign of a struggle. Probably didn't know what happened. They had the window open, so we figure whoever did it slipped in and out unseen."

"Peter and Jaeger?"

"Asleep in their own beds. Didn't hear a thing. Thought it was odd when their mother wasn't up cooking breakfast, so they went in and checked on them."

"And they found them." I closed my eyes. The chicken didn't seem to matter any longer.

Every memory I held dear of the Knudsens flooded my mind,

and overflowed silently out of my eyes. I wiped away my tears as Hilo nodded and looked away, out over the empty paddock that reached toward the Knudsens' farm. Purple Martins dived and careened over it, feeding on mosquitoes and other insects.

Shep looked up, finished with the treat, content to lie on the ground and watch over the farm. There was concern in the dog's amber colored eyes. Usually those eyes were focused, certain of their task, but now, the dog looked like he understood every word Hilo was saying. That didn't surprise me a bit. I'd seen that look in Shep's eyes before.

"They called me right away," Hilo continued. "I guess those boys are orphans now." He looked down sadly and kicked an imaginary bit of dust off the porch.

Hilo Jenkins knew more about injustice and the meanness human beings could inflict on one another than I ever would, but it was easy to see that he was shaken to the bone by what he'd found on his plate of duties this morning. I knew him well enough to know that sooner or later he was going to get angry—mad as hell—that there was a murderer wandering around loose in his county.

Someone had set an edge of uncertainty on every human being within a hundred-mile radius, had taken peace and comfort away with an act that destroyed, and had brought terror to Stark County under Hilo Jenkins' watch. He took things like that personal.

We were simple, hardworking people. Not murderers—killers who used sharp knives and evil ways to resolve their problems. At least that was the way it had been before the Knudsens met a death that no one could have ever imagined.