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ANN RULE

PRACTICE
TO
DECEIVE

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Ann Rule



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To good cops everywhere who never give up, even when they are investigating the most difficult cases imaginable. The public will never really know the overtime they put in, the emotional toll they often pay, or how much it matters to them that justice will one day be served.

Oh what a tangled web we weave
—when first we practice to deceive.

—Sir Walter Scott, *Marmion*, Canto VI, XVII

FOREWORD

THIS STORY OF MURDER has as many facets as an intricately cut diamond, far too many to see believable as either fiction or nonfiction. Either way, as the bizarre scenarios blaze a path through encounters between people who would not be expected to know one another, this saga might well seem contrived. As nonfiction—which it is—it is a murky sea of reality with myriad characters who seem larger than life. They are infinitely different from one another in personalities, lifestyles, and possible motivations.

I have wondered if their machinations can be reconstructed here in any orderly fashion. Where do I jump in and build a foundation of sentences and paragraphs strong enough to bear the weight of everything that must be told? There are no locks that my author's keys will open easily, just as there are few threads that might be woven into a pattern that makes sense.

The denouement of this baffling case took a decade. The entire story traverses fifty years. Even now, there are shadowy corners where secrets still hide.

Many innocents have died violent deaths in unlikely places. Over time, the motives behind why these particular human beings were singled out for death are more obscure.

* * *

IN THE SIXTIES, a group of authors decided to write a rather silly book where each writer penned a chapter. New additions didn't necessarily have to have anything to do with the story line that came before. The provocative title and book jacket drew potential buyers, and *Naked Came the Stranger* became a bizarre bestseller.

Some years later, I belonged to a similar social organization of a dozen or so Seattle best-selling authors. We called it the Bitch and Moan Society. It was a venue to air our disappointment, complaints, and anxieties about our profession. Eventually, we decided to write a book similar to *Naked Came the Stranger*, where we, too, took turns writing disconnected chapters.

Our manuscript, *Deadly Obsession, Possession, and Depression Revisited*, was packed with implausible plots and wacky characters. A reader could start at the beginning, the end, or the middle and none of it fit together, which isn't surprising, because each of us wrote in a different genre: romance, horror, military espionage, true crime, psychological suspense, teenage love stories, humor, and historical sagas. We never intended to publish it, which was just as well, but we all laughed hysterically when each segment was read aloud.

One of our rules demanded that we always had to "put the action on an island!"

In many ways *Practice to Deceive* has challenged me to cover murderous plots with players as diverse as our mythical *Deadly Obsession*. And, ironically, many of the nefarious plots in this book *did* take place on an island.

PART ONE



The Body in the Woods

CHAPTER ONE

WHIDBEY ISLAND, WASHINGTON, IS one of the largest islands in the continental United States, a vacation spot for some, home to sixty thousand residents, and a massive duty station for navy personnel. Ferries and the Deception Pass Bridge transport visitors and residents alike to this idyllic body of land that floats on Puget Sound with any number of passages, inlets, bays, and other waterways.

Whidbey is a study in contrasts. The sprawling Whidbey Island Naval Air Station is in the town of Oak Harbor at the northern tip of the forty-seven-mile-long island. It is the premier naval aviation installation in the Pacific Northwest and the location of all electronic attack squadrons flying the EA-6B Prowler and the EA-18G Growler. It is also home to four P-3 Orion Maritime Patrol squadrons and two Fleet Reconnaissance squadrons that fly the EP-3E Aries.

South of Oak Harbor along Highway 520, there are smaller, homier towns: Coupeville, the Island County seat, Greenbank, Langley, Freeland, and Clinton. Although supermarkets and a few modern malls have opened in the last several years, much of Whidbey Island is composed of hamlets, bucolic pastures, evergreen forests, marinas, and a good number of lavish waterfront estates built by people from the mainland.

Visiting much of Coupeville is akin to stepping back in time; the tree-shaded streets are lined with any number of restored houses more than a hundred years old.

From some island locations, there are views of Seattle rising out of a fog-smudged mist, but most of Whidbey Island is still a place to get away from the stresses of city life. With so much waterfront and so many parks, Whidbey draws tourists in every season. And it is a great place to raise a family with good schools, friendly neighbors, and a true sense of community.

A number of high school graduates move off-island as they search for a quicker-paced world, but they almost always come back for reunions and holidays to catch up with family and old friends.

There isn't a lot of crime on Whidbey; bank robbers prefer spots where they don't have to wait for a ferry to make a clean getaway. There are, of course, some sex crimes, and a murder from time to time. When law enforcement officers *do* have a homicide to investigate, it tends to be out of the ordinary, even grotesque. Island County detectives have investigated explosive cases that made headlines in Seattle, and sometimes nationwide. Colton Harris Moore, "the Barefoot Bandit," a brilliant teenage lawbreaker who went from robbing cabins to stealing airplanes and boats, began his crimes on Camano Island where he grew up—but he was tried on Whidbey Island.

Like all insular areas, Whidbey Island has active gossip chains of communication. Illicit liaisons seldom remain secret for long. There aren't many "No-Tell Motels" or discreet cocktail lounges where lovers can hope to escape prying eyes. Frankly, some of the posher restaurants and health clubs have been headquarters for swingers and "key clubs," and they aren't all that secretive. With the advent of the Internet, gossip spreads more rapidly with every year that goes by.

During the last days of 2003, the chains were buzzing. Some residents were fascinated with the violent mystery and some were just plain frightened.

CHAPTER TWO

WAHL ROAD IS ABOUT four miles from the small Whidbey Island town of Freeland, and a hodgepodge of homes and buildings line the narrow roadway. Some are sparsely furnished old cabins with few luxuries, and then there are newer cabins, upscale houses, and even a few lodges worth a million dollars or more where access to those walking to the beach is cut off by iron gates and impenetrable shrubbery. As Wahl Road wends its way parallel to the part of Puget Sound known as “Double Bluff,” it passes everything from a monastery to trailers tucked far off into the woods.

Many of the residences are getaway retreats for people who live in Seattle, Everett, or Bellingham, Washington—or even in Vancouver, British Columbia. Since many of the places are vacant during the winter months, neighbors who are full-time residents keep an eye out for strangers or any sign of suspicious activity.

Nicole Lua and a woman friend—Janet Hall—left Lua’s Wahl Road home at about three in the afternoon on the day after Christmas 2003, and headed toward the Double Bluff beach area where winter sunsets are often spectacular. There was a narrow parklike area they could access via the road or by cutting through neighbors’ yards.

It was raining and threatening to rain more, but it wasn’t that cold for December, about forty degrees, which would drop to just above freezing during the night. Many of the homes in the neighborhood had already turned on their Christmas lights, and beams and shards of color sliced through the rain and fog. As always, the day after Christmas didn’t seem nearly as joyful as the day *before* Christmas.

As the two women cut across the thickly forested property at 6665 Wahl Road, Nicole noticed a bright yellow SUV parked in a small cleared space at right angles to the dirt driveway leading back to a cabin. She knew that her neighbors who lived there—the Black family—had gone to Costa Rica for the Christmas holiday, and she was a little surprised to see a strange vehicle there. It was an idle curiosity, however, since nothing seemed to be amiss, and there was a light on in the cottage kitchen. The Blacks sometimes invited friends to stay at their vacation spot.

The two women didn’t walk near the yellow car. When they headed back from the beachfront, it was four thirty and full dark during this week of the shortest days of the year. Now they could see that the yellow Tracker was still there, and its pale dome light was on. Caution told them not to walk closer to a strange car in the dark on their own. If the car had a mechanical problem or was out of gas, the driver had probably called for help or walked up Wahl Road toward town.

They decided they would look for it the next day—if it was still there. If it was, they would call the Island County Sheriff’s Office and ask that a deputy check it out.

Before they did that, however, someone else noticed the yellow car that was almost hidden by the fir trees beside the long driveway. On the early Saturday afternoon of December 27, 2003, Joseph Doucette, who was a schoolteacher in Bellingham, Washington, left one of the cabins on the Black property with his sons to take a walk.

One of the Blacks’ sons was Doucette’s pupil, and the teacher, his wife, their two sons, and his sister had happily accepted an invitation to spend Christmas in the cozy cabin.

With all the excitement of Christmas and the somewhat close quarters of a cottage, the little boys were bouncing off the walls. Doucette rounded them up and they headed out for a hike with their dog, hoping they could get rid of some of the pent-up energy.

The Bellingham teacher saw the yellow SUV backed into a grassy spot between two fir trees. Its dome light was still on. His oldest son noticed that the passenger door was open.

“I thought I should go up and shut the door,” Doucette recalled. “To keep the battery from draining

and rain from getting in. I called out to anyone who might be in the car, but no one answered.”

With an eerie sense that there might be something really wrong, Doucette quickly led his boys back to their cabin and told them to stay inside while he checked on something. Once his sons were safely out of the way, the teacher jogged back to the SUV.

As he moved to shut the car door, he glanced in and froze in shock. There was someone inside the Tracker. The man behind the steering wheel appeared to be asleep, drunk—or perhaps even dead. Hoping he might only be imagining the worst, Joe Doucette looked closer. The silent figure appeared to be buckled into a seat belt. He saw that the man was slumped over with his head down and his fists tightly clenched.

Backing away, Doucette knew he shouldn't touch anything, and he hurried back to his cabin to call 911.

He told the Island County dispatcher that he'd noticed something that looked “like goo” coming out of the man's forehead. That led him to believe that the stranger might be dead.

Doucette had no idea who the man was or what had happened. He stayed beside the yellow vehicle waiting for the ICOM (Island Communications) operator to dispatch someone who might know how to determine that.

* * *

ISLAND COUNTY SHERIFF'S SERGEANT Rick Norrie was working the 1 P.M. to 8 P.M. shift that Saturday afternoon, the supervisor of patrol duties in the south sector of Island County. At 4:26, ICOM dispatched him to investigate a “possible death” at 6665 Wahl Road in Freeland. He arrived at the scene eight minutes later, the first of many sheriff's officers and emergency responders to head for the “unexplained/possible death.”

He didn't know what he would find. As with any call concerning a body, neither Norrie nor anyone else knew exactly what might have occurred. He could have responded to a heart attack victim, someone who had suffered an accident, to a drunk sleeping it off, or to a suicide. The latter was the most likely; the holiday season is depressing for many people, and anyone who staffs crisis lines or works in public safety knows that suicides peak around Christmas and New Year's.

To get to Wahl Road from the shopping center in Freeland, most drivers take Fish Road from Freeland's shopping center, turning left on Woodard to its end, left on Lancaster Road, and then right on Wahl. Double Bluff beach was on the same side as the address given, and Mutiny Bay was across the road beyond a row of houses there.

Sergeant Norrie drove slowly down the narrow dirt driveway. He spotted the vehicle in question and saw that it was a yellow GEO Tracker, license number 128-NXQ. As he got out of his patrol unit fifteen feet away, Norrie immediately saw that the GEO's front passenger door was open, and the dome light illuminated the front seat area. He could see a white male with short brown hair slumped over the steering wheel.

As he approached the open door, Norrie saw that the driver had apparently suffered serious head trauma. His forehead bulged with some kind of matter and large globules of blood. The man's flannel shirt was soaked with drying red stains and Norrie noted that the driver's-side door panel was also splattered with what appeared to be blood.

Still, Norrie wasn't sure yet if the man was alive and unconscious or deceased. He moved to the driver's window, which was lowered about four inches. Not really expecting a response, he spoke aloud, identifying himself as a sheriff's deputy, as he reached in to touch the silent man's right shoulder.

He felt no life at all; rigor mortis was well established, leaving the dead man frozen in his position behind the wheel.

Paramedics Darren Reid and William Brooks from Whidbey Island Fire Station 3 arrived a minute or so after Norrie did.

“I think he’s gone,” Norrie told Reid. “He’s in almost full rigor.”

Reid checked and confirmed what Norrie said.

The obvious expectation was that this violent death would prove to be a suicide.

The bleak spot in the woods was soon crowded with responders. A few minutes later, Officer Le Haugen of the Langley Police Department and Deputy Laura Price of the sheriff’s office joined Norrie. They had passed some EMT rigs and an ambulance leaving the address given, but there were no sirens. That probably meant that whoever was down the driveway was dead.

Haugen and Norrie began to seal off a crime-scene area with yellow crime-scene tape while Price started taking photographs.

She saw that the dead man was probably in his early to mid-thirties. He had sandy-blond hair, and he obviously hadn’t shaved for a few days. The coagulated mass of blood seemed to be from a wound right in the center of his forehead at the bridge of his nose. Oddly, he had fragments of blue glass in his hair. Wondering at first what they were, Laura Price found the lens from sunglasses on the passenger side resting near the seat. Then she spotted the blue frame from the sunglasses on the driver’s-side floor.

It had been a gloomy few days and she wondered why anyone would be wearing sunglasses.

She saw that rain and some tree debris had blown into the passenger side, and noticed an envelope and other mail lying on the floor there, along with cans and paper cups. She looked in the backseat of the GEO; she saw no blood—only clothing, shoes, and trash—but she couldn’t see exactly what was there because of the dim light, and she didn’t want to disturb them.

Looking through the back window, Deputy Price observed a snow sled with coats lying on top of it.

The dead man had bled heavily and his plaid shirt, crotch, and thighs were drenched with it. The seat belt had blood on it, but it wasn’t latched.

His hands were also covered with blood and the steering wheel had grip imprints from his stained fingers. Price saw that he wore white socks with flip-flops, but the left-foot sandal was missing.

Moving around the vehicle, Laura Price took many photographs with 35-millimeter film.

Once the scene was contained and preliminary photos were taken, Rick Norrie asked Haugen and Price to begin a tentative canvass of nearby houses to see if anyone had heard anything unusual coming from the Blacks’ property in the past few days.

* * *

WHEN NICOLE LUA SAW blue lights whirling atop several deputy sheriffs’ cars a few doors down, she walked over to see what was going on. She hadn’t called the sheriff after all, but now she felt a sense of dread. She had probably been correct in assuming that there was something eerie about the parked car.

Whoever the dead person was, Nicole explained that she thought the body probably had been there the day before, too. She and her friend had noticed the SUV there almost exactly twenty-four hours earlier. It didn’t belong to anyone that she knew on Wahl Road, nor had she seen it before.

Who *was* the dead man? And why had he ended up in a small parking area off a narrow road that was shadowed by towering trees? No one driving by on Wahl Road would have seen the yellow Tracker. It seemed that he, or someone else perhaps, had chosen this hidden spot for just that reason.

The vehicle’s glove box was open. Later, neither officer could recall which of them had opened it. With extreme care, they removed the vehicle’s registration that lay on top of papers there. With a flashlight, they looked at the registered owner’s name.

It read Russel Douglas, age thirty-three, with an address at the Mission Ridge Apartments

Renton, Washington, a city southeast of Seattle. Norrie wondered what could have been so bad that man this young would have shot himself.

It would take a postmortem exam to be sure, but it appeared that Douglas had sustained only the one wound—right in the middle of his forehead, just above the bridge of his nose. The bullet must have penetrated his sunglasses at that point, sending the broken glass all over.

Norrie noted a shell casing between the driver's seat and the door. It looked to be from a .38 caliber bullet. The bronze casing would at least tell them what kind of gun they were looking for, although it was unlikely they would find it in the dark, even with the mass of auxiliary lighting the sheriff's department was bringing in.

In the driver's door itself, he saw a green and yellow sealed box of 30/30 caliber rounds. Maybe there were two weapons. Norrie didn't open the box, but waited for detectives to arrive.

He did, however, continue to look for a gun that had fired the fatal shot into Russel's forehead.

He couldn't find it. Depending on the ejection recoil pattern, it might be in the dark rear seat of the Tracker, or it might even have flown out the passenger door, only to be swallowed up in the undergrowth of salal, sword ferns, kinnikinnick, and huckleberries.

Rick Norrie called Island County's detective commander, Sergeant Mike Beech, advising that he was standing by on what appeared to be a suicide. He asked that one of the county's detectives respond, as well as County Coroner Robert Bishop.

At 5:35 P.M., Detective Mike Birchfield pulled up to the scene and the death investigation was turned over to him. Less than an hour had passed since Sergeant Norrie first arrived at the death scene, but it seemed so much longer.

Soon, the pullout beside the driveway was almost as bright as day as the auxiliary lighting showed up and was turned on.

Lieutenant Harry Uncapher, an evidence technician, and Deputy Scott Davis joined the investigators working in the rain. Uncapher bagged the shell casing, papers, documents, and everything that might become vital physical evidence, and he sealed and labeled everything so the chain of evidence would be sacrosanct. He recovered a Nextel cell phone from the left visor, a black fanny pack with a checkbook, more personal papers, and identification documents.

Scott Davis took measurements to triangulate points that would show the precise spot where the Tracker sat. Later, he would draw the scene to scale.

Detective Birchfield asked Rick Norrie and Leif Haugen to extend the crime scene by roping off both an inner and outer circle around the Tracker to be sure that no one could accidentally step on items of possible evidence. He asked Laura Price to start a log that would show the names of anyone who might come inside the tapes, along with the times they arrived.

This wasn't the first unattended death any of the officers had encountered, but it was still shocking. The sheer amount of blood on the dead man and in his car was appalling.

Detective Mark Plumberg, who was even more of a detail man than Birchfield, arrived at the scene. He had never had occasion to go to Wahl Road before. The two seasoned investigators would work this strange case together, although Birchfield would be the lead investigator in the beginning. They had no idea just how long the trail would be before they found out the baffling story behind the body in the woods.

It was probably better that they could not see what lay ahead, how long it would take to solve the puzzle of Russel Douglas's death, or the tragedies the future would bring.

Indeed, one of them would not live to see the final denouement.

The two detectives saw that the Tracker's keys were still in the ignition. They measured the driver's window and saw it was lowered by 6.5 inches. Although it had been unhooked, the driver's seat belt was still partially wound around his torso. It looked as if the dead man had rolled down his window

to speak to someone. He might have been in the process of removing his seat belt before getting out of the car. More likely, Plumberg felt, someone had unbuckled the belt after he was shot.

Rick Norrie said he had looked for the gun to no avail. As they searched for the missing gun and failed to find it, Birchfield and Plumberg regretted that any of the first patrol officers on the scene had touched the yellow SUV. Although the sodden grass around the car probably wouldn't have given up much in the way of footprints, they would never know, because several people had walked there by now.

And it was definitely beginning to look as if this might not be a suicide after all. Unless they found the gun within a reasonable distance from the Tracker, this could very well turn out to be a homicide. People who shoot themselves in the forehead cannot then fling the weapon many feet away.

Experienced detectives know that the manner of death should be viewed first as homicide, second as suicide, then accidental, natural, and finally, as undetermined. Because this had seemed to scream suicide, the scene wasn't as untouched as Birchfield and Plumberg would have liked.

Mark Plumberg remembers standing on the edge of Wahl Road, and looking all around him. Something niggled at him.

"I saw how deserted it was. Totally out of easy access except for the few families who lived there in the winter. I said to myself 'This is ridiculous! Why would the victim have come way out here—he had to have been lured out here by someone.'

"Mike Birchfield said he had that sense from the beginning, too."

Even on that first night, Mark Plumberg was curious about something he noted. A small, partially coagulated pool of blood was next to the dead man's hand, and that hand would have been directly below the gunshot wound on the bridge of his nose. It seemed to him that that odd stain should still have been on the victim's hand if he had remained in the same position since the time of the shooting.

"But it wasn't," Plumberg said. "I thought then—and I still do—that someone had attempted to move the body for some reason—possibly looking for the bullet casing. That made me doubt even more that we were looking at a suicide."

Still, working with only artificial light, the two detectives couldn't say for sure where the casing was.

They would have to look for it in the morning.

PART TWO

Russ and Brenna

CHAPTER THREE

CORONER DR. ROBERT BISHOP released the body and it was taken to Burley's Funeral Chapel to await an autopsy. The Tracker would be towed to the Island County Criminal Justice Center to be stored in a locked storage port until the Washington State Patrol Crime Lab criminalists could process it.

It was after ten when Mark Plumberg and Mike Birchfield cleared the scene, leaving reserve deputies Bill Carpenter and Jay Geiler to provide security in case anyone—a killer or merely someone curious—should try to get inside the crime-scene tapes.

The detective team had their suspicions and their gut reactions, but the probe was embryonic at that point; the two uniformed officers who had done the initial canvass of nearby houses *had* located one possible witness who sounded as if she had seen the dead man's car the day before.

Diane Bailey, who lived a short distance from the Blacks' property where Russel Douglas was shot, gave a statement about a "boxy, small, bright yellow SUV" that was driving west along Wahl Road, as if the driver was searching for an address. That had been sometime between 11:30 A.M. and 1 P.M. on the twenty-sixth. She hadn't paid that much attention to it until she saw the same vehicle backing out of her own driveway.

"It looked as though he'd seen my red Volvo parked there and realized he had the wrong address," she said.

Ms. Bailey hadn't had a clear view of the driver, but her recall did help to place the Tracker in the Double Bluff neighborhood sometime around noon on Friday.

* * *

MARK PLUMBERG AND MIKE BIRCHFIELD weren't through for the night. They still faced one of the tasks that any cop hates— notifying the deceased's next of kin. There is no easy way to break such awful news; police know that they will hear sobs and see tears or the shocked, frozen reaction on the faces of those the dead have loved and who have loved them.

Mike Birchfield knew of Russel Douglas; his wife, Brenna Douglas, had babysat with the detective's children. Several deputies' wives went to her beauty shop—Just B's—to have her do their hair. That was one semilucky thing for the detectives; most residents on Whidbey Island knew each other, or they had mutual acquaintances.

And then there was the gossip line that they knew would begin beating jungle drums with both solid and mythical information within hours. They had to find Brenna soon and tell her what had happened before someone called her and bluntly gave her the news that her husband was dead of a gunshot wound to the head.

Russel Douglas might have been living in an apartment off-island, but his driver's license gave his address on Furman Avenue in the Whidbey Island town of Langley. Mike Birchfield knew that that was Brenna's current address. There had been rumors for months that Russel and Brenna were estranged and living apart; that could explain why Douglas had two addresses.

But they weren't divorced.

* * *

IT WAS ABOUT A quarter after ten when Mike Birchfield and Mark Plumberg pulled into the driveway of Brenna Douglas's home in Langley. There was a maroon van parked in the driveway, but there were no lights on in the house. Plumberg stayed back in the yard while Birchfield approached the front door. A large dog was in the yard, barking at him.

Birchfield shone his flashlight through the living room window, and saw a woman in a robe walking toward the front door.

“That’s Brenna,” Birchfield said.

She opened the door without hesitation. Squinting in the porch light, she asked, “Can I help you?”

Mike Birchfield showed her his identification as a sheriff’s detective and introduced her Plumberg. As they walked into the living room, it appeared that she was ready for bed.

“Could you talk to us?” Plumberg asked, wondering why she would open the door so readily when she saw two strange men in her yard.

“Come on in,” she said, opening the door wider. “What’s going on?”

“We want to talk with you about your husband,” Mike Birchfield said as they walked in. They stood awkwardly for a minute or two before he gestured toward the dining room: “Could we sit down at the table?”

Brenna Douglas seemed at ease as she led them toward the dining room. She asked no questions. Mark Plumberg pulled out a legal pad. He would take notes while Birchfield interviewed Brenna Douglas.

As they passed a chair near the front door, he saw a note on lined tablet paper there. It was addressed to “Russ,” and read: “The kids and I went out and we’ll be back later.”

It was a strange tableau. Even though it was fairly late at night and there were two detectives sitting with her, Brenna showed no curiosity about why they were there.

Birchfield began easily, asking about Russel Douglas’s hobbies, habits, and how her relationship with him was going. She answered with a tumble of words, and the sheriff’s men noted that she often spoke negatively of her husband.

“When did you see your husband last?” Birchfield asked.

“It was before noon yesterday,” Brenna Douglas said. “I called him several times on his cell phone yesterday—but he didn’t answer. I slept with my phone beside me, but he never called. I know he planned to go surfing.”

That didn’t seem strange. Mark Plumberg was a scuba diver himself, and he knew that the water surrounding Whidbey Island drew surfers and divers any time of year as long as they had adequate protection from the cold. He wondered if she was concerned that Russel might have drowned—disappeared in the dark water.

Brenna explained that she and Russel were still married, but that they had separated seven months before and he was living in Renton. Christmas weekend also happened to be his time to see their two children—Jack, eight, and Hannah, five.

Her words continued to burst out, almost as if she was trying to delay learning whatever the two detectives were there to tell her. Even so, she had little positive to say about Russel. She said they were separated because Russel had had a couple of affairs, one of them homosexual.

“I just couldn’t accept his deviant lifestyle,” Brenna said.

According to his wife, Russel Douglas had been cruel and brutally open about sharing that lifestyle with her. She knew about an older woman who lived in Tacoma, Washington, twenty-six miles south of Seattle.

“Her first name is Fran* and she’s around fifty years old. I think she works for a telecom company. Russel sometimes tries to tell me about how he parties and has sex with her. I think he does that just to get to me . . .”

“Where do you think he is now?” Birchfield asked. “What do you think has happened to him?”

“I don’t know. I talked to him on Christmas Day and he told me he had a promotion at work. He was happy about that.

“I talked to his sister, Holly Hunziker, the next day; she lives in Everett. She and I are good friends

and I wanted to take her a birthday present because her birthday's so close to Christmas, and she kind of gets left out. She said she was going out, so we just spoke on the phone. Then the kids and I went shopping and to see a movie—*Hook*.”

Still, Brenna Douglas didn't ask why they were there close to 11 P.M., wanting to talk about her husband.

Mike Birchfield asked about Russel's friends and who his doctor was. She said she didn't know. She had no idea who his friends were. He might have friends at his job, but she didn't know any of them. If he knew anyone on Whidbey Island, he would have had to meet them through her. She stressed the point over and over. Russel had no friends on the island unless it was someone he might have met because *she* had many friends.

“Are you surprised that we're here tonight?” Birchfield finally asked bluntly.

“Yes . . . and no. I don't know where he is. He just came back into my life a couple of weeks ago.”

Brenna didn't seem to be very happy about that. She described Russel as very controlling, a man who cheated on her callously and mentally “abused” her.

“Is he physically abusive?”

“Not so much, but he does—did—some pushing.”

“Does Russel own any firearms?”

“A .22 rifle, and some knives,” she said. “No handguns.”

“Do you own any guns?”

Brenna Douglas didn't blink or seem frightened by this line of questioning. “I have a .22 caliber pistol.”

“Could we see it?”

She walked to her bedroom and came back with the pistol. She explained that her home had been burglarized recently, and she thought it might have been Russel who broke in. She didn't say why she thought that.

“My stepfather gave me this gun after that happened. I only fired it once.”

The two detectives exchanged a glance. They had been in the house for almost half an hour, and Brenna had yet to ask them why they were there, or why they were asking about her husband.

Her behavior wasn't as uncommon as it might seem on the surface; some people, dreading terrible news, try to stall because they don't want to know. Brenna was placid, even stoic. As much as she denigrated her husband, he *was* the father of her children, and she had allowed him to stay with her over Christmas. It was even possible they had been partially reconciled.

“Do you know why we're here, Brenna?” Birchfield asked quietly.

“No—not really.”

“Russel was found dead in his car this afternoon.”

“Oh . . .”

That was all she said. Was she in shock? They waited, but she didn't ask why her husband was dead, how he died, or where he was when he died. She seemed so composed that she was almost aloof.

Or was she stunned into silence, shocked to her core?

While Mike Birchfield continued to question the new widow for another five minutes or so, asking about the couple's relationship, Russel's lifestyle—even touching on his sexual habits—Brenna answered woodenly.

But she still didn't ask how her husband had been killed, so Birchfield kept talking.

“He was shot in the head.”

Brenna sat like stone, completely void of reaction. Was she in deep shock?

Or was she not surprised?

Now she began to speak, breathlessly running one sentence into another. She certainly didn't avoid

speaking ill of the dead. Brenna repeated that Russel had “rubbed in her face” his clubbing, partying and cheating. She thought he might be a sadomasochist, although she said he had never tried anything like that with her.

“I just couldn’t accept his sexual ideas—he thought whatever he saw on the Internet was ‘normal.’”

“Did you ever participate in any of those sexual activities?”

“No!”

“Why do you think he wanted to get back together with you?”

“Control. He liked to play control games with me. Like on Thanksgiving. He was supposed to meet me at the ferry about seven in the morning. But he didn’t show up. I finally called him at ten thirty and he was just then leaving Tacoma. He did things like that as his way of controlling me.”

“Did he build you up and then let you down when he treated you bad?”

“Yes.”

“How did that make you feel?”

“Sad.”

“Did he ever make you angry?”

“Yes! When he treated me bad.”

When Mike Birchfield asked her if she thought Russel Douglas had mental problems, she nodded. Now she recalled the names of two counselors he had been seeing.

Once again, Brenna stated that Russel had “run off before,” only to come back and try to get her to make their relationship work.

“Russel started divorce papers but he never went ahead with them,” she said

“Why didn’t you file for divorce?”

“I guess I was hoping we could work it out. Russel and I have owned Just B’s salon in Langley for about a year. Our business is pretty successful. I’m the one who works there, but he was going to cover our taxes this year.”

“Do you know where his current address is?”

“No—but I know how to get to his apartment. I know he runs—ran—and went to Gold’s Gym that was near his apartment. He used to work out at Ken’s Korner in Clinton about eight years ago—when we were first married.”

But Brenna added that Russel wasn’t exactly a health freak—he drank a lot. It was very common for him to get drunk.

“Drugs?” Birchfield asked.

“I don’t know.”

Mark Plumberg asked Brenna about the note he’d seen near the front door.

“I wrote it this morning. He’s been staying here since Christmas Eve. I left him a note that me and the kids were going off-island. We took the one o’clock ferry to Mukilteo.”

At that point, Brenna’s phone rang. She left the room to answer it. When she came back, she explained that two of her friends—sisters—had called, and that they often called her late at night because it was a good time to talk after her children went to sleep.

Within about fifteen minutes, the two women arrived at her door to comfort Brenna in her loss.

Mike Birchfield asked her if she would be willing to come to the precinct office in Coupeville the next day for a further interview.

Finally, she looked stricken. “What do I do?” she asked. “What do I do with his family?”

There was no way to answer that. Birchfield studied her face before he commented casually that she hadn’t been very emotional or surprised when he told her that her husband—albeit an estranged husband—was dead.

“Why is that?”

Brenna sighed. “When my mom died, Russel told me I was not allowed to cry. Now, I guess I’ve learned to just suppress my emotions.”

“Do you know what your husband had in his car?” Mark Plumberg asked.

“Tons of stuff—sleds for the kids, files from his work, some clothes.”

“Have you been in his vehicle since he arrived here on Christmas Eve?”

She nodded. “I drove it to the Star Store on Christmas Day to buy some pies, and then Russel drove me to our salon so I could hide a key for one of my girls to open the shop the day after Christmas.”

“When your husband left here on the twenty-sixth,” Mike Birchfield began, “what did he do—say?”

“It was about a quarter to eleven. He kissed me and the kids, and he said he’d be back in a few hours. He said he had to get some things done.

“But he never came back.”

It was late, and it seemed wise to end this first interview. Mike Birchfield and Mark Plumberg had many more questions they wanted to ask Brenna Douglas, but they could wait until morning.

As they left, one of Brenna’s friends asked if she should bring an attorney with her for the next day’s interview.

“That’s up to her,” Birchfield answered.

This was the beginning of one of the most challenging investigations the Island County Sheriff’s Office and the Island County Prosecuting Attorney’s Office had ever faced. It was not what it seemed to be; just when they pieced together part of the deadly foundation of a murder case, it would tear loose of another section. Their probe would involve Oregon, Idaho, Nevada, New Mexico, Florida, Texas, Alaska, and Mexico.

And it would take years.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE ONE PERSON A homicide investigator needs to interview the most is forever out of reach. The victim can no longer speak, and yet superior detectives find ways to know that person more thoroughly than anyone they know in life. They must weigh everything they learn about the dead, balancing what one witness says against what other witnesses assure them is the truth. At times, when the victim has lived an uncomplicated life, that can be a fairly simple exercise. With someone like Russel Douglas, the challenge from the beginning was overwhelming.

Beyond losing their very lives, homicide victims lose their privacy. Their hopes, dreams, flaws, sins, accomplishments—*everything*—become public knowledge. In a sense, their very innards are spread out for public viewing to be picked over, criticized, and exploited. The media does that, of course, and detectives have to explore every facet of the dead person's life if they hope to find what might have had a motive, opportunity, or means to destroy him—or her.

Who was Russel Douglas? His semi-estranged wife had made him sound monstrous even as she learned he was dead—murdered.

But that was only one person's opinion. Russel *did* have friends, coworkers, even a lover who would speak positively about him.

Mark Plumberg and Mike Birchfield had to examine physical evidence and study forensic results. They also had to seek out dozens of people whose paths had crossed Douglas's.

As they returned to 6665 Wahl Road the next morning, they found that daylight wasn't going to reveal much. The gun simply wasn't there, nor was there any other ballistic evidence. There were some tire marks in the soft dirt of the driveway that indicated that a vehicle had turned around near the cottage. But the details of the tires were blurred, not nearly distinctive enough to compare to exemplars of other tire imprints.

By noon, Plumberg and Birchfield met Brenna Douglas in the South Precinct office for a second interview. She brought Russel's "work computer," a laptop, with her. They learned that he was employed by the Tetra Tech Corporation, near Redmond. He was a zone manager and was highly skilled with computers. Brenna said he was working toward his master's degree in the University of Phoenix's distance education program, and had an email account with the school, along with several other accounts.

Indeed, he was within only a few credits before he got his MA.

Mark Plumberg interviewed Brenna in one room, while Mike Birchfield talked to Russel's sister, Holly Hunziker, in another.

Plumberg asked Brenna if she had thought of anything since they last talked that might help the investigation. She mentioned that some of her clients at Just B's had told her they had seen her husband a few times on the ferry as it docked at Whidbey.

"That was odd, because during some of those times, he didn't come to see me—or our children. I don't know who he was meeting."

For some reason, Brenna had concluded that Russ might be having a homosexual affair with some man on the island.

It wasn't long before Brenna began talking again about Russel's lifestyle. She was convinced he was into "swinging" and bizarre sexual exploration. She had seen his body piercings, and said he even had his nipples pierced.

"He wanted to get more piercings, but I just could not deal with that!"

She spoke in an oddly matter-of-fact manner. Nevertheless, she had let Russel back into her life over the past few weeks to see if he had changed. She didn't really want him back, and she said she had

discussed it with their very young children, and they didn't want him living with them, either.

~~"We were doing very well since he left us last May."~~

Mark Plumberg noticed how relaxed and comfortable the recent widow appeared to be. She sipped from a cup of coffee she'd brought with her. She was almost inappropriately animated as he talked to her.

It seemed that she could not say enough bad things about the man who had been found dead less than twenty-four hours earlier. Brenna repeated that she thought he was having an affair with a man she named. Her suspicions had been fueled by pornography she found on his computer in September.

"For Christmas, do you know what he gave me? Lingerie, flavored condoms, and a sex swing! We agreed to take it slow, and I asked him if that was his idea of 'slow.'"

Plumberg asked her if Russel had tried to get her to engage in any unusual sex since he'd been home for Christmas, and she shook her head.

"No, he's been on his best behavior. We did have *very* protected sex. I guess I just wanted to feel loved."

Brenna was a study in ambivalence. One minute she characterized her late husband as gay, and the next she talked about his lust for her and other women.

More confusing, the Christmas she described sounded like any happy family's, although Russel was a "little upset" because she changed their usual Christmas morning. He had wanted their children to wait while he had breakfast before they opened their presents.

"I told him that now the kids were coming first, and he could just wait for his breakfast."

Brenna's stepfather, who had been widowed a year earlier, came over to have dinner with them and left between five and six. Then Russel had played Xbox with Jack, while she and Hannah watched a movie in her room.

"Russel came into my bedroom later and we watched *Bad Boys II* and then we went to sleep."

On December 26, she had stayed at home after Russel left, although she was upset because she had wanted to go to the "eye doctor." She had called Russel's cell phone a few times to see where he was, but he didn't answer.

"Were you worried about your husband?" Plumberg asked.

"A little—because we hadn't been fighting or anything so I didn't know why he wouldn't come back. Then I got mad because I thought he was back to his 'old routine' of only being concerned about himself."

With no word from him, she had gone to the mainland—as she said before—eaten at the Red Robin restaurant, shopped at Penney's and some "video game place," and then gone to the movie. She had receipts and ticket stubs that verified this.

Brenna Douglas's description of Russel's alleged "abuse" indicated that it was more verbal than physical. He had taken their children to visit his lover, Fran, at Thanksgiving and unplugged the phone there so she couldn't talk to them.

"He never went places with me. Oh, once we went to a game and there were these two women sitting in front of us. I simply commented about how 'trashy' they were dressed, and he turned on me and in a real loud voice, he said I was just jealous because I was the 'fattest woman in a stadium of thirty thousand people!'"

Brenna's complaints might have been justified in other circumstances, but they sounded weak and selfish when compared to the unsolved homicide of her husband who had a bullet in his brain.

She was a big woman, but in an attractive, buxom way, and she was also pretty with long, luxuriant hair. And there was no way she could have been the "fattest woman" in the stadium. She appeared somehow stronger than the photos Plumberg had seen of Russel Douglas. In a physical fight—indeed, they ever engaged in one—Brenna would have had a good chance of winning.

Plumberg tried again to get any information Brenna might have on who hated Russel enough to kill him. ~~Was there anyone he seemed afraid of?~~

She had no idea. Then she remembered that he had told her about a man who was a “headhunter” who was looking for him the week before Christmas. She hadn’t known what a headhunter was until Russel told her they were people who tried to steal employees away from other companies and offered them jobs.

“This guy told Russel he would have to sign a secrecy thing. They had to meet at night and no one was supposed to know. We were having dinner at his mother’s house just before Christmas when he said that. Gail will remember that, too.”

Gail O’Neal, Russ’s mother, *did* recall a discussion about a “headhunter.” That holiday dinner in 2003 was the last time she saw her son alive.

Brenna seemed to be on good terms with her mother-in-law, even though Russel had told a number of people that he disliked his mother because of the strict and punitive way she had raised him.

Asked about that later, Gail O’Neal, who has a PhD in nursing and teaches at Washington State University, nodded. She knew that Russ had blamed her for some of his misfortunes.

“He always blamed someone else for the unhappiness in his life,” she said. “He was a grown man and he was still complaining that he had a miserable childhood. He felt he had missed out on so much in his life, and he looked for someone he could hold responsible.”

When her ex-husband, Jim Douglas, left Whidbey Island and moved to Alaska, Gail and her second husband—Bob O’Neal—raised her two sons.

* * *

NOW, AS HE CONTINUED talking with Brenna Douglas, Mark Plumberg saw that if Russ intended to hide anything from his wife, he hadn’t done a very good job of it. Brenna knew all of the passwords on his email accounts. And she said she checked on them regularly.

Once more, Mark Plumberg asked for the names of Russel’s friends—someone the detective could talk to.

She shook her head. She didn’t know of any friends who might know much about him. She was quite sure he’d been trying to get into a swingers’ club at an island restaurant.

“I know they meet on Saturday nights and it’s called a ‘key club.’”

That sounded like something out of the seventies.

Detective Plumberg looked straight into Brenna’s eyes and held her gaze. She didn’t look away.

“I’m going to have to ask you some tough questions,” he began.

Instantly, she became very still and her body was rigid as she folded her hands in her lap.

“Does anyone in your family have any reason to kill Russel?”

“No.”

“Did *you* have any reason to kill him?”

“No,” she answered in a flat voice.

Plumberg moved on to other questions, and she seemed to know he was getting ready to close the interview. Now, where she had been tense, her voice tight, Brenna relaxed, returning to her former casual mien.

The detective didn’t know what that meant. He didn’t know her—not yet—or anyone she might be close to, either someone she wanted to protect or who might possibly know hidden things about her.

He closed his notepad and smiled. “You can call me anytime if you remember anything—or if you have questions or need to talk to me.”

CHAPTER FIVE

MIKE BIRCHFIELD TALKED TO Douglas's sister, Holly Hunziker. She seemed to have been close to Brenna, and she recalled that Brenna had phoned her on the twenty-sixth and asked to bring a birthday present to her. Her niece and nephew had sung "Happy Birthday" to Holly over the phone. Her sister-in-law usually made a point to recognize her birthday, Holly said, because it came hard on the heels of Christmas Day. But this year, it hadn't worked out as Holly wasn't going to be home.

Holly's opinion of her brother was surprisingly negative. She spoke of the verbal and psychological abuse he had heaped on Brenna, and about the sexual scenarios he also forced on her. Holly, too, mentioned that Russel had had affairs with both women and men.

"He had weird ideas when it came to sex, and he was always trying to get Brenna to join in."

What Holly was saying was much like the information Brenna had given the two detectives the night before, and Birchfield asked Holly if she had firsthand knowledge of her brother's erotic obsessions, and she admitted that she didn't; she only knew what Brenna had told her.

She recalled hearing that a few years earlier, Russel and Brenna had a business for a while where they gave "parties" in other people's homes where they sold sex toys. Brenna had told her that they had to put on a show, demonstrating the bizarre condoms, bondage items, and phallic substitutes and she hated it. They had soon quit that business.

Despite Brenna's apparent distaste for her husband's alleged proclivities, Holly said Brenna was very jealous. She had tried to keep tabs on him and who he was seeing. She particularly resented Fran, the older woman he was supposed to be dating during their estrangement.

Mike Birchfield studied Holly. "I have to tell you that I find it strange that all I've been hearing about Russel is mostly negative—and he hasn't been dead more than two days."

"Holly looked sheepish," he wrote in his follow-up report later, "but she didn't say anything."

The Island County investigators knew *how* Russel Douglas had died, but they were a long way from knowing *why*. Although his widow and his own sister had said virtually nothing positive about him, what they described didn't seem bad enough to mark him for murder. And murders without a motive are not easy to solve.

The Island County investigators learned that Russ and Brenna had dated since they were in high school. Russ went solo to a club where teenagers were allowed and one of his sister's friends introduced him to Brenna.

When Holly and their mother, Gail, realized that the couple was getting serious, they were appalled. They seemed to have nothing in common, both had short fuses, and they always seemed to be fighting.

"It was a horrible, *horrible* relationship," Holly remembers. "Brenna didn't get along with her mother, and she was completely on her own by the time she was twenty-one; she had an apartment, a job, a car."

Russ wasn't sure where he was going, but he did believe in education. Brenna scoffed at high school education, and was adamant that she didn't want her children to go to college.

"They might have gone on to better lives *separately*," Holly said later. "But they just didn't belong together."

When Brenna became pregnant in 1994, she and Russ talked to Gail about it.

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

"Have the baby," Brenna said.

"Good. That's good," Gail said, "but don't get married. You don't need to get married to have a child. Give yourselves some time."

His mother's advice got through to Russ Douglas enough that they waited about finalizing the

union. Gail hoped that they would see what everyone who knew them felt about their chances for a happy marriage.

“They waited awhile,” Gail said sadly, “but they eventually got married during the late summer of 1995. Their baby, Jack, was one at the time.”

Brenna regretted all the arguments she had had with her mother, and tried to effect reconciliation. They talked many times a day on the phone, and that made Russ jealous.

Brenna thought that Gail was controlling Russ.

And vice versa.

Gail raised briards, and she offered one of the puppies to Russ and Brenna. Russ was trying to make everyone happy in the vain hope that his wife and his family could get along—and he accepted the active pup, whose breed grows to between seventy-five and a hundred pounds. They are wonderful dogs, but they need daily exercise, exacting training because they can be stubborn, and their luxurious coats have to be brushed at least every other day. Gail used her dogs to herd sheep, an activity that these French sheepdogs were born to perform. Briards love children and they protect their owners home and family.

Of course, it was not a good choice for a couple already dealing with a baby, and Brenna railed at Russ that their dog was way too much for her to handle and clean up after.

Seeing that the match wasn't a good one, Gail offered to take the puppy back and keep it until they were ready.

“I knew they would never be ready, but it seemed like a good way to get the poor pup out of there,” Gail said, “and hopefully, to stop some of their fights. Finally, Russ agreed to let me take the puppy. And, of course, they never asked for it back.”

Brenna's favorite pastime was shopping.

“I would have to call her a shopaholic,” Gail O'Neal said. “She could easily spend a thousand dollars on one trip to Costco. I helped her unload after a visit to the grocery store once, and was surprised to see that she had two large freezers *and* a refrigerator and I could hardly find room in any of them to store her new purchases! And she still fed her kids junk food all the time.”

It was more than just the expected bickering between a wife and her mother-in-law. Both Russ and Brenna called Gail O'Neal for advice, and she did her best to remain neutral. She knew her son was immature and sometimes hard to deal with, but so was Brenna—only in a different way.

When Russel Douglas complained about something—even something as childish as not being able to find his favorite soda pop—his mother told him, “You're an adult. You want a Mountain Dew, and your store doesn't have it. You are grown up—just go find a store that carries it, and get your Mountain Dew yourself.”

* * *

WHILE MIKE BIRCHFIELD SEARCHED for a financial reason behind the homicide, Mark Plumberg prepared to find out as much about Douglas as he possibly could. The picture on his driver's license showed a bland-looking man with an almost shy smile. He certainly didn't appear to be a sex-obsessed fiend, but then few sex offenders do. He apparently had a good job and was a devoted father to his two small children, supporting them financially and visiting them whenever Brenna allowed him to see them.

On the evening of December 28, Plumberg and Birchfield executed a search warrant on Russ Douglas's apartment in Renton. The now-dead man had left a radio on, and the sound of soft jazz in the background made their visit a little eerie.

The place was sparsely furnished. It was little more than a studio unit, but it did have one bedroom and one bathroom on the second floor of a building with many apartments. It looked like a temporary place where a man might live while he tried to salvage a marriage gone sour—or while he was making

plans for a divorce. A bachelor's apartment in every sense of the term.

The investigators found a surfboard in its carrying case leaning against a bedroom wall, so Russel obviously hadn't gone surfing. According to Brenna, Russel had told her that he had a number of errands to run that day after Christmas. One of them was apparently a present for her; she thought it might be a tablecloth she wanted.

His closet was stuffed with clothing, books, and various papers. There was also a .22 rifle there, and two plastic garbage bags with adult sex toys—nothing very shocking or different than a lot of men had. Outside of those objects, the two detectives found nothing that smacked of pornography or sexual perversion.

There were two computer cases, but when they looked inside, neither had a computer in it. Among the myriad papers, they found a number of notes that appeared to be in Douglas's handwriting. An initial glance at them showed they were introspective, written by a man who asked himself questions about how he should be managing his life, a man wondering how he could achieve happiness.

Mark Plumberg set those aside to study in depth later; they might let him understand who Russel Douglas had been.

The next morning, Plumberg attended Russel Douglas's postmortem examination. Dr. Daniel Selove, a forensic pathologist who often travels around Washington State to do autopsies in sparsely populated counties, performed this after-death exploration while Island County Coroner Dr. Robert Bishop stood by.

There were no surprises. Douglas had died of that single bullet fired into the bridge of his nose, and the slug had plowed into his head, forcing out a large amount of brain matter that dangled grotesquely from his forehead.

He would have died instantly. When the bullet was removed, Plumberg logged it into evidence along with plastic bags that held hair and nail clippings, a loose hair from the victim's lower lip, and anal and oral swabs.

Even the fragment of blue plastic from his broken sunglasses was saved. If the hair on his lip wasn't his, it would only be probable evidence. Unless its follicle is attached to a hair, it is impossible to tell anything beyond class and characteristics.

Plumberg was aware once again that it would surely take a motive or, he hoped, a match to the bullet casing and slug to the gun that fired it. And that gun seemed to be as lost as if it had been flung into Puget Sound.

Perhaps it had been.

Douglas's clothing was bagged and sent to the Washington State Police lab to be tested by criminalists. They found semen on the victim's underwear, but DNA results weeks later indicated the fluid was his own.

On New Year's Eve 2003 Mark Plumberg took the slug and the shell casing, labeled C-1, to Eva Thompson at the Seattle Police Department's Crime Lab. If possible, they needed to know what brand of gun might have fired it. If they ever found the gun, that could be a vital link between the murder and the murderer. Less likely, the shooter's DNA might be on the casing, but Plumberg would take the casing to the Washington State Police Lab in Marysville, Washington, to test for that only after Thompson examined the bullet and casing.

The Seattle criminalist saw immediately that the missing gun was definitely a cheap .380 automatic weapon. The brand of guns that came to his mind were possibly a Llama, a Grendel, or a Bersa.

Immediately after the tests, Mark Plumberg took possession of the bullet/slug and casing again.

* * *

NICOLE LUA AND HER friend Janet Hall were interviewed for a second time. The women who had fired

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