



Sheriff David Reichert

**MY TWENTY-YEAR QUEST TO CAPTURE
THE GREEN RIVER KILLER**

**CHASING
THE DEVIL**

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Acknowledgments

*This book is dedicated to the victims of the Green River killer.
It is my hope that the tragedy they suffered will inspire
a greater effort to prevent young women from being
caught up in a life of desperation and danger on the streets.
May we all remember these young women
and the lives they should have been able to lead.*

PROLOGUE

THE RIVER

THE GREEN RIVER'S SOURCE is one mile high in the Snoqualmie National Forest and just south of a spot on the map called Stampede Pass. From one small spring it trickles westward, gathering strength from dozens of mountain creeks with names like Champion, Wolf, and Cougar. By the time it reaches flat land, it is a steady flowing stream that in the springtime, when the snow melts in the Cascades, can run twenty feet deep in some places.

The people who live in the mountain valley carved by the Green River have always had a close relationship with its waters. It was a source of fish and drinking water for Native Americans, who also used it as a highway to Puget Sound. Early settlers depended on the river in the same way, and in modern times it provides irrigation for farms and pleasure to sport fishermen, rafters, swimmers, and anyone else who loves the outdoors.

But even as it brings life to people on the shore, the river has long been a site for tragedy. In the middle of the nineteenth century, white settlers battled Indians along the river, and men, women, and children died on both sides. In more recent years, the river periodically claimed drowning victims or gave up bodies that had been dumped by those who hoped the evidence of their crimes might be swept out to sea.

My own connection to the Green River goes back to the early 1960s, when, as a boy growing up in the city of Kent, I earned money picking fruits and vegetables at farms that nestled up to its banks. Later, when I was in high school, the riverside became a haven from my long-running battles with my father. We had good times, but I was always aware of the pressures my parents felt raising seven kids on limited wages. On weekends my dad might drink a little too much and get into a fight with my mother. When I was young, I would hide. When I got older, I tried to intervene. After one especially bad fight, I left home and lived for two months in a 1956 Mercury, which I had recently bought with money from my after-school jobs. I parked in a deserted spot beside the river, went to school and work during the day, and slept in the car every night.

I knew all the isolated and hidden corners of Kent where a kid on the run might hide away. But I wasn't the type who got in a lot of trouble. In fact, I was the opposite. I

was a kid who lived in the tough neighborhoods, dealt with bullies and bad guys on a daily basis, and felt it was my duty to defend myself and my fellow underdogs from them. Part of this attitude came from the tough example my father set. He never backed down and was always ready to fight for what he thought was right. But while he always seemed to try to impose his will and his judgment on others, I developed a near obsession with keeping myself and others safe.

Childhood had brought me plenty of experiences with danger. I was seven or eight on the day when, as I was shooting marbles with a friend, a man pulled up in a station wagon and tried to abduct me. An escapee from a state mental hospital, he had me halfway into the car when my mother ran up and grabbed me by the feet. She tore me out of his hands, saving me from God knows what he might have done. At around the same time, I was kidnapped by three older kids who blamed me for something I hadn't done and tied me to a tree out in the woods. I escaped, but the lesson of that experience and others was clear: We share this world with bad people, and you have to stand up to them.

With all the violence and drama I faced inside my family home and outside on the street, it's little wonder that I had an early fascination with cops and firefighters, who, after all, are officially charged with keeping us safe. As a boy, one of my favorite games was called Rescue 8, after a TV show by that name. I would get my brothers and sisters and cousins to stage emergencies—some kids would hang from tree limbs or pretend to be trapped somewhere—and then the rest of us would come racing to their rescue. Bikes served as police cars. We made our throats sore trying to scream like sirens.

When I was old enough, I stopped playing rescue and started jumping into bad situations whenever someone asked for help or I saw the need. When a Peeping Tom was bothering the women at my future wife Julie's college dorm, I raced after the guy and jumped on the running board of his VW. (He dislodged me by crashing into a telephone pole.) On the football field, where I played quarterback, I got into the middle of a fight that broke out after we had won a game. I didn't like it that one of our smaller players was taking a beating from a giant lineman. I broke up the fight, but the lineman cracked me between the eyes with his helmet and I wound up in the hospital.

For some reason, my early interest in keeping the peace didn't move me immediately into law enforcement. In college I considered teaching, coaching, social work, and the ministry. My grandfather, whom I loved and admired, was a Lutheran pastor, and faith was, and is, the center of my life. I thought about it a lot as I served seven months of active duty in the air force. All along my girlfriend, then fiancée, then wife, Julie, said I would make a good cop and encouraged me to consider that option. We discussed it often and decided the time was right when I left the air force and transferred into the reserves and returned to the Seattle area. In 1971 I took the test to join the King County Sheriff's Department and scored high enough—number 82—to get one of 110 deputy positions. I started work in 1972 and would stay on the job for more than thirty-two years as Julie and I established a home and made a family that included our children, Angela, Tabitha, and Daniel.

On my very first evaluation my supervisor wrote: “Officer Reichert has the ability to be quite a good policeman. Although he seems very quiet, his actions indicate that he will do a good job.”

I was a quiet young man, and action was far more interesting to me than any conversation. But I could empathize with those in need, and that made me a good fit in a profession that still harbored a certain Wild West mentality. Thirty years ago, before training was upgraded and the department established more specific procedures, individual officers were expected to be creative and assertive. You raced to every scene at high speed with the siren wailing, and you called for backup only as a last resort. (One reason for this was that your fellow cops were probably miles away.)

Sometimes the results of this macho approach were a little less than perfect. Take the time I answered a call to a domestic dispute where a man was holding a knife to his wife’s throat. A more senior officer arrived and suggested I sneak in an open window. I took off my shoes and managed to get into the house. I distracted the man. He turned away from his wife, she ran to me, and I helped her escape through a window. I then went to the living room to see if I could prevent the man from killing himself. But as I entered the room, the man saw my reflection in a window. In the fight that ensued, he slashed my throat from my right ear to my esophagus, barely missing the jugular vein.

When I tell this story, some people are shocked. Today we have negotiating techniques and special teams that handle these kinds of situations. But people are often more surprised to hear that my wife, Julie, wasn’t hysterical over that incident. She was alarmed when someone called the house and said, “Dave’s on TV, he’s been hurt.” But once she knew I was going to be okay, her attitude was, “There’s nothing you can say. That’s Dave.” And she was right. I would always see myself as a competitor and a protector, and I preferred to play offense whenever possible.

Fortunately, a cop can be assertive without risking his life every day. In those early patrol years, I learned some subtler strategies, like developing sources on the street and using my imagination on every call I answered. Sometimes the results were even amusing. I’ll always remember the teenager who broke into a suburban home and stole from the liquor cabinet and the candy drawer. I went to the backyard and followed candy wrappers to a power line right-of-way. Eventually I found a school absence note next to one of the wrappers. It must have fallen out of his pocket. That gave me the burglar’s name, and soon I was speaking with his mother, who led me to his room and a cache of items he had taken from houses all over the neighborhood.

Then there was the night when I surprised a burglar who had broken into a gas station. He leaped out of a broken window and ran into the woods behind the station. I followed but quickly lost him in the darkness. (A rookie mistake: I forgot to bring a flashlight.) I could hear branches breaking, heavy breathing, and footsteps as I chased him. Finally there was a loud thunk and a cry of pain. Although we didn’t catch him that night, we returned in the morning to follow the trail of blood from the tree the man had run into to the nearby trailer where he lived.

Besides the challenge of solving crimes and the rewards that come from helping people, one of the main benefits of police work is the camaraderie you feel with fellow

officers. You might bicker and complain about some of them, but the bonds you form are unbreakable. I felt this was especially true when it came to the person who influenced me the most during my years of patrol—Sam Hicks.

Seven years my senior, Sam had been on the force for about three years when I arrived. A big man with curly red hair, he enjoyed the job and was part of a new generation bringing a smarter, more professional attitude to the work. Sam was gung ho, but he also had more common sense than anyone I had ever met. And he never lost his sense of humor, especially when it came to himself. One night we went to a robbery suspect's house and were attacked by a snarling dog that charged out of the darkness. Sam whipped out his mace but pointed it in the wrong direction. He sprayed himself in the face, and we went running for our police cars. With his eyes swollen and red from the spray, Sam laughed as hard as I did.

Although I never forgot what Sam showed me about keeping my cool and staying alert, the most important lessons he taught me were about persistence and thoroughness. Both were on display the night we responded to a call from some fishermen who had spotted a man's boot, complete with a foot and a piece of leg bone, on the bottom of an isolated mountain lake. Months earlier someone had reported a missing hiker in the same area. The man had had a few enemies, so we were looking at a possible murder.

Sam and I arrived at the edge of the forest before dawn. Detective Bob LaMoria joined us. We grabbed our flashlights, hoisted packs onto our shoulders, and began a nine-mile hike to the lake in pouring rain. Sam never slowed down, and when we got there, we quickly inflated a rubber raft and paddled out to recover the leg and foot with a grappling hook. While we were in the raft, I looked up to see a human rib cage resting on the side of a mountain five hundred feet above us. Under Sam's direction, I scaled the mountain, recovered what bones I could find, and then packed them out. In the end, the death was ruled a suicide, but at least the man's family could lay him to rest. For Sam, an eighteen-mile hike in the wilderness to solve the mystery of a foot found at the bottom of a lake was all in a day's work.

Sam became my closest friend, and his example of intelligent, dogged pursuit became my template for effective investigations when I joined him on the homicide and robbery detective unit. Sam always pushed his cases, and he didn't like to wait. On June 24, 1982, when he was ready to arrest a murder suspect, he called my house, looking for me. I was out, but rather than wait for me, Sam grabbed another detective, Leo Hursch, and went after his man.

Leo and Sam spotted their suspect, Bobby Hughes, riding in the passenger side of a truck driven by his brother. They followed him along the country roads of rural southwest King County until the brother turned down the long driveway of a big, isolated farm. The brother dropped Bobby near a line of trees and split. As Sam and Leo drove up, a shot fired from the trees smashed the windshield of their car. They got out and ran behind a barn.

On that fateful day, Sam and Leo were unable to determine where their suspect had gone. While Leo carefully scanned the area, Sam slowly crept around the corner of the barn. In the split second that his body was exposed to the tree line, a shot was fired. The bullet hit Sam in the chest, and he fell to the ground. Leo ran to Sam and radioed for help, and the shooter fled into nearby Flaming Geyser State Park, a large wooded

area bisected by the waters of the Green River.

My friend and mentor Sam Hicks was airlifted to Harbor View Hospital, but he wouldn't survive. The shot from a high-powered rifle had caused too much damage. But before we knew he was dead, while the doctors still worked on him, the sheriff's office responded to the shooting with a massive manhunt. Every available cop raced to the scene. Dogs were put on Hughes's trail. Helicopters crisscrossed the sky. Patrol cars cruised every mile of road.

At first my supervisors held me out of the hunt. They said I was too close to Sam and that emotion would cloud my judgment. But when they needed someone to deliver photos of the suspect to the scene, I volunteered, roaring down there with the lights on and the siren screaming. The delivery was just an excuse for me to get involved. I think they knew that when they sent me on the errand.

When I arrived at the farm, deputies and detectives were streaming in from all over. One of the first I saw was Fabienne "Fae" Brooks. The first black woman detective in the sheriff's office, Fae was usually assigned to sex crimes. But like everyone else, she had turned out for the manhunt. Fae must have seen the shock and sadness on my face, because even before we talked, she gave me a strong hug.

The search for Bobby Hughes would go on for three days and nights, with hundreds of people scouring the countryside on both sides of the river. I was part of the effort, putting in long hours on the hunt and returning home just once to see my family, weep over my friend's death, and struggle for a few hours of sleep.

Finally, on that third day, a motorist reported seeing a haggard-looking man scrambling up from the riverbank and then crossing a road. Detective Bill Henne and I were among the officers who responded to the call. A police dog got the scent and began chasing Hughes. We raced to position our car along a gravel road that was right in Hughes's path. Bill and I both grabbed shotguns. I lay on the hood of the car, facing the woods with my finger on the trigger. Bill positioned himself on the trunk, facing in the same direction.

While we lay in wait, we could hear the dog in the woods and the cracking of branches. But neither Hughes nor the searchers ever broke through. He had stopped and tried to hide under a fallen tree. The dog caught him, and the officers trailing behind apprehended him. I was the only homicide detective on the scene, so I was enlisted to ride with Hughes to the Auburn station, advise him of his rights, and take his statement. I later took him to King County jail in downtown Seattle. Through it all, I forced myself to stay calm as he told some bullshit story about how he thought Sam and Leo were bad guys out to kill him. He had fired in self-defense, he claimed. All I could think of was how this guy had killed my best friend, a husband and a father and one of the best cops I ever knew, with the twitch of his index finger.

My daughter Angela's ninth birthday fell seven weeks after Sam's death. About forty members of our extended family were coming to our house to celebrate her birthday and all the others that occur in August. Because our family is so big, we had long ago agreed to have one giant party every month. For Angela's big day, Julie had made sure there would be cake and ice cream and plenty of other food. The presents had been bought and wrapped, and more would arrive with our guests. With a crowd of this size,

the monthly birthday bash was almost as exciting as Christmas.

Angela was barely able to contain her excitement as she waited for the guests to arrive. She was sitting at our kitchen table, a big oak hand-me-down from my parents, when the phone rang. The call was for me, and if Angela was watching my face as I listened to the voice on the other end, she knew what was about to happen. It was an emergency call from the King County Sheriff's Office, and Dad, the homicide detective, would have to go, again.

So much would flow from that single phone call—decades of struggle, worry, danger, and obsession—that I almost forgot that it all started on Angela's birthday. But many years later, she reminded me of this and recalled how she had cried and then felt ashamed because she had thought of herself, not the murder victim I was summoned to examine. "I thought it was so unfair," she told me. "But we knew you had no choice."

Everyone understood that I had to respond without hesitation. And they knew that this was more than a job to me. I believed that I had been entrusted with the responsibility to resolve the worst kinds of tragedies and bring some sort of justice to the victims and their families. It was a serious business, and given how deep my Christian faith runs, I considered it to be a calling.

But even though I answered calls to murder scenes with almost automatic calm and efficiency, this one did strike a few emotional chords. First, it tore me away from Angela's party. I regretted that. Second, it involved multiple victims, and that always made things more challenging. And third, this call was bringing me back again to the Green River.

On June 24, the river had been the backdrop for events that had brought me to my knees with grief when Sam was killed. Now the Green River held even more tragedy. The bodies of two young women had been found submerged near the shore. It would fall to me to lead the investigation to discover who they were, how they got there, and who was to blame.

ONE

SOMEBODY'S DAUGHTERS

IT MAY BE HARD TO BELIEVE that every time I took an emergency call at my home, my mind shifted smoothly from family life to murder, but that's the way it works for most experienced detectives. We have the usual human desire for peace and comfort when the workday is done. And like most people, we try to move between home and work without much cross-contamination. The only difference is that homicide is one of the most disturbing acts that human beings commit, and homicide detectives have to deal with it every day.

On August 15, 1982, I received a call about a double homicide—two female victims. I knew that the site where the bodies had been found—a spot on the Green River in the Seattle suburb of Kent—was going to be difficult to search. Sinewy blackberry plants sprout on both sides of the river. Covered with thorns and almost impossible to snap, the vines are six feet and higher, and they grow amid reeds and grasses that are just as tall. Besides the thick brush, the river is banked by steep slopes of rocks, placed there by the Army Corps of Engineers to contain the river as it rises every spring with the runoff from melting snow in the mountains.

In Kent, access to the river is along a winding, two-lane country highway called Frager Road. For an area that's just twenty miles from downtown Seattle, it's a remarkably rural place, just farms, nurseries, and a few private homes. The only substantial business around there was a slaughterhouse called PD&J Meat Company, which overlooked the river just south of the Peck Bridge.

What bothered me most as I drove down Frager Road in my unmarked car was that I had been there just three days earlier—to PD&J Meats, in fact—to investigate the death of another young woman. In that case, a slaughterhouse worker had gone outside to smoke a cigar. He had looked down at the river, to a place where a spit of sand broke the surface of the water and a few logs had become stuck. Up against the logs he saw what he took to be a large animal carcass. Curious, he followed a path used by fishermen to the water's edge. As soon as he broke through the blackberry vines, he realized that the sandbar had captured not an animal, but a human being.

In that case, I had photographed the scene, called divers to collect the body, and helped bring it up the bank for the medical examiner. For me, dead bodies were a normal part of my work, and I was trained to regard them as evidence. I also treated them with deep respect. A body represents a person who was once loved, who once

looked forward to the future, and who was robbed of the experiences and feelings that future promised. And sometimes the body can speak to us, offering clues and evidence that might bring justice to the person who once lived inside. For that reason, I take extreme care with the remains we find.

In this case, the sun had beaten down on the body's exposed skin with such intensity that parts of it were charred. Other portions of the body had been submerged and were beginning to bloat. Worst of all, egg-laying insects had been especially active, and larvae were crawling all over it. I paused for a moment to steel myself and then, like the other officers on the scene, did what was necessary to gently rescue the corpse and carry it to shore.

Once we had the body on the riverbank, we could see that though the young woman was unclothed, she was offering us some clues to her identity. She wore a ring and an earring. She also had a few tattoos. The most notable was the word "Duby" inside a heart tattooed on her right shoulder.

The official cause of death would be determined by an autopsy, which I would attend the next day. But on the scene, the medical examiner was able to estimate that the body had been in the river for at least two weeks. He found no water in her lungs—which meant she was dead before she reached the river—and no significant wounds or trauma.

During the investigation, I contacted a local tattoo artist named Joe Yates, who had once helped identify another body via the victim's tattoos, but in this case he was stumped. However, checks with area police departments, which record key features whenever they arrest someone, eventually turned up the name Debra Lynn Bonner. Twenty-four years old, she was the same height and weight as the woman found in the river, and she had the same tattoos. She had been arrested for prostitution at least eight times while using several different names.

All the facts of the Bonner case raced through my mind as I approached PD&J Meats on Sunday, August 15, but my most troubling thoughts were not of the body, but of Debra's mother. Just twenty-four hours earlier I had gone to one of the roughest neighborhoods in Tacoma and knocked on the door of her tumbledown house. Inside, the house was a monument to poverty and dysfunction. The furniture, what little there was, was beat-up and stained. Mice ran across the floor. Everything about the place said, "Here are people who have struggled through life." When we sat down and Mrs. Shirley Bonner heard me say her daughter had been murdered, tears filled her eyes and trickled down her cheeks. You might say that this woman had never been equipped to raise a child, and you might be right. But her grief was real and her sorrow was deep, and she cried a mother's tears. "I will not give up," I had told her. "I promise you, I will not give up."

Now I was headed back to the river, where two more young women, two more daughters of mothers who would weep when they got the news, waited to be recovered and examined. As the lead detective on the scene, I would take on these cases, too. That meant that I would be responsible for the crime scene, for identifying the bodies, and for every other aspect of the investigation, including making contact with grieving families. It was going to be a very long day.

The parking lot at PD&J was jammed with official vehicles, so I parked on the roadside. I grabbed the big, bulky Mamiya camera I used for crime scene photos, along with its huge battery pack and a logbook to record each shot. As soon as I got out of the car, some of the officers who stood on the roadside began filling me in on the scene: Robert Ainsworth, a rafter who collected old bottles and other junk that had been tossed into the river, had been drifting through the shallow water, poking at the bottom with a homemade hook. Whenever Ainsworth found something he couldn't bring up with his tool, he'd slip into the water and muck around in the silt and sand.

On this Sunday afternoon, Ainsworth had seen a man on the riverbank as he rounded a bend near PD&J. The two spoke briefly about an outboard motor submerged at that spot. Ainsworth also saw a man in a pickup truck on Frager Road, above the river. Moments later, after the two men departed, the rafter saw what he believed was a mannequin of a woman submerged in the water. He poked it with his hook and noticed that it was pinned to the riverbed by a large rock. Then, as he maneuvered the raft, he saw another female form lying submerged about ten feet away. Her limbs, hair, and hands were so perfectly formed, so lifelike, that he realized these were not mannequins at all but, rather, the bodies of young women.

In order to avoid contaminating evidence that may have been dropped by whoever put these women in the water, the officers already on the scene had made a fresh path through the blackberry vines and tall grass. Before I plunged ahead, I looked for one of them to take my photo logbook and accompany me to record each picture that I would take, noting the time, location, and other details. The duty fell to a rookie who had hung back while other, older officers had briefed me.

Officer Sue Peters had the good or bad luck (depending on how you look at it) to have been assigned to patrol this corner of King County. Barely five feet tall with brown hair and a youthful appearance, Peters looked more like a grade school teacher than a cop. About to have her first encounter with dead bodies, she was quiet as we climbed down the bank and walked north along the rocks to the spot where the bodies looked to be shadows in the shallows.

The first body we reached was lying facedown, unclothed, in three feet of water. She was weighted down with rocks that had been laid on her foot, knee, buttocks, and shoulder. The silt that had begun to cover her up made it impossible to determine her race. I snapped pictures and called out the details to Sue, who managed to stay calm and composed by keeping her focus on the task at hand.

The second body, submerged ten feet farther upstream in water that was a little deeper, was lying faceup and was nude except for a front-closure bra that had been opened. This body had been secured with rocks on her right leg and hip, left ankle, and shoulder. But nothing held down her right arm, and as the water flowed around her, it raised her arm and made her hand flutter back and forth. Her mouth and eyes were open. She looked like she was waving to us and saying, "Here I am. Help me."

I was already wondering about the person—maybe "creature" is a better word—who was responsible for this little horror show. We all were trying to imagine how someone would have handled the chore of lugging the bodies to the water and then moving the rocks to keep them submerged. And naturally, we speculated about the

connection to the girl with the Duby tattoo, Debra Bonner, who had been pulled from the river within sight of this spot.

Did these two young women have anything in common with Debra? Did they move in the same dangerous underworld of prostitutes, pimps, drugs, and johns? And what about the killer, or killers? Were all the people involved in this crime connected in some way?

Once I finished taking pictures, Sue and I joined the others scouring the water's edge for evidence. The area was littered with cigarette butts, bottles, cans, and other trash that people had thrown out of car windows or left while tromping alongside the river. This was a popular fishing spot, and a couple of makeshift shacks for winter sportsmen sat between the road and the water. No one discovered anything of apparent value, but we collected everything we found just in case.

While the others worked nearby, Sue and I picked our way carefully down the steep bank, looking for any sign—footsteps, broken plants, litter—of the person who had dumped the two bodies. The underbrush was very thick, and we moved slowly, parting grass that was five or six feet high, carefully pushing blackberry vines aside to avoid the thorns. We couldn't see more than a foot or so ahead of ourselves, so I was surprised when, halfway up the bank, we moved through the brush and almost stumbled upon a body.

"I've got another one!" I called out.

While I waited for other officers to come help mark the scene and check for evidence, I had time to examine the body. She was a young African American woman. She was lying facedown. Her legs were straight, her heels almost touching. Her right arm was raised, with the elbow bent at a ninety-degree angle. The only clothing she wore was a white bra, still clasped but pushed up. A pair of blue pants was twisted around her neck.

In my mind's eye, I saw the killer getting spooked by something—the man on the raft? a passing car?—and simply dropping this body before he could reach the river. He had obviously miscalculated, believing that this stretch of the Green River was more secluded than it was. I hoped that he had made other mistakes, missteps that would give us some clue to his identity.

The search for evidence would go on for hours. In the meantime, I would photograph the body and the scene, with Sue recording the details. Down below us, divers waded into the river to retrieve the first two bodies. I went down to help.

It was a gruesome task. The bodies were terribly bloated and starting to decompose. At one point I lost my grip on one of the bodies when the skin simply slipped off into my hands. When we were finally able to get both corpses to shore, we slipped them into body bags and then struggled up the bank, where the medical examiner, Donald Reay, MD, waited.

After we opened the first bag for him, Dr. Reay quickly determined that the first victim taken from the water was African American and that she had been in the water for three or four days. She had no obvious injuries, but there was a sizable bruise on her left arm. The second body from the river, also that of a young black woman, was more severely decomposed, and Reay thought it had been underwater for a week or so.

She, too, showed no signs of trauma. In fact, of the three discovered that day, only the body in the grass bore any scrapes or cuts.

The third body still showed signs of rigor mortis—a stiffening that begins to ease about twenty-four hours after death—so it was obvious she had been dead for just a couple of days at most. Dr. Reay also noticed petechiae, tiny dots that appear on the face from broken blood vessels or hemorrhages. Petechiae form when the pressure in tiny capillaries is so high that the vessel walls burst. People can get them under their eyes or on their nose if they have a bout of severe coughing or vomiting. They are also a telltale indication of strangulation.

I looked down at the young woman and imagined her death at the hands of the beast who had wrapped those blue slacks around her neck and pulled hard, closing off her windpipe and draining the life from her. Her face looked both distorted and sweetly innocent, and I thought to myself, “Each of these women is somebody’s daughter.”

It would take several more hours for us to clear the scene. The rocks that had been placed on the bodies were evidence, so we gathered them up. But nothing in the trash that we found on the riverbank seemed to be important. We could only hope that as we discovered the identities of the three women and traced their relationships and activities, we would see something important.

Nothing at the river connected the bodies discovered on Sunday to Debra Bonner, who was pulled from the water three days before, except for the fact that they were all young females. This came up as I stood beside Frager Road and discussed the case with Major Richard Kraske and other investigators. Debbie Bonner’s parents had admitted she was a prostitute and they had complained about a man she had called her boyfriend, who was really her pimp and drug supplier. His name was Carlton Marshall, and *he* had called *them* three weeks ago to say Debbie was missing.

Prostitution had been part of the picture in two other recent murders. In January, I had investigated the killing of Leanne Wilcox, who had been strangled and then dumped nearby on dry land. In July, the local Kent police had handled the death of Wendy Coffield, a prostitute who was a friend of Leanne’s and who had been strangled and dumped in the Green River.

Wilcox, Coffield, and Bonner made three young prostitutes strangled and dumped within a ten-mile radius. What were the odds that these three additional strangulation victims—all young females—were *not* pieces of a single grotesque puzzle? Any reasonable person would bet that we weren’t dealing with six isolated homicides—crimes of passion or impulse—but, rather, an ongoing campaign of death carried out by a single-minded killer.

Catching the killer would be our responsibility because the bodies lay in our jurisdiction, the unincorporated portion of King County (Seattle and the county’s other cities had their own police departments). At twenty-one hundred square miles, it’s the twelfth-largest county in the entire United States. Once a sparsely populated place of mountains, rivers, and coastline, the county had grown to a population of more than half a million people. Add in the cities, and the head count exceeded a million. But even with all these people, King County included plenty of wild and isolated spots. It

was a perfect setting for serial killings: a big, diverse population surrounded by countless hiding places. To make matters worse, we had just five hundred police officers to cover the entire area. With fewer than one street cop for every thousand people, our manpower was not even half the national average.

The people of King County and the Pacific Northwest have had their share of experience with serial murder. In 1974 Ted Bundy began his killing in Seattle, abducting women from colleges and parks around Puget Sound and then killing them. Coeds were his favorite victims, and people grew ever more terrified as young women disappeared and bodies were discovered. Bundy eventually carried his killing to Colorado and then to Utah, where he was captured. Remarkably, he escaped *twice* and went on to kill more women in Florida before being arrested, tried, convicted, and sentenced to death in 1980.

Though the “Ted murders,” as they were called, had ended, Bundy was still alive and still making headlines with offers to help officials locate bodies so long as he was kept alive. These stories served to remind people that every once in a while a vicious human predator may arise and start killing with ruthless, remorseless abandon. And we all knew that the fear and revulsion created by Bundy would be renewed as soon as the Green River deaths were publicized.

We caught a lucky break on that afternoon at the river when the media failed to appear. Like almost everyone else, most reporters take weekends off, and maybe the few on duty forgot to turn on their police radios. Whatever the reason, we had been able to do our work without having the press looking over our shoulders from the riverbank or peering down from helicopters over our heads. But as soon as Major Kraske issued a formal statement about the investigation, which we had to do given the seriousness of the crime, it became the biggest story in the region. The next morning the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* would greet its coffee-sipping subscribers with a bold headline: 3 DEAD WOMEN FOUND IN, NEAR GREEN RIVER.

The front-page story wouldn't contain the name Ted Bundy, but it would leave the clear impression that someone had embarked on a very aggressive killing spree, which the police had been unable to stop. This early coverage would establish the media's tone for years to come: Another devil was on the loose, and once again the cops were unable to stop him.

As investigators, we could brace ourselves for the criticism that the media would inevitably stir up. But we didn't have the luxury of stopping to worry about it. There wasn't time. On the night after the bodies were discovered, we fanned out to tap informants and other sources. A sergeant and I paid a brief visit to a woman named Michele Marshall, who was married to Debra Bonner's pimp, Carl Marshall. She admitted that Debbie had worked with Carl but insisted she knew nothing about her death, or any of the others'.

It was after ten o'clock. The ME hadn't yet performed the autopsies, and most of the police offices that we could contact for reports on suspects and missing persons were closed. There was little more we could do, so I said good night to the sergeant and got into my car to drive home.

Before I started the car's engine, I knew that I wouldn't burden my wife, Julie,

with all the details from my day. It was bad enough that she had had to make up for my absence at Angela's party. She didn't need to hear a gory tale of bloated corpses and body bags. I would slip into the house quietly, remove my clothes, and jump into the shower. Then I would tell her that it had been a difficult day, but that I was okay.

On the way home, I noticed that the night sky was clear and dotted with stars. I could make out the shapes of the mountains that loom over Puget Sound, sprinkled with the lights of the houses that climb up their sides. With its sparkling sound crisscrossed by ferries and the pristine mountains always in view, Seattle and King County are truly beautiful. People feel blessed to live here. I know I do.

But while the average citizen and countless tourists see an ideal place to live and work and play, the landscape I traveled that night included landmarks they wouldn't recognize. As a homicide detective, I could recall all of the murders I had investigated in dozens of neighborhoods across the region. Memories of those bodies, the families left behind, and the killers brought to justice came to mind. And now there was a terrible new place on the map, another intersection of longitude and latitude where violent death had cast its shadow.

TWO

STRANGER TO STRANGER

ON AUGUST 16, 1982, the King County medical examiner had three bodies in his cooler and no names to go with them. When I went to the lab to collect photos of the women's faces, I learned that all three had been asphyxiated—probably strangled—and that semen had been discovered in two of their bodies. That wasn't all. The two corpses that had been pinned to the riverbed with rocks had come ashore bearing additional evidence: fist-size, pyramid-shaped stones that had been inserted into their vaginas.

You didn't have to be a forensic psychologist to interpret this kind of discovery. Whoever was killing young women and dumping them in and around the Green River was blending a grotesque kind of sexuality with his violent attacks. If all the victims turned out to be prostitutes, then we were obviously looking for someone who was making a statement about the women, the trade they practiced, and himself.

We would stay silent about the rocks found inside the bodies. That kind of information might help us sift out our future suspects, since only the killer could know about them. We also decided to keep a lid on an intriguing bit of evidence found on the body we discovered in the grass. It turned out she had scores of little glass beads, microscopic in size, on her body. Those were collected and set aside in hopes that they might one day bring us closer to the killer.

In the meantime, we faced a series of immediate obstacles. We had no witnesses, except for a rafter who offered vague descriptions of two men and a truck. Very little evidence was acquired at the river. And we didn't even know the names of the victims.

Although I had worked dozens and dozens of previous murders, I had rarely encountered so much mystery in the early stages of a case. In most homicides, police can rely on an official piece of identification or a witness to quickly determine the victim's identity. And crime scenes, especially indoor crime scenes, often harbor very valuable physical evidence. Bullets can be traced to a specific gun. Fingerprints are left on doorjamb and tabletops. Many killers leave behind their own blood, a few strands of their hair, or a bit of thread from their clothing.

The typical murder investigation seems even easier when you realize that most killings involve people who know each other. Often there are friends and associates who can name likely suspects and testify to a fight, a disagreement, or a long-running feud that suggests a motive. A significant number of homicides involve family

members and occur in homes where the police have answered many domestic disturbances. All you have to do is check the reports to get the right names.

You would be surprised by how many cases are cracked when we simply pick up the most likely suspect and take him in for a conversation. Having committed a murder and spent days wondering when the cops will show up, most people feel tremendous guilt, anxiety, and fear. They are so close to confessing that all you have to do is provide the right atmosphere. Then you say things like “I can understand if things got out of hand” or “You’re basically a good guy. We know that. Just tell us what happened.” Eventually one of these questions will be like a pinprick on a balloon. Suddenly the suspect explodes with information. All the facts rush out, and you’ve got your killer.

In every case, you pray for such a quick resolution and worry about running into dead ends. The cases you dread the most are homicides in outdoor settings where there are no witnesses, little physical evidence, and no indication of a relationship between the killer and the victim. They are stranger-to-stranger crimes. This was the situation in the cases of Leanne Wilcox, Debra Bonner, and Wendy Coffield. With all three of these women, we had only the fact that they were engaged in a dangerous profession—prostitution. We could speculate about pimps and johns, but we had little real evidence. And with the additional bodies lying in the ME’s lab, we had a total of six especially tough cases, and a killer who had been very careful to leave almost nothing to pursue.

While I was in the autopsy room, King County sheriff Bernard Winckoski had been meeting with Major Kraske and other senior officers. Fearing that we had another Bundy on our hands, they decided to put together a twenty-five-person task force. Detectives and patrol officers would be drawn from other duties, and we would work under the direction of the major crimes command staff. This move would put much-needed manpower into play, and assure the press and the public that we were serious. But it also signaled to me that I was dealing with a case that would be much bigger, more complicated, and far more demanding than any I had seen before.

I felt this burden quite keenly because I was, officially, the lead detective in all the murders, starting with Debbie Bonner and Leanne Wilcox. This was the way most police departments worked back then. When you had a case, and a related crime occurred, it became your responsibility, too. There was a certain logic to this practice. In those days, long before the computer became a ubiquitous tool, we had to rely on the facts in our heads and use our own intellect to make connections. So there had to be one lead detective who was present at the beginning and responsible for assimilating all the facts. For better or worse, I was that man for the task force.

Although I would direct the activity at every crime scene, read every report, and conduct a great many of the key interviews, I didn’t have to organize the entire project all by myself. My superior officers, Major Kraske and various others, would handle long-range planning and daily management. But it would still be up to me to make sure that all avenues of investigation were followed and that all of the information that was gathered was processed and correlated. We were going to generate an enormous volume of data, and I would have to keep up with it all.

The first thing we needed to do was identify the three bodies recovered on Sunday. We checked our own records on runaways, missing persons, and previously arrested young women. Outside law enforcement agencies tried to help, and we received suggestions from police all over the Northwest. Every local department maintained a list of unsolved missing persons cases. If a match could be made with one of the bodies, then the task force and the local cops would make progress on two cases.

At the same time, we also heard from a steady stream of citizens who had ideas about the killings. Our phones rang nonstop as we struggled to move callers through their stories to determine if anything of value was being offered. Some of the callers gave us serious information. One had overheard a man discussing dumping a body. Another told us that his friend had recently raped a woman and threatened to throw her in the Green River. A third saw a suspicious-looking man in a baseball cap cruising Frager Road in a green station wagon. He made an abrupt U-turn when he saw police vehicles parked along the highway.

It was vital that we hear about the suspicious driver on Frager Road, but, as you might imagine, we also fielded a great many calls from people who were either misinformed or just trying to inject themselves into the drama of the case. One anonymous tipster recommended we look into a man who frequented taverns around Kent and might be into drugs. No other reasons were given. A couple of prostitutes pointed at their johns. One caller suggested that a lonely, old disabled man—he had a debilitating hunchback—should be our prime suspect. Obviously he was her idea of what a killer looks like, but she had no other reason for her suspicion. Several women told us to check out ex-husbands who hated women, collected pornography, and often disappeared without explanation.

We all took these kinds of calls, and in between, we met with every source—snitches, prostitutes, johns, and pimps—who might have seen or heard something important. Knowing that our earlier victims had plied the sex trade, we paid special attention to the nearest active area for prostitution, a section of Pacific Highway that everyone called The Strip.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, The Strip had become an open-air market for those who would pay for sex. Lined with chain hotels, cheaper off-brand motels, bars, and twenty-four hour markets and cafés, this stretch of road was convenient for businessmen traveling through Sea-Tac airport, which served almost thirty thousand people a day. It was also handy for men who worked in the many industrial parks that could be found within a half hour's drive. At around four o'clock every afternoon, young women who had dressed to be noticed would start walking up and down the street as traffic built to around five to six thousand cars per hour. The activity grew as the night wore on. On peak weekend nights, you might see up to a hundred strolling women. Their customers made their "dates" by pulling to the curb for a chat with the vendor of their choice.

Every police officer who worked the area knew the dance performed by the prostitutes and johns. Once a woman got into a customer's car, he might take her to his hotel, or she might direct him to a room she had rented for the night. More times than not, however, the deed would be done in some secluded spot off the highway. Few