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MURDER IN HAKKAS FALLS

By Janet Krokson

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Murder in Hakkas Falls



Janet Krokson

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First Edition

CHAPTER 1

Almost immediately, and for years afterward, residents of Hakkas Falls knew instinctively what was meant when someone among them referred to “the murders.” The murder spree became the new reference point in describing time in this sleepy little town, almost as the birth of Christ was for the rest of the world.

The killing began early one summer morning and continued until it had left a savage mark on nearly every citizen of the community, stealing away a grandmother, snatching a grandfather, taking away a beloved friend or parent or sibling. The killing crept into the town silently, unexpectedly, and brutally. No one could have seen it coming.

Mabel Hon bent to her laundry basket and pulled out her kitchen apron, shook it to snap out the wrinkles, and slowly straightened up, taking one of two clothespins she held between her lips. She attached a strap of the apron to her clothesline. Her thick fingers, swollen by arthritis and stained from peeling acres of potatoes and carrots and apples over the years, pulled the other clothes pin from her lips and struggled to pinch it open to attach the other apron strap.

She always hung her laundry on the line during the summer. And always on Monday – laundry day. The earlier, the better, because then she had all day to let the

clothes and sheets dry in the breeze before the sun went down. Plus, when she got an early start, she could beat Molly Ripley to the task. For decades she and her neighbor had engaged in a friendly contest to be the first to get the clothes on the line every Monday.

Today Mabel had won. Molly had yet to make an appearance in her yard, and Mabel took some satisfaction in knowing she had once again come out on top in this ongoing race to the clothesline. She glanced again between the trees to the north, hoping Molly would soon be emerging from her back door, clothes basket in hand, so she could get her laundry on the line and then wander through the path to Mabel's house for a cup of coffee and maybe a piece of the cinnamon almond coffee cake fresh from Mabel's oven that morning.

A beautiful summer morning reigned in Hakkas Falls, Wisconsin, population 1,417, give or take. A light breeze played with Mabel's silver hair and fluttered her hanging laundry. The sky was solid blue, not a cloud to be seen. The temperature was a perfect seventy-eight degrees. "This is the kind of day we struggle and suffer through winter for," Mabel thought to herself. "Yes, and after last winter, we deserve a few of these," she muttered to herself.

She bent slowly to her laundry basket and began pulling out a bath towel when a sound she could not identify reached her. She straightened up, towel limp in her hand, and turned to the stand of trees from where she thought the sound had come.

A loud, high-pitched but muffled "MMMMmmm!" as if someone were holding a hand over someone's mouth to trap a scream.

“Oooooohhh. Myyyyyyyyy. God!” someone shrieked.

Indeed, the sound had come through the stand of trees. Mabel quickly determined it had originated at Molly’s house.

“Help!” someone shouted. “Oh, my Lord, someone help me!”

Mabel dropped the towel back into the basket and tentatively turned to the well-worn path through the thin stand of trees between her yard and Molly’s. That wasn’t Molly screaming, Mabel realized. Even in distress, Molly, two years older than Mabel and, bent by osteoporosis, a foot shorter, could never have issued that kind of noise.

As she stood staring through the woods, temporarily stunned to inaction, she saw Virginia Parkinson fling open the back door and stumble into Molly’s back yard. “Help, help, oh my God, help,” she screamed.

Finally jolted into action, Mabel began a painful trek across the well-worn path, arthritis keeping her knees from bending but concern keeping her moving.

“What? What’s happening?” she shouted to Virginia. “What’s the matter?”

As if snapped from a bad dream, Virginia turned and spotted her. “Oh, Mabel,” she said, turning toward her. She staggered toward the path and flung her arms over Mabel’s shoulders, hugging her and shaking. “Oh, dear Lord, Mabel. Oh, my God.”

She removed one of her arms from Mabel’s shoulder and pointed to Molly’s back door, hand quivering. “Go look. No, don’t look. Yes, go look.”

Cautiously, Mabel guided Virginia's other arm from her shoulder and pulled free from her friend. "What am I going to see?" she asked cautiously.

Virginia shook her head and buried her face in her hands. "Just ... go ..." she told Mabel.

Venturing slowly through the back yard of Molly's little bungalow, Mabel watched the back door as she approached it, hoping, praying Molly would suddenly emerge with her basket of clothes.

By the time she reached the weather-beaten screen door, a door that had slammed an unknowable number of times during the past decades as Molly's twelve children and countless grandchildren and great-grandchildren ran in and out, Mabel was slightly out of breath. She had not come a long way, but it was further than she usually moved at a brisk pace.

She heard Virginia behind her, sniveling and coughing and whispering to herself. She couldn't decipher what she was saying.

Mabel paused, bracing herself as best she could, then pulled open the screen door. She stepped into Molly's small back porch and noticed Molly's galoshes sitting by the inside door. They were hanging with dried mud and leaves from the garden. Mabel admired that Molly still maintained a vegetable garden. She knew she herself could no longer manage one.

She ventured toward the kitchen door and carefully pulled it open, calling Molly's name as she did so. She stepped into Molly's little kitchen and immediately spotted her friend. Molly was sitting on the floor next to a kitchen

chair in a pool of blood. Her back was against the wall and her head dropped down, chin resting on her chest. Her hands pressed lightly, palms up, on the floor at each side. A piece of paper rested in one hand. Blood soaked her daisy-patterned housedress in the front, and her short little legs jutted out in front of her, casually crossed at the ankles, as if she were enjoying a glass of lemonade in a chaise lounge on a warm summer day. Like today.

Mabel noticed that two knives were missing from Molly's knife-block on the tidy counter to Mabel's left as her eyes darted around the kitchen, trying to ignore the sad bloody scene before her yet keeping one eye upon it. Molly's butcher knife was gone, and so was the one she used for slicing bread. She located the butcher knife. It was plunged to the hilt into Molly's stomach, the handle resting in Molly's thin, red lap.

"Oh, Lord," Mabel whispered to Molly, "what happened?"

She stood staring, trying wrap her mind around what she was seeing. Molly sitting on her floor ... a knife ... Molly so at peace except for the drying blood swirling around her.

She pulled herself away, suddenly aware that an attack had taken place here, and the attacker could still be lurking somewhere in the little bungalow. Slowly, she removed a third knife from the block and ventured into the bathroom adjoining the kitchen. Nothing there, but the dirty towels were still in the bin. Molly had not even begun her Monday laundry, much less had it ready to hang on the line.

She walked cautiously through the living room, glancing to the corners. No one there. Finally, she stepped

into Molly's small bedroom. Soiled laundry remained piled in a basket. No one was under the bed. No one was in the little closet. As she turned to exit the room, her eyes locked on to a runnel of blood that once flowed down the wall but had now partially dried. It emanated from Molly's 18-year-old American short-hair cat, Muffer, pinned to the wall by Molly's bread-slicing knife. The weapon had been plunged through the poor cat's stomach, and the pitiful animal hung from the wall with two paws grasping the handle, as if it had plunged the weapon into its own stomach.

"Dear, sweet Jesus," Mabel whispered. "Oh, baby cat, you poor, poor thing."

Mabel returned to the kitchen, returned the knife she had taken as a weapon to the knife block, and informed Molly she was going to get help.

Then she heard the sirens. Out on the path, Virginia had apparently pulled herself together enough to take some positive action and summon the police.

A light knock at the kitchen door. Virginia stepped in, staring into the living room as she entered, keeping her eyes straight ahead, safely averted from the scene in the kitchen.

"I stopped to pick her up for morning Mass," she told Mabel. "She didn't answer the door, so I let myself in. We usually have coffee before we go. But instead of coffee I found ... that," she said, pointing with her left hand.

Mabel stepped forward and took Virginia by the arm.

"Let's us go to Mass," she said. "The police know where to find us. And it's a good day for Mass."

CHAPTER 2

Police Chief Bert West stepped into the kitchen, his assistant chief, Ben Sorenson, close behind. "Ah, Christ," West said, taking in the scene. They stood together staring. "This is bad. Call Dahl and the guys from Chippewa," the chief instructed Sorenson.

When Virginia Parkinson had called dispatch, she had been stammering incomprehensibly, repeating only "Help, Molly Ripley ... Help, Molly Ripley" Then she abruptly hung up. Knowing how excitable Virginia could be, West was expecting maybe a cat caught in a tree.

This ... this was crazy.

As one, West and Sorenson suddenly realized a killer had been here, and ducked, drawing guns. West went left, covering the living room and bedroom. Sorenson went straight ahead to the bathroom and a second bedroom. All clear in the bathroom and living room, they reported to each other. Sorenson, back in the kitchen, heard West exclaim from the bedroom, "Oh, for crying out loud. Good God." He joined his chief in the bedroom. "All clear in here," the chief said, "except for that," pointing to Muffer pinned to the wall.

"Jesus," Sorenson said, jumping back a step.

Together, they returned to the kitchen.

"I thought it was crazy in the first place," the chief said. "But now it's even crazier. Who would do that to a harmless cat?"

Waiting for their back-up crew, West turned reflective, staring at Molly and shaking his head sadly.

"Poor old Molly. She had a tough life, and now she's had a tough death. She was such a sweet old gal. Raised all those kids by herself while her husband sat down at the WhyGoBy drinking up all their money, what little there was to start with. I don't know how she managed. No idea. I stopped by here one day, oh about 40 years ago, and she was out there in the back yard hanging up clothes on that clothesline out there. Middle of winter, snow all over the place. And she was barefoot, standing in snow shin-deep," West told Ben. "Wasn't even wearing a jacket, and it was only a couple degrees above nothing."

The young assistant cringed. "Yeah, I knew Molly too," he said. "She had an awful time walking. All crippled up. It was painful just to watch her trying to get around."

"Probably from hanging clothes barefoot in the snow," said the chief.

"Well, let's get at it," the chief sighed. "Looks pretty cut and dried from here ... pretty much the same as the Phillips woman two weeks ago. Butcher knife in the stomach. Bled to death. And someone left a note."

"She didn't have a cat, though," added Sorenson. "And the cat wasn't impaled on a knife."

Two weeks before, Sonja Phillips, age eighty-seven, had been found dead in her home, also stabbed with a knife from her own cutlery set. West and Sorenson had been

going on an assumption that her grandson, whom she had raised after her daughter, the boy's mother, had snuffed up too much coke one weekend and died of a heart attack when the boy was only five. He had been a nice little boy, but as he had grown older, he had tested Sonja almost to her breaking point. He was always out of work and needing money. And, too often, he was drunk or stoned or both.

Sonya hadn't trusted the banks. Her dad had lost all his money in the Crash of '29 and always advised her to take care of her own money. She took that advice. And two weeks ago, all her cash went missing the same night she played hostess to her own butcher knife. And West and Ben hadn't yet been able to locate the man they assumed came to that little party and went away wealthy, leaving behind his dead grandmother.

Mrs. Ripley, though, lying dead on her kitchen floor, might force them to take another look at that Phillips case, the chief thought. He and Ben both knew that two almost identical crime scenes were a situation not unlike reaching out to shake hands with an octopus. Dangerous. And it couldn't end well.

"Just when you think you have something figured out, you don't," offered Ben.

"Deep as that is, you're right," said the chief.

The county coroner and the forensics crew arrived. "This is similar to that case a couple of weeks ago," began coroner Jim Dahl, taking a cursory view of the scene before them. "Old lady, butcher knife"

“We know,” said the chief, cutting him off. “Just do your thing and let’s get this thing rolling, huh? Looks like we all have some work to do.”

CHAPTER 3

At St. Joseph's Catholic Church on Main Street, Virginia and Mabel had joined the coffee klatch in the basement after Mass. They sat at a table with long-time friends Vivian Honius and Ruth Olson. Vivian had spent what she called her "real life" as a second-grade teacher at Hakkas Falls Elementary School. She and her husband, Ted, had never had children, Vivian always claiming she had enough children at school. Ted had died twenty-five years before, when they were both fifty-seven, of a brain tumor. They'd had a three-year struggle before he finally lost his battle, but she had moved on, tougher and more opinionated than she had ever imagined being. She said she had become so "out of necessity."

Ruth, too, had spent decades teaching school. She had stayed at home with the two children she and Leonard had brought into the world, and when her youngest, Anna, had started school, Ruth had dusted off her degree in secondary education and filled in temporarily for the math teacher at Hakkas Falls High School when she went out on maternity leave. The math teacher had never come back, and Ruth had accepted the job permanently.

That was fifty years and thirty-five "Best Teacher of the Year" awards ago. Over the years, she had watched students come into her classes terrified of math and sent them away much braver, while she watched good math students become exemplary math students. They, in turn,

year after year, voted her “Best Teacher.” Ever modest and unassuming, Ruth had cried each time the award was presented to her. Thirty-five times she was flabbergasted her students that year had so honored her.

Ruth’s husband, Leonard, had fallen off a ladder while painting their house five years ago and was dead of a heart attack by the time he hit the ground. She had, of course, called an ambulance, but he was gone. Nothing could be done, the EMTs had told her when they arrived. The shock was beyond measure, but she took solace in her friends, her two children, five grandchildren, three great-grandchildren, and her former students, several of whom had stayed in touch.

The topic quite quickly became Molly. Mabel had advised Virginia to hold off mentioning the early morning events until they knew more about what had happened, but Virginia could not hold back. Still traumatized, she burst out with the news the moment their coffee cups had been filled. It hadn’t helped that Vivian had asked where Molly was – she never missed Mass, and Vivian was afraid she might have fallen at home and maybe should be checked on.

“Dead!” blurted Virginia. “She’s dead! I found her this morning when I went to pick her up. She’s dead with a butcher knife in her stomach. Mabel saw her too. She was murdered! That’s why she missed Mass!”

Mabel dropped her head as Vivian and Ruth stared blankly, first at Virginia, then at her, trying to test out this new and unexpected information.

“No,” argued Vivian, “I talked to her at ten o’clock last night. She was fine!”

"She's gone," Mabel confirmed, nodding her head sadly.

The four women went silent.

"Did you say a butcher knife?" Vivian offered meekly.

"From her own cutlery set," confirmed Mabel.

Silence again as the four women thought about that.

"So, either Ronny Phillips didn't kill Sonja two weeks ago and we have an unidentified killer running around, or Ronny's still around here somewhere and he's killed twice now," Ruth said.

"Maybe so," said Mabel. "Maybe so."

CHAPTER 4

Karen Guthrie had owned and operated the Hakkas Falls Courier for the past thirty-seven years. Two years out of college, she purchased it from Sue and Tom Meyers, a husband-and-wife newspapering team. After free-lancing for several Wisconsin and Twin Cities newspapers for two years she discovered she didn't have the proper discipline and self-motivation to support herself by free-lancing. She needed a real job with regular hours and a ready-made series of duties. Purchasing her hometown newspaper gave her that – and more – and she had thrived on the work to the point where, her friends assured her, she didn't have a life. Maybe that was true, she thought, but she had the satisfaction of knowing that she was doing what she wanted to do.

When younger, she had assumed she would someday get married and have children. Things just hadn't worked out that way, and her newspaper was, in fact, her life. But, for Karen, it was a satisfying life.

Hakkas Falls was her hometown; she had friends and many acquaintances here, and even some relatives. Her grandmother, Mabel Hon, was a big part of her daily life, particularly since Karen had lost her parents and younger brother fifteen years before. Suffering her own losses, Mabel had taken Karen by the hand and led her from bitterness and self-pity to the land of the living and thriving again after her entire family had been destroyed

by the drunken driver of a cabin cruiser who had smashed into her brother's fishing boat on Lake Hakkas, killing her brother and both parents instantly. Her entire family was gone ... gone at the hands of a bottle of whiskey.

Karen now lived with two cats, Maggy May and Della Belle, who kept her grounded and gave her someone to chat with each evening. Or at least on those rare evenings she was at home and not out covering a city council meeting, school board meeting, or other community event.

In that week's newspaper, this appeared on page one:

Hakkas Falls woman murdered in home

By Karen Guthrie

HAKKAS FALLS, WIS.— A long-time Hakkas Falls resident, Molly Ripley, 84, was found dead in her home at 312 3rd St. early Monday morning, the victim of a stab wound.

According to local police, Ripley was stabbed in the stomach with a knife from her own cutlery collection; death was due to loss of blood.

Police chief Bert West reported that, "We have precious little evidence to go on. No fingerprints were recovered from the knife – not even Molly's own – and nothing else was collected at the scene that could point us to a potential suspect."

The body was discovered by Virginia Parkinson, a friend of the victim, who had stopped by the Ripley home to pick up Ripley for morning Mass at St. Joseph's Church in Hakkas Falls.

Chief West confirmed that the murder scene resembled that of Sonja Phillips, an 87-year-old Hakkas Falls woman who was found dead in her home on Fox Street by neighbors nearly two weeks ago. She, too, had been stabbed.

A person of interest named by police in that death was the victim's grandson Ronny Phillips, whom police have been unable to locate since the murder.

The Ripley murder "gives us reason to go back and take another look at the Phillips murder under a different light," said Chief West. "It also puts new emphasis on locating Ronny Phillips so we can talk to him."

According to West, suicide was ruled out almost immediately in both cases based on forensics evidence relating to the trajectory of the knife and the strength of the thrust.

Police are continuing to interview friends and relatives of Ripley, the chief said, as the investigation continues.

West asks anyone with information about either murder or the whereabouts of Ronny Phillips to contact the police department.

"Seeing it in print makes it seem less unreal, I guess," said Ruth Olson, as she finished reading the article aloud to Mabel Hon. The two sat at Mabel's kitchen table sharing a pot of coffee.

"I just can't make any sense of this," Ruth said. "Who would want Molly dead? What could she possibly have had that someone else would have wanted? What could she

possibly have ever done that would prompt someone to come after her? She was an outright sweetheart from the word 'go'. Never had a bad word about anyone”

Mabel nodded.

“With Sonja, everyone knew she had all that money hidden somewhere in her home,” Ruth continued. “And with that grandson of hers, a person didn’t have to look too far to come up with a suspect. In a way, she was tempting fate. That kid had to have known that money was there somewhere, and as doped-up, drunk, and unemployed as he always was, it maybe was just a matter of time. But Molly? Why would someone want to kill Molly? It makes no sense.”

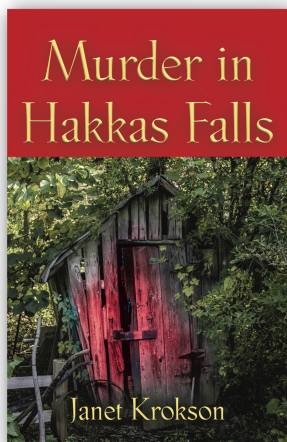
“No,” Mabel agreed, dropping her glance and shaking her head. “No, it doesn’t.”

Mabel paused. “If you can keep it to yourself, I’ll tell you something that Karen told me.” Ruth nodded encouragingly and reached for a ginger snap cookie from a plate on the table before her. From long experience, Mabel knew she could trust Ruth to keep a secret.

“Apparently, the police found notes on both Molly and Sonja. They asked Karen not to put that in the paper, so she didn’t. It’s one of those things they want to hold back as a means of separating the chaff from the grain if they ever do come up with a suspect.”

“Well, what kind of notes?” Ruth asked.

“Apparently the kind that can tie the two cases together,” Mabel said.



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