

HONOR KILLS

by Nanci Rathbun

Chapter 1

Which death is preferable to every other? The unexpected. — Julius Caesar

I parked on the street and sat for a few moments in the dark of a cold Milwaukee January night. How do you tell a woman whose husband abandoned her and their children fifty-eight months earlier that you found his obituary online? Would Marcy Wagner be relieved? I didn't think so.

When she hired me to locate him, after the Greenfield Police Department found no evidence of foul play and closed the missing persons case, I did all that any private investigator would do to find him—interviews at the middle school where he taught and with the neighbors and the police investigators, as well as repetitive online searches for credit reports, DMV and court records, and even fishing and hunting license applications. No one had anything but praise for Hank Wagner. They described him as solid, reliable, good with the kids, and particularly strong in helping those with math deficits. He was a late and only child whose parents were deceased, with no other blood relatives, so that avenue was a dead end.

Last year, I considered luring Trekkie Hank into the open with an ad for the rare Mego Star Trek Phaser Battle Game. I consulted Larry Phillips, owner of AAAA Auctioneers, for guidance on how to market the item, although I didn't actually possess one, but I didn't follow through with it. The logistical nightmares and the possibility of being sued by a fanatic Trekkie made me rethink that strategy. But at our initial meeting, Larry mentioned that he needed help at the store, which was, frankly, a disorganized mess. His wife, who was also his assistant, had walked out on him. Marcy needed work, so it seemed a natural fit. She'd been there ever since.

Although Marcy told me Hank was a good husband and loving father and his colleagues described him as reliable and well-liked by both staff and students, I considered him a weasel. How else can a man who cleaned out the family's bank accounts and left his wife with few resources to raise their three young children be viewed? But after monthly contact with Marcy—I ran searches for Hank every month and usually only charged her for one out of three—I had a fairly good reading on her. The news would hit her hard.

The cold seeped into the car. I gathered my briefcase and purse and stepped out. Greenfield was a lower- to middle-class suburb of under forty thousand on the southwest edges of Milwaukee, heavily populated by people who wanted to escape the urban school system. The bungalow-style house fit the neighborhood.

Marcy came to the door, looking cheerful. "Come in, Angie." She took my coat and we settled on a plump-cushioned sofa in the small living room. Kids' toys and books were scattered around. An older CRT-style TV sat on a small corner table. "Excuse the mess," Marcy said. "Henry had a science project to finish for school tomorrow and it was getting late, so I didn't make him pick up. And Marjorie, well, she's good at getting out of stuff. She was only a year old when Hank left. I suppose I'm too easy on her. As for poor Susie, she gets the typical middle child leftovers. I try to give her individual attention, but time gets away from me." She pushed overly-long bangs back from her forehead. "Before you tell me why you're here, would you like some decaf?" She gestured to a carafe and cups on the coffee table.

When the pouring was done, I set my cup down and removed Hank's death certificate and obituary from my briefcase. "I'm afraid I wasn't entirely honest with you earlier. I didn't want to tell you this over the phone." I took her hand in mine. "My new intern, Bobbie Russell,

ran the usual searches for Hank today. I'm sorry, Marcy. Hank died a couple of weeks ago, on December 29th, in a Stevens Point nursing home."

The color leached from her face and, as she started to tremble, I took her cup and placed it on the table. She stared at me and whispered, "He's dead? Hank is dead? How?"

I handed her the death certificate.

*Original Certificate of Death, Henry James Wagner, Male, Pronounced Dead
December 29, 2016 3:15 AM, Age 42, DOA-From Nur. Hm., Hospital or Nursing
Home-Padua Manor, Marital Status-Never Married
Manner of Death-Natural, Immediate Cause-Liver Failure, Cirrhosis
Funeral Service Licensee-Figgs Funeral Home*

"Liver failure," I said.

Marcy's eyes went wide. "Hank didn't drink or smoke. He was only forty-two. How would he get cirrhosis? And why didn't he call me? I would have helped him, even after what he did. He didn't have to die alone." She began to cry, softly at first, then louder and harder. I put my arms around her and held her until she quieted and then handed her a tissue from my purse.

With a gulp, she sat back, wiped her eyes and blew her nose. Then she took a slow sip from her coffee cup. It had to be lukewarm by now, but it seemed to steady her. "I always thought he'd come back, Angie. That, one day, he'd get in touch and come home and tell me why he left. That he'd ask to be part of the family again. That I'd let him." Her eyes held so much sadness, so much want. "He was a good husband, a good father, a good man. I never understood how he could walk out the way he did, in the middle of the day, before his classes were even over. That wasn't Hank, that wasn't the kind of man he was." She took a ragged breath. "Now I'll never know. Unless ... was there a letter?"

“I don’t know.” I took a deep breath and pointed to the marital status on the paper she held. “The death certificate lists him as ‘Never Married.’ I’ll call the nursing home and funeral director tomorrow morning.”

At that, she straightened and her head snapped up. “Never married?” She gazed back to the death certificate. When she spoke, her words were low and mournful. “So he abandoned us even in death. He didn’t want us, even then.”

I didn’t have a response to that. “Can I call someone to come and stay with you?”

“My mom hates Hank for what he did. She’ll do the ‘good riddance’ routine. I don’t want to hear that right now. You can’t live with a man, love a man, for twelve years and not feel grief when he dies.” She paused and then said, “I’ll call my older sister. She’ll come over.” Marcy stopped twisting the tissue. “And what do I tell the kids? We should probably have a funeral, for their sakes. Where is his ... body?”

“I’ll find out.” Even though she knew how to contact me, I gave her a card. People get scattered during a time of shock. I assured her that I would be available any time she needed to talk and headed back to my car.

My high-rise condo was empty when I arrived home. Wukowski and I don’t live together, but we gave each other keys in November, right after we finally got around to saying the L-word to each other. Although we didn’t see each other every night, tonight I missed having him greet me with a kiss.

After my marriage of twenty-five years ended, I dated sporadically, but never settled into a stable relationship until I met homicide detective Wenceslas Tadeusz Wukowski. Ven-chess-louse Ta-doosh. Polish names are quite common in Milwaukee, but not the Christmas carol king! Small wonder he goes by Ted. We started out as adversaries on a prior case. By the time we

admitted our attraction for each other, I'd gotten used to calling him by his last name. When I told him I didn't sleep with men unless I knew their real names, he 'fessed up. His mom, the MPD's HR people and I might be the only ones who knew the truth.

In his capacity as a Milwaukee homicide detective, Wukowski deals with violent death on a regular basis and has an almost irrational fear about women in danger. His sister was attacked and killed while in her teens—hence his mother's dread of strangers—and his partner, Liz White, was savagely murdered during a drug investigation some years ago. He and I reached a tenuous balance concerning my PI work. I don't take cases that might involve violence—none of them had, before I met Wukowski—and he respects my right to act according to my principles. Since my work generally centers on employee background checks, spouses wanting to know if their partners are unfaithful, and locating missing people when the police have given up, it isn't much of a problem.

As I headed for the bedroom to shuck my work clothes, I got a text from him: *Don't expect me tonight*. I texted him back: *Be careful out there*. It was a standard line we both said to each other. I hadn't seen much of him since Thanksgiving Day, when Wukowski was called away to investigate a body on the lakefront bike path. Since then, two other bodies were found in areas used by joggers and bikers. The *Journal Sentinel* christened it the Bike Path Murders. I promised him that I'd use the treadmill in the condo gym until the killer was found.

I brewed a cup of herbal tea and settled on the sofa, watching the lights twinkle on Lake Drive, seeing the occasional steady beam from the breakwater's edge. My ex was a cheater. Wukowski's wife left him because she couldn't handle the stress of his job and his mother's agoraphobic reliance on him. Marcy's husband simply disappeared. My intern Bobbie recently confessed that he was worried about his partner's fidelity. Examples of good marriages—even

good relationships—were few and far between, in my experience. As for Wukowski and me, it was early days. Was this a strong and steady kind of love, or one that twinkled in and out of existence like the lights along the lake shore? Time would tell. I headed for my bed and a chapter or two of the latest Louise Penny mystery.