

SEE ALSO DECEPTION

ALSO BY LARRY D. SWEAZY

See Also Murder

A Thousand Falling Crows

SEE ALSO DECEPTION

A MARJORIE TRUMAINE MYSTERY

LARRY D. SWEAZY



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To Rose

“Absence and death are the same—only that in death there is no suffering.”

—Theodore Roosevelt

“Indexing work is not recommended to those who lack an orderly mind and a capacity for taking pains. A good index is a minor work of art but it is also the product of clear thought and meticulous care.”

—Peter Farrell

CHAPTER 1

October 1964

By the fourth ring, concern started to creep into my heart and mind. Calla Eltmore had always been one of the most consistently reliable people that I'd ever known. Her enduring presence at the other end of the telephone line was a matter of expectation on my part, and Calla's, too, as far as that went. She'd been the librarian at the public library in Dickinson for as long as I could remember, and she'd always held a strict policy of answering the phone promptly. More than once, Calla had said that she could get to the phone in three rings or less from anywhere in the library, then proven that statement to be true time and time again. My growing concern was not unfounded.

With each ring I gripped the receiver and tapped my red ink pen against the wall more emphatically. If I'd had another hand I would have chewed at the tip of my reading glasses, a bad habit I'd picked up recently. My nerves had yet to calm down from the unfortunate events that had occurred over the past summer.

I wasn't really pressed for time, though I was under a strict deadline—two in fact—with another indexing project waiting in the wings, a commitment made to my editor, Richard Rothstein, in New York, without much choice. But I had a question concerning the index that I was working on. A simple question that Calla could answer for me quickly, so I could move on to something else. So, like a thousand times before, I'd made my way from my desk to the phone in search of a resource that I did not possess, a book that needed to be added to my collection but never would be. At last count, the library in Dickinson

held over twenty-one thousand volumes of text. The library had always been my salvation. The building, and Calla, had always been there for me in one way or another.

Was musk thistle a perennial plant or a biennial plant?

It was a basic question and one that I really should have known, since the noxious plant grew on our land. I could walk out my door and touch it, smell it, and feel it if I wanted to. But I'd never paid attention to its lifecycle, nor was the year of its growth mentioned anywhere in the text of the book that I was writing the index for, *Common Plants of the Western Plains: North Dakota*. It was a short book, more of a field guide than an in-depth study, and I was perplexed by the omission of such foundational information. *Perennial or a biennial plant?* How could the author, Leonard Adler, a native of Fargo, have missed such an important point about such a hated, invasive weed?

According to Mr. Adler, musk thistle had been introduced in the nineteenth century, most likely on a ship with livestock, and had spread from the eastern United States to North Dakota aggressively, replacing other native and more beneficial thistles in pastures and grasslands as it went. Farmers fought it when they had time to notice, but they mostly won the battle and lost the war.

I pulled the receiver from my ear and looked at the phone to make sure that it wasn't broken. The buzz of the unanswered rings sounded like a bee was trapped inside the black plastic earpiece. I knew better than that. Then I began to question whether I'd dialed the right number. *Of course I had*. I could have dialed the library in my sleep. But I still had to wonder. I'd been burning the candle at both ends for weeks, bouncing between the demands of the farm, my daily life tending to Hank, and writing indexes for an array of books, one right after the other. The variety of subject matter required my undue attention—common plants, travel by train in Europe, and a biography about George Armstrong Custer's wife, Elizabeth. Each new index I wrote became a journey into the unknown, an opportunity to learn, to better myself, to get paid for reading and writing, but I still had a life outside of books—whether I wanted to admit it or not.

It was obvious by the eleventh ring that Calla wasn't going to answer the phone, so I reluctantly hung up.

The tips of my fingers were cold to the bone. I had a deep urge to try and stop time, to walk out of my small house and grab at the wide blue sky that hung overhead and try to wrap it around my shoulders in a protective shawl against any bad thing that might be coming my way. I knew it was magical thinking, a childish wish, but I'd had enough tragedy to digest recently, and I could barely stand the prospect of dealing with anything else that came in the form of a dark cloud. Enough was enough.

Something is wrong. I know it.

I decided that I would just have to call back later, that the question about musk thistle would have to go unanswered for the moment. It wasn't the end of the world. I was on track to finish up the *Common Plants* index a few days early, leaving me a little extra time to dive full force into the second book that I had committed to indexing, *Zhanzheng: Five Hundred Years of Chinese War Strategy*.

Unlike the *Common Plants* book, the *Zhanzheng* title was a thick tome, four hundred pages, and I'd been given a month to complete the index. I was intimidated by the subject matter, since I didn't know a thing about China, much less its ways of war, but I was heartened by the structure of the book. At first glance at the first few page proofs I received in the mail, the book looked to have been edited well, which made all the difference in the world when it came to divining the most important terms and concepts out of such dense text and creating an index out of them.

But China would have to wait, too, just like my unanswered musk thistle question. I was almost sure that the thistle was a biennial plant once I thought about it, but *almost sure* wouldn't cut it. I had to know the *correct* answer. There was no guessing when it came to including an entry in an index. It had to be a solid fact. I needed verification of my assumption, otherwise I would risk the integrity of the index, of my livelihood, and that wasn't going to happen. I had to be just as reliable as Calla Eltmore had always been.



I pulled myself away from the phone and stopped at the bedroom door, just like I did every time I passed it. I had to make sure that Hank was all right, still breathing.

I would have preferred to be able to walk straight back to my desk and put a question mark by the biennial entry and move on to the next decision, the next question that needed to be answered for the reader, but that was not to be. The comfortably worn path of my life had been permanently altered a year ago and would never be the same again.

As I looked at Hank, I was silently relieved. *Today's not the day.* And silently sad for the same reason. Once again, death had not taken Hank gently in the night. The coming day would only bring more struggling—if only to breathe—than a good man like Hank Trumaine should ever have to endure.

I'd rested my hand on the same place on the door trim so many times that it was starting to show the wear of my presence. Smooth with hours of worry and dread, the white paint had started to fade, discolored by the labor of waiting and the acidic oils of my skin. The terrified grip of my fingers holding tight to the molding had left an unsavory mark.

I was not on a ship, but most days I needed steadying, fearful that the sway of everyday life, as it was now, would knock me off my feet and toss me overboard. I'd be lost in an endless sea of madness and fear from which there was no return. And no one to save me . . . but me.

I knew that I would never repair the door, dab fresh paint over the mar, for as long as I lived, for as long as I remained in the house. It was like the notches that marked the growth of a child as it sprang as eagerly as a weed toward adulthood. Only this was no march toward independence or a keepsake log of happy milestones. There was no hint of a child in our house; Hank and I had failed long ago at that effort. Instead, it was a march toward death, the result of a simple accident, one that had left my husband nearly unrecognizable; a withering,

fragile man, blind, paralyzed from the neck down, instead of the hale and hearty one that I had married and fallen in love with so many years before.

The wear on the trim would forever remind me of Hank's struggle to live and the sad fact that there was nothing I could do to save him or relieve him of his suffering. The truth was, he wanted to die more than he wanted to live. But leaving me and leaving this earth was out of his hands, or harder than he would have ever acknowledged out loud. I was convinced that it was only his permanent stasis, his inability to move, that had saved him from the choice of suicide.

More than once Hank had begged me to put a pillow over his face and walk away. "No one would know," he'd whisper. He was mostly right. We were isolated, miles from town, our tiny house in the middle of seven hundred flat acres of durum wheat and silage. Our nearest neighbor's farm, Erik and Lida Knudsen's place, was three miles down the road; ten minutes as the crow flew but longer for my human legs. We were connected by a path carved out over the years by their sons, Peter and Jaeger, coming to help out when they could or were needed, and by the horrible tragedy that had befallen Erik and Lida three months ago.

But I'd know. I'd know and couldn't live with myself, couldn't live with the memory of the darkest sin a human being could commit. I wasn't capable of murder. I just wasn't. I could find no mercy in honoring Hank's request.

Hank would yell and curse at me—something he'd never done before the accident—when I'd disappear from the bedroom without saying a word. He would accuse me of being selfish, only to apologize later when it was time to eat or take a bath. Both of us were afraid. It was as simple as that. Lost and afraid, incapable of living the life we'd found ourselves in, but left with no other choice but to face every day the best we could.