

Chapter Two

Over on Elm Street, Hilda Marker sat at the telephone switchboard in the local office of the Mountain Telephone Company and buffed her fingernails. She was wedded to her job. Hilda's only beau, Butch Campbell, had been killed in the Civil War. Her switchboard hadn't lit up for half an hour, but Hilda knew why. Every woman in Mt. Hope lucky enough to own a telephone was at Madeline Andrews's house for the monthly meeting of the Travel Club.

Suddenly, a light came on. Hilda plugged in. "Operator."

"Stephen Andrews office, please."

Hilda recognized John Gilmore's voice. The call was short, and in a few seconds he was back on the line. "The sheriff's office, Hilda."

Why would John Gilmore want the sheriff? This time Hilda listened.

"Come out to Lil Irons right away, Koon."

"What's the matter, doc?"

"Lil's dead. You need to have a look."

Donald Koon whistled. "Foul play, you think?"

"No question."

"Have you called Steve?" Stephen Andrews was the district attorney of Seneca County.

"He's not in his office."

"Keep everyone away from the body until I get there."

John Gilmore was back on the line again.

"Hilda, do you have any idea where Ike Irons is?"

"He's in the court house with Judge Flanagan."

"Do me a favor, will you? Find him and tell him I'd like to have him come out to Lil's house as soon as possible."

"Glad to."

With one plug in the switchboard, Hilda located Ike Irons, although her hands were shaking so much she had trouble making the connection.

Foul play, she thought. Didn't that mean murder? Lillian Irons murdered. Her friends would want to know. Everyone had been so worried with Lil down with pneumonia. The Travel Club meeting was at Madeline Andrews's house, and Madeline was Lillian's best friend.

Hilda glanced at the clock. The meeting would be over any minute. She hesitated. It would take Ike some time to get to Lillian Irons' house. If the meeting broke up, Martha might go over town and be hard to find. Forewarned, her friends could plunge into cooking and baking and have time to run to the grocery store before it closed. Thinking over this sequence of events, Hilda decided she would be doing everyone a favor if she called with the news of Lillian Irons murder.

Madeline Andrews answered the phone in a barely audible voice. Hilda gathered the meeting was still going on.

"Madeline, this is Hilda." She found herself whispering and then raised her voice. "I thought you'd like to know. Lillian Irons was murdered."

Madeline screamed.

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Sheriff Donald Koon and his deputy arrived at Oakcrest and barged in, slamming the cut glass front doors hard enough to break them. Upstairs, John Gilmore heard the racket. "Up here," he yelled.

The sheriff lumbered up the stairs pulling his two hundred and fifty pounds along as fast as he could. Smitty, his deputy, a thin spare young man, trailed behind like a shadow.

John covered the body when they entered the bedroom. Sheriff Koon immediately pulled the linen sheet back down. Lillian Irons' skull was caved in on one side.

"Somebody had it in for her."

"Vicious blows. She lost a lot of blood."

"First murder in Mt. Hope in five years." Koon got down to business. "How long she been dead?"

"Impossible to determine exactly, but not too long. She was warm when I found her."

"Anything missing?" he asked, glancing around the room.

"I wouldn't know. Ike should be here any minute."

"Smitty, go call Andrews. Tell him he'd better get on out here."

"John?" Ike Irons bellowed from the downstairs hall. John met him at the bedroom door.

"Sorry to tell you, Ike. Lil was murdered."

"Murdered! I thought you were going to tell me the pneumonia came back."

John pulled down the sheet to uncover Lil's head. Ike took one look and turned away with his face twisted in revulsion. "We had our differences, but my God! I would never have wished this on her."

"Look around," Koon ordered. "Anything missing?"

Ike walked over to Lil's dressing table. "Her jewel box. She always kept it here." He indicated the spot. "Someone's made off with it."

"You're positive?" John said. "Could it be anywhere else?"

"Not likely." He pointed to the dust trace. "Wait till Martha hears this."

John began to collect his belongings in his satchel. He was anxious to leave to go to the Stein's. Five-year-old Susan was running a high fever with the measles.

"How come you were here?" Koon asked. He was writing on a pad as he talked.

"Lil's had pneumonia. I always try to check on her Wednesday afternoon when her housekeeper, Mary Hudock, is off. Mary leaves the door open for me."

"Anybody around when you came?"

"The house was quiet."

"You didn't see anyone outside?"

"Marcus Stone and his daughter were leaving as I came."

Koon stopped writing. "Leaving the house? Why didn't you say so? Marcus Stone, that fellow at the inn?"

"Don't attach any importance to it. They were looking around the neighborhood and stopped for a minute." John snapped the latch on his satchel.

"Where'd they go?"

"They're leaving on the late afternoon train. Headed for California."

Koon glanced at the ormolu clock on the fireplace mantel. He flipped his notebook shut. "Jesus, we don't have much time." Jerking his head for his deputy to follow, he rushed out of the bedroom.

"Come back here," John cried.

Sheriff Koon and Smitty thundered down the front stairs.

"Stop!" John yelled over the banister. Doors slammed. Glass rattled. John raced after them, but a shrieking Mary Hudock blocked his path on the stairs. He caught her as she banged into him.

"She's dead! She's dead! Someone killed her!" Mary screamed in John's face.

She eluded his grasp, ducked under his arm, and tore shrieking up the stairs. Mary ran into Ike, who had heard the commotion. She gave him a shove, and kept on going. John continued pell-mell in the opposite direction.

"Give me a hand, John," Ike yelled, leaning over the upstairs hall railing.

John hesitated. Koon was going off half-cocked, and he couldn't stop him even if he caught up to him so he went back up.

Mary was lying prone across Lil's sheet-covered body. Ike stood rooted at the foot of the bed, not moving a muscle, although plainly discombobulated by Lil's maid having hysterics with ear-splitting screams.

John walked over and gently touched Mary's shoulder. She lashed out, knocking his arm away with her hand.

John opened his satchel on the cushioned chair by the bed, and took out a white packet. "Get a glass of water, Ike, if you will, please. I'm going to sedate her."

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On the way into town, Donald Koon suddenly jerked the reins, and the buggy slid to a stop in the dirt in front of the Irons Lumber Company. He was thinking maybe he had taken too much on himself. Steve might not like it. He knew where his bread and butter lay. Stephen Andrews had been the district attorney for four terms, and he was probably second in power in Seneca County after Ike Irons. Koon bent over backwards to keep on good terms. He happened to know that Steve was Lil Irons' lawyer.

"Back in a minute," he said, leaping from his seat.

"Glad I got hold of you," Koon said when Steve answered the telephone in his office. "You heard yet? Lil was murdered."

"My God! John tried to get me, but I was at the courthouse. Are you sure?"

"Her head was bashed in. They were after her jewels."

"What?"

"Ike says the jewel box is missing. They made off with it. You know how valuable them jewels are."

"You think it was more than one?"

"Doc caught that fellow and his daughter leaving the house. The pair staying at the inn. I'm going after them, Steve, fast as I can. Thought I'd better have your say-so. They're leaving on the four-thirty."

"Arrest them. Hold their luggage."

"I'm on my way."

"Good work, Koon. I'll see you get a raise."

* * *

Ezra drove Jenny and Marc to the train station. He did not even try to relieve the heavy silence. Papa headed for the platform to check on their luggage. Ezra and Jenny walked into the drab waiting room. A man in denim work clothes, nursing a large valise on his lap, was the only other boarding passenger.

Ezra felt for Jenny's gloved hand and held it.

"You'll have to come visit California," Jenny said, realizing his discomfort.

Ezra shook his head. "I'd come, but I couldn't get Lizzie to travel. She's never been more than ten miles away from home."

They quietly held hands. Seconds ticked off. A train whistle sounded in the distance.

"She's on time," Ezra said, glancing up at the big clock on the station wall. They rose and met Papa on the platform. He walked ahead of them along the cars until he found the Pullman section.

"Stop!" The shout caught everyone's attention. Two men ran along the platform toward them. The man in front was beefy, and a large silver sheriff's badge glistened on his dark jacket.

"What's the matter, Koon?" Ezra called.

"Don't board that train!" He was gasping for breath. "Thought I missed you. Been in trouble if I had."

The smaller man grabbed Jenny's arm and clamped handcuffs over her wrists.

"Ouch! " Jenny screamed.

"Let go of her, Smitty." Ezra shoved hard against him. "What do you think you're doing?"

At the same time, Koon slapped handcuffs on Papa after a scuffle.

"Sheriff Donald Koon. You're under arrest for the murder of Lillian Irons."