
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 modest 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 mostly 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 gos-

sip 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 a 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 their 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 Blacks' 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 her 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. Half 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, to 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 Leif 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 midthirties. 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 in Renton, Washington, a city southeast of Seattle. Norrie wondered what could have been so bad that a man this young would have shot himself.

It would take a postmortem exam to be sure, but it appeared that Douglas had sustained only that 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 .380 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 com-

mander, 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.