

THE COLUMBIA MURDERS

I sank into my chair, completely exhausted. Spread out on my desk were the files of six murders in Columbia and the adjoining counties over the past four months, complete with photos of each crime scene.

I'd gone over those files for hours, trying to find a connection. The first victim, Jennifer Rutledge, was 27 years old and worked at the S&S Bank on U.S. 90. She was a Columbia High graduate who had earned a finance degree from the University of Florida. She returned to Lake City after school, and had been working at the bank ever since then.

On Nov. 5, she left the bank for the night, and met up with some friends at a local bar. At around 12:30 in the morning, they drove her home, and she was never seen alive again.

Five days later, two fishermen found her body floating in the Suwannee. She had been strangled, and dumped in the river.

Kara Sweeney, 28, was a real estate agent at State Farm who lived in Suwannee. On Dec. 14, she was found dead in her home, the victim of an apparent break-in. But, nothing was stolen, and like Rutledge, she had been strangled.

Twenty-five-year-old Stacy Bettman worked at the boutique in Findley Mall. She missed work and didn't call in on Dec. 23, which wasn't like her. Her landlord opened the door to her apartment, and found her body on the kitchen floor. Like the first two, she had been strangled. And like Sweeney, it had been a forced entry.

Jenna Walsh, 25, was studying nursing at the state college. When she wasn't in school, she was working at the town hospital. She went out on her dinner break at 6:05 p.m. on Jan. 6, and never came back. She wasn't having dinner with anyone; she said she was going home to eat. But she never made it.

Her car was found the next day on the interstate, and she was in the back seat with a plastic bag over her head.

The other two women had similar profiles: In their mid-to-late 20s, young working professionals who suddenly disappeared from their lives, only to be found dead. Both women were strangled, like the others, linking the crimes. Apart from the methods of their deaths, and their relatively close ages, there were no links.

We ran down the usual suspects: Jilted lovers, angry family members and friends, disgruntled co-workers. But we found no single personal connection between all six victims, and there were no leads there, either.

The ex-lovers had alibies, or were otherwise not deemed worthy of arrest, and the angry co-workers, family members and friends did not have a strong enough motive to kill the women.

So, in essence, we had nothing. About the only lead we had to go on was the security camera in the hospital parking lot, which picked up a man who was about 6-foot-2 approaching Jenna Walsh as she made her way to her car. He was dressed head-to-toe in black, and his face was covered. From the way his long hair hung from his shoulders and back, I guessed he was wearing a wig.

No, it certainly wasn't enough to accuse anyone. There were plenty of guys in the neighboring counties who matched that description, and what was worse, we could not establish a connection between the few suspects we had and all of the victims. In fact, all of the suspects had two things in common: They knew barely half the victims, and they weren't in the area when some of the murders were committed, which eliminated them from suspicion.

The area was in a frenzy; women were afraid to go anywhere by themselves, and the men in their lives had to accompany them everywhere, because they would not let the women travel by themselves.

As the police chief in Columbia County, I was under considerable pressure from political officials and the townspeople to arrest someone. The problem, as I said before, was there was no one to arrest.

Jeff Sheehy was a drifter in town who went to school with three of the girls, but most of the people in the county attended Columbia High. However, he did not have any connection at all to Kate Sweeney and Cassy Moyer, the fifth victim. That said; the media and the mayor were pressuring me to arrest him anyways, simply because he was “no good.”

Yeah, Jeff had a record for juvenile delinquency and assault and battery, but he was not a killer. I couldn't arrest someone for appearance's sake. But, that's just what the people in town wanted me to do.

“John,” Mayor Tomkins told me one day as we discussed the case, “it's been almost six months and you haven't arrested anyone. You know how bad that makes us look, that we can't connect a single person to this crime? Now, you'd better start getting some results, or I may have to advertise for a new police chief.”

I frowned, and could only say, “I'm doing my best, sir. I'm working as hard as I can.”

He smiled that greasy politician's smile, put a hand on my shoulder, and said, “I know you are.”

It was getting so bad, I couldn't turn on the television or the radio without hearing something about the case. I couldn't leave my house without being accosted by someone -- it didn't matter what age or gender they were -- asking me if I was getting any closer to solving the case, and who I thought the murderer was.

My name was being dragged through the gutter in the local paper, as I had now earned the unflattering nickname of “Chief John ‘Can’t Get the Job Done’-an.” It was embarrassing for myself, the department, and my family and friends.

Those closest to me meant well, but whenever I saw them, they would start to pepper me with questions about the case, or allude to something having to do with the murders, and I would shut down immediately. I’d excuse myself for some random reason, and I would go home rather than face the Inquisition.

I felt like Robinson Crusoe on his deserted island, only I was surrounded by people, people who seemed to me to be living on an entirely different planet.

In the space of one year, since I’d been hired as chief, I’d gone from a well-liked and respected public official to a joke. It seemed that all the good work I’d done in that time had been completely and permanently eclipsed by this one case, a case that had now become my albatross, and, sad to say, had come to dominate my life.

It reached the point where I couldn’t go out to eat, and I was moody and sullen at the office as I spent my entire work day at my desk trying to crack the case. And when I was finished at the office, I would often take the case files home with me to see if I could find a new angle, or discover something I’d missed.

The guys in the department were working just as hard as I was, so they too were feeling the pressure, criticism, and outright ridicule. It felt like the entire station was a pressure cooker that was about to explode.

About the only thing I could do to relax and get away from the case was to watch sports, which I did incessantly, more than I ever had before.

Since I couldn't read the newspaper anymore for fear of seeing more criticism of how we were investigating the murders, I started watching high school basketball games that were broadcast on the local channels.

I was watching Columbia take on Live Oak one night when something one of the announcers said struck a chord.

He was talking about the previous meeting between the two teams in Suwanee, and he mentioned the date they had played was Dec. 14, the same day Kara Sweeney had been murdered.

And I remembered the basketball team had been at home on Nov. 5, the night Jennifer Rutledge had disappeared.

I knew basketball teams played at least twice a week, and it could have been mere coincidence.

But at this point, I was desperate for any new lead I could find.

So, I went to the paper's site online and looked up both game stories, written by Jeff Plum, a writer I did not know. Maybe he was new, I figured.

There was nothing unusual in either story, but on a desperate hunch, I decided to search all the basketball game stories from the current season.

And what I found stunned me.

On each of the six nights a woman had been murdered, a basketball game had been played that night in the very same town where a murder had taken place: Twice in Lake City, then in Suwanee, Live Oak, Bransford, Fort White and Spring City.

That couldn't be a coincidence, I thought. But, what was the connection? Some of the murders had taken place while a game was in progress, which eliminated the players and coaches – unless one of them had been sick or injured on each of the nights in question.

I figured this had to be the best lead I'd had so far, and I decided to chase it.

The next day, I paid a visit to Columbia High, and asked to speak with Coach Skip Watson.

Skip had been a star player at the school about 10 years prior. He was 6-foot-3, well-built, and had a military cut with only a shock of red hair on top showing. He was pale, had a pair of close-set eyes, and a strong jaw.

It was his lunch hour, and I found Coach Watson in his office, going over game film.

"Coach, can I speak with you a moment?" I asked graciously, removing my hat for effect.

"Chief Donnan, how are you?" he said, breaking into a smile.

"Not too good," I admitted. "This damn murder case has had me up all night for months."

"Yeah, I'm sure. I've been reading about it, and I've heard so much about it. Don't listen to people and the papers; I know you'll catch the guy."

"Thanks. I'm actually here to see you about the case."

"Oh, what about?"

"I think I've found my first good lead. I was going over your team's schedule, and I noticed something. You know you guys played in the towns where all six of those girls were killed, on the very nights they were murdered?"

“Really?” he said. “I knew it happened a couple of times, but to tell the truth, I’ve been so busy that I didn’t know it was every single time. But, who did it, and why?”

“I was hoping you could help me there. Have your players and coaches been available on all of those nights?”

Skip’s face suddenly turned as red as his hair, and he said, “You don’t think one of my boys did it, do you?”

“No,” I lied. “I just wanted to account for everyone on those nights.”

Skip opened his desk drawer, pulled out a big black ledger, and slapped it onto the desk.

“All the info’s in there,” he said coldly.

I sat down in the chair opposite his desk, and grabbed the ledger. I went over it a couple of times, but apart from a couple of players who were injured on different occasions, everyone was accounted for on those nights.

I pushed the ledger back to him, and said, “Thanks. Any of your boys or coaches been acting strangely lately?”

“No,” Skip said shortly, “and I don’t like your asking. None of my boys did this, I can tell you that. After games we all typically go to dinner, and if we’re on the road, we go right back to the hotel. Every kid was in at bed check, I can assure you of that.”

“Like I said, I don’t suspect your boys. In fact, I was just trying to establish their whereabouts so I could eliminate them from consideration.”

“That’s kind of you,” Skip said. But I could tell from his tone that he didn’t believe me.

“Any of your boys know the victims?” I asked.

He glared at me, and said, “No, Chief. And again, I mind you asking. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’ve got more film to review before tomorrow night’s game.”

“Oh,” I said, suddenly interested. “Who are you playing?”

“Buchholz.”

“Here?”

“Yeah.”

“Hmm, may have to check that one out. Buchholz is pretty good this year, right?”

“Yup,” he said curtly. “Now, I’ve got to get some work done.”

“I’m sure,” I said. “Thanks for your help.”

He didn’t look at me as I slipped out of his office.

I called a meeting that night to tell my men that we were going to tighten security around town the next night, and I wanted two officers specifically to shadow members of the coaching staff and team from the time school was out. I wasn’t going to miss anything this time. I felt like I had a solid lead, and I intended to see it through.

Some of the men objected, saying they knew Skip Watson, his staff, and the players well enough to know they weren’t murderers. But with the murders still unsolved, and the pressure mounting every day, I couldn’t take the chance.

I had officers on every street corner, at the high school, outside the basketball arena. I felt secure that no one would get past my men tonight.

But, nothing happened. The game ended, my men watched the players and coaches all the way back to their homes, even spent the night parked outside them, and not a single untoward thing happened.

Two nights later, Columbia played in Chippewa, and I phoned the sheriff there, and told him to have his staff on the alert.

He didn't have many men though, so I sent over as many as I could spare, which wasn't enough.

I was in bed that night, asleep, when I heard my cell phone ring. I picked it up, and Ben Hershaw, one of the men I'd sent over to Chippewa, said, "We found another one, Chief."

I could feel my dinner rise up in my throat as I put the phone down.

I drove out to Chippewa, which was only 20 minutes away, to inspect the scene.

A 26-year-old woman, Joyce Martin, was found by the Chippewa River. She had been out for a late-night jog, and had been strangled. No one saw the suspect, who must have slipped away into the surrounding forest. The suspect must've known we had men shadowing the team and the town, and he simply moved the murder off the beaten path, to the outskirts of town.

When I reached the office the next day, I was besieged by the media. They asked all sorts of questions, like why I couldn't find the murderer, why my men and I were so incompetent, and so forth.

I answered only a few, and absconded into the safe haven of the station.

A couple of hours later, when my secretary informed me Mayor Tomkins was waiting to see me, I figured he was there to end my investigation.

Instead, he stormed in, looking like a bull about to gore a matador, threw a copy of the paper on my desk with the murder emblazoned on the front page, and said shortly, "Find him," and left.

I opened a bottle of aspirin, took two with a cup of water, and went back to the case files. There was an obvious connection between the murders and the basketball team, but what was it?

I asked my men to check into any player who was 6-foot-2 who played at Columbia for the past decade. We got a strong lead when Det. Marty Jenkins found Jerry Cole, a guard who played here five years ago who was a deadbeat. He'd been arrested twice for domestic battery, so we brought him in for questioning.

It turned out he didn't have the means to travel to all those road games, as he had sold his car for money. So, he was out, too.

I went back online, to check the paper's archives on the days following the murders. I soon noticed that this new sports writer, Jeff Plum, had written the game story each time. I'd forgotten what happened to the previous writer, a Marshall something or other, and I wondered who this new writer was. Maybe if I paid a visit to the paper, which went against every fiber of my being, I could talk to this Jeff Plum, and see if he knew anything that could shed some light on the case.

I called the publisher, Ed Randall, a burly, gray-haired guy who I knew pretty well, to let him know I was coming, and I asked him to keep his lapdogs off me.

"Now, John, I can't promise you that," he said in his syrupy voice. "My boys have got a job to do, and I can't interfere."

"This is important, Ed, and I can't be bothered by some fool questions when I've got work to do. I'm coming around noon."

“Alright, you do what you have to do. But like I said before, I can’t make any promises.”

I took back roads to the paper, and waited outside the rear door. I called Ed on my cell phone, and said, “I’m outside, in the back,” and he came to get me.

“Hi, Chief, how are things?” he said, mustering the best smile he could.

“You know how they’re going,” I said tiredly, and I followed him inside.

“Who are you here to see, anyways?”

“That new sports reporter of yours, Jeff Plum.”

He stopped, and turned to look at me to see if I was serious.

“Let me get this straight, we’ve got a trail of dead little ladies all over these counties, and you’re here to see our *sports reporter*? You really are losin’ it, Chief.”

“He’s important,” I said as I rubbed my eyes. “He was in the towns where the murders were committed on each night. He may know something, and if your boys would bother to actually investigate this thing instead of tryin’ to roast me over a fire, you might have noticed that connection, too.”

Ed ignored my comment, and we walked silently to the sports editor’s office, which was in the back of the newsroom.

“Talk to Bob,” he said with a grin, and he headed back down the hallway. I looked to my right to see only a couple of reporters were at their desks, which were facing away from me. It was a lucky break, and I knocked quietly on Bob’s door.

“Come in,” he said, and you should have seen the look on his pale, pudgy face as I came striding in.

“Chief Donnan? This *is* a huge surprise,” he said merrily as we shook hands, and I dropped my weary body into the chair across from his desk.

“Who’s Jeff Plum, and where can I find him?” I asked.

“Jeff Plum? What do you want to see him for?”

“He was in those towns every night the murders were committed.”

“No, he wasn’t,” Bob said, and I arched an eyebrow.

“Oh, then whose byline have I been reading in the paper each day after another murder was committed?”

Bob got up, and said cryptically, “Follow me,” and we walked out of his office, and down the back corridor to a private room.

He fished a key out of his pocket, and unlocked the door. He turned on the light, and inside, I saw nothing but a computer on a counter, with an empty chair in front of it.

Bob walked in, turned on the computer, and said, “I want you to meet Jeff Plum,” and I watched as he signed in with Jeff Plum’s name.

“What the hell?” I said, stunned.

“We got one of these from a company called Narrative Science,” Bob said, facing me. “They sell the software, and papers and magazines are buying it; you have no idea how many. You know the trend of declining newspapers, and the cost of sending reporters out to do their jobs, as well as the cost of

paying them, is too much to maintain our profit margins. You know how many people I've had to lay off over the last five years since I took over? We were reaching a point of diminishing returns, and Ed was getting antsy; said if we couldn't make a profit soon, he'd have to sell. So, I did a little research, and found out about Narrative Science from one of my colleagues, another sports editor who shall go nameless. You pay about \$3,000 for the software, which is not chump change, believe me. But, it's a lot cheaper than hiring another sports writer. So, we made the transition."

"But, how does it write stories? It doesn't even leave this room."

"We feed the box scores into the computer, and the software converts it into copy, clean copy. It really does work great, and the writing is quality, better than a kid right out of community college, I must say."

"What happened to that kid who was here before, Marshall something or other?"

"I let him go when we bought the software. He wasn't too happy about it, which is understandable."

"Where'd he end up?"

"He's still in town, I think. Lives with Suellen Halsey on Freepoint."

"Oh, he does, does he?"

"Wait a minute, Chief. Are you thinking he had anything to do with these murders?"

"I don't know, but I do know that the murders are connected somehow with the basketball team. And I'll check him out just like anyone else in this town."

"You're gettin' desperate, Chief," Bob said calmly. "If the news boys find out ..."

“They won’t. This has been off the record, and if you feed them any information about this investigation, I’ll have you up on obstruction charges so fast, your computer here will blow a fuse.”

Bob frowned, and said apologetically, “I was just sayin’, Chief.”

“Good, and thanks for your time,” and I walked toward the back door.

I drove up to Freepoint to find Marshall, but when I knocked on the door, I was faced with Suellen, a pretty young thing with short brownish-blond hair, thin lips, and hazel eyes.

“Hi, Chief, what are you doin’ here?” she asked sweetly, and with a smile.

“Lookin’ for someone you know, Marshall.”

She frowned, and said, “Him? I ain’t seen him for a while; threw him out six months ago.”

“You did? Why?”

“He lost his job, wouldn’t get a new one; was being an asshole.”

“Any idea where he is now?”

“Heard he was livin’ with Jimmy Toban by the lake.”

“Thank you, ma’am,” and I was off.

So, Marshall got fired and couldn’t find a job, then got thrown out by his girlfriend. He was getting more and more interesting.

I pulled up to the small wooden cottage by the lake, but didn’t see anyone around. There was no car outside, but I was curious, so I got out, and approached the door.

I knocked, but no one answered.

The sunlight shone through the large window next to the front door, and I cupped my hands over the glass to have a look. Clothes were strewn all over the floor, as well as something that drew my interest, a Columbia High program that lay on the floor, half-covered by a shirt.

Then, I felt something pierce my left shoulder, and the glass shattered. I spun around as I fell, and drew my gun. Marshall was approaching me with a gun in his hand. I raised mine, and didn't hesitate.

He got off a shot, but missed, before the bullet hit him.

He dropped to the ground, dead.