

WHO KILLED THE GIRLS?



JANE
BELL

Who Killed the Girls?

Jane Bell



Strategic Book Group

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*For Connie and Carolyn
And for Mélanie and Isabelle*

Murder is a crime and a sin, and when a crime remains unsolved for many years, everyone thinks that the killer has escaped punishment. The families still grieve for their loved ones and they know that the legal system has failed to bring justice. Time has not healed their sorrow. They cannot bring their loved ones back. All they want are answers. Why did their loved ones have to die?

In 2008, the breaking of a cold case sent shivers up my spine as I read the newspaper reports from Virginia. Intrigued by the articles, I followed the unfolding story each day as the police released facts and transcripts of interviews with their latest suspect. So much time had passed since the shooting of two young girls in Staunton, Virginia in 1967 that the evidence was thin and sketchy. There were no eyewitnesses and as only a few vital forensic clues remained, the police had let the case slip after a failed attempt to convict someone.

Persistent private investigative work and a chance meeting followed by reminiscences about the case brought new information to light and threw the spotlight on a co-worker of the girls. Overlooked in the earlier investigations and now dying, it seemed simple to focus attention on that suspect and make an arrest. Why did they kill their friends and colleagues? Did they actually take a gun and kill the girls or did they see the crime scene and panic? Were they so emotionally disturbed and confused that they mixed up dates, times, places and events? Did the police neglect evidence or cover up their involvement in the case? Did the killer of the girls frame someone? Dead ends in the cold case suddenly open up as the meticulous questioning by the lover of a suspect provides answers for the hidden twists and angles, culminating in an unpredictable ending.

This intriguing crime in a small country town sheds light not only on the tragic events of 1967, but also on community attitudes to physical and mental abuse, religion and sexuality at that time. I developed this fictional story based on actual events, and I have tried to imagine conversations and describe people, their emotions and the circumstances built from reading newspaper accounts. I have not interviewed anyone connected to the

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case or examined any evidence. The story that I tell is purely the result of my imagination at work based on the tragic deaths of two beautiful girls who never had the opportunity to enjoy life to the full.

Acknowledgements

I could not have written this story without the information contained in the newspaper articles by Brad Zinn and Fred Pfisterer. The Staunton Police Department released invaluable original files and interview transcripts that allowed me to imagine situations, events and conversations. Library staff at the Staunton Public Library provided access to microfilms of historic newspaper reports.

Personal relationships are often complex and stressful so it was serendipitously beneficial in writing this story to watch an episode of Oprah that handled the sensitive issues of ‘fluidity’ in relationships. On that show, several people revealed the benefits they felt after giving up their traditional heterosexual lives and adopting strong, loving homosexual relationships. I found these insights invaluable in helping me frame certain imaginary conversations.

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CHAPTER 1

Monday, June 23, 2008

Lowell Sheets opened the door silently and stepped into the hospital room. Sheets, the owner of the S & W Appliance store on West Beverley Street, had been doggedly pursuing a cold case murder mystery for years. He nervously glanced around. Adjusting his bifocals, he noticed the clear liquid drip and tube connected to the patient's arm. He looked like a Rat Terrier sniffing out new ground.

Antiseptic odor permeated the air. He could smell the subtle, distinctive scent of vomit. Sheets felt lucky; he smiled.

Found you at last, he said to himself. Taking his small digital camera from his pocket, Sheets stepped forward quickly to the head of the bed. *Click!* The image froze on the screen like the still face lying asleep. He stepped back, thinking.

Can't escape now. Hesitating, he lurched forward to look again at the sleeping face. His arm swung the camera easily up to his eye.

Is one photo enough? He wondered. *No, I'll get another one for Roy's scrapbook when she wakes up.*

He stood still, looking at the patient. He waited. There were no sounds or movements. Sheets smiled again, relieved. He sat down on one of the two chairs near the bed.

"Joyce was right! Roy and I have finally tracked you down," he said softly, looking intently at the woman lying in the bed. Sheets and Private Investigator Roy Hartless were seeking answers to questions that their families and their community had been asking for forty years. Now, he was sitting near someone who could give him what he wanted: answers to those questions! He could not believe his recent luck. His gut told him his search was over.

Sheets waited, studying the still form in the bed. This was more than luck; it was the result of their hard work and persistence. He slapped his thigh in self-adulation. *Way to go, Sheets; way to go, man*, he thought to himself.

Time passed, but the sleeping female in the bed did not wake or stir. *Drugs had knocked her out*, Sheets thought. He would have to come back another time.

Disappointed, he stood and walked quietly out of the room, closing the door gently as he left. No one was in the corridor as he walked confidently along the clean tiled floor to the reception area. The duty nurse kept reading the latest *Marie Claire* as he walked out of the Harrisonburg Health and Rehabilitation Center.

Tuesday, June 24, 2008

The duty nurse saw a professional-looking man stride into the hospital. He could easily have been mistaken for one of the senior administration staff. She noticed the brown manila folder he carried confirming his administrative appearance. He wore a gray suit, black-and-white striped tie, and a white shirt. Distracted, she answered the ringing phone. He strode confidently past the reception desk, adjusted his glasses and smiled. He turned left and headed down the corridor to the West Wing. The nurse did not stop him; her boyfriend was on the phone. In any case, the man looked like he knew where he was going.

Sheets stopped in front of Room 33. He listened. There was no sound. He turned the door handle and entered the room. The sleeping female from yesterday was awake. With a stack of pillows at her back, she was looking directly at him as he entered. *More good luck*, he thought.

“Sharon Smith? I’m Lowell Sheets,” he said as he moved toward the bed to shake her hand, an artificial smile creeping across his face.

“Who are you?” Smith asked as she reluctantly held out her hand in a feeble attempt to shake his hand.

“Lowell—Lowell Sheets. I came here yesterday but you were sleeping. I want to ask you some questions,” he replied.

“What about?” She asked cautiously.

Sheets did not know how to start. He was excited. He had found the woman at the center of his investigative world and now he did not know what to say.

“I came here yesterday, but you were asleep,” he repeated. “You know Joyce, don’t you? Joyce Bradshaw. She’s a relative of yours, right? Well, I met Joyce over the weekend and she told me that you were here. I just wanted to come and see you for myself. Ask a couple of questions. That’s all.”

“Huh? Joyce . . . Oh, yes,” Smith answered groggily, still under the influence of sedatives.

“Joyce is your aunt? Right?” Sheets prompted.

“Yes,” she said.

Sheets backed away after shaking hands. He was nervously excited. Plucking up courage, he moved closer to the bed and sat down on a chair. Smith turned and looked closely at his face, but she failed to recognize him.

“I don’t know you,” she said.

“I am a cousin of Connie Smootz. She married Larry Hevener in 1966. Remember?” he asked.

Smith turned away and looked vacantly at the end wall. “No,” she said.

Dismissing her answer, Sheets continued. “I met Joyce at Keith Bourne’s yard sale in Verona and she said that you had collapsed at home and the ambulance had brought you here. So, I’ve come to see you and ask you some questions, if that’s all right?”

“I see,” she said indifferently.

“Joyce told me that you and she worked at Western State Hospital. Is that right?” he asked.

“Yes,” she nodded.

“You were an LPN; that’s a Licensed Practical Nurse. I think that’s what it is, right?” Sheets asked.

Smith nodded. *Who is this person asking me questions? How did he get in here?* She began to wonder.

“You worked at the hospital a long time ago, back in the ’60s, and before you left Staunton?” Sheets asked eagerly. “You also worked at High’s Ice Cream Store, didn’t you?”

Smith looked away from his penetrating gaze and nodded, grunting. “Uh huh.”

“Well, I’ve got something to show you,” Sheets said, opening up his manila folder.

He took out a photocopy of an old newspaper article and held it up for her to see. Smith turned to look at it. She squinted at the headlines. Suddenly, her face went white, shocked. Four black-and-white photographs on the page were of two young girls. Another photograph showed the counter of the store. A headline captured Smith’s attention: TWO STORE CLERKS SLAIN AT TERRY COURT.

“Two bodies and lots of blood,” Sheets said.

“When did this happen?” she asked.

“April 11, 1967, at High’s in Staunton,” he replied.

Sheets searched for a reaction on Smith’s face but there was nothing. Then suddenly she said bluntly, “It looks like the Higgins’ murder in 1955.”

“I don’t recall that,” Sheets said, startled by her quick comment. He had not expected that response. He was hoping she would say something about recognizing the scene in the photograph.

“Looks similar, but I can’t read the small type,” she said. “In the Higgins’ double murder, both victims were shot in the back of the head execution-style. Was that the same with this one?”

“Yes. Both girls were shot in the head—one in the back of the head and the other one in the face,” he replied. His eyes focused on her face. Still not the reaction he hoped for. “Looks like there would have been a lot of blood,” he added.

“Well, you would expect that when you shoot someone in the face. It bleeds profusely. You would know that, Lowell, when you cut yourself shaving,” Smith said.

“I’m sure it happens like that, but I’ve never seen it myself,” Sheets said, putting the photocopy back into his folder.

“Why are you showing me this? Who was killed?” Smith asked.

“You don’t know?” replied Sheets, surprised. “Those two girls in the photos . . . Connie Smootz, my cousin; she was Larry

Hevener's wife. Carolyn Perry was the other girl. Did you know them?"

"No, I can't say I recall those names. It's a long time ago. Why are you telling me this now?" Smith asked, seeming confused.

"You don't know Connie or Carolyn?" Sheets asked agitatedly.

"No! I don't *think* I know them," she answered.

"They worked at High's Ice Cream Store in Staunton. You used to work there, too, didn't you?" Lowell Sheets was frustrated by the answers he was getting. This was not what he expected or wanted.

"Yes, but only part-time and that was many years ago. We wore white smocks. I remember that," she said.

"That's all you can remember?" Sheets asked, doubting her.

"There was black-and-white checkered linoleum; I know that. I used to mop it. The place had a back room, I think, and we used to talk to friends back there when customers were in the shop. I can vaguely remember that, but that's all I can think of," she said.

Smith's eyes were getting heavy and her head dropped forward. A trickle of saliva ran out the corner of her mouth. She wiped it wearily with the bed sheet.

The answers he was getting were not what Sheets wanted to hear. While looking out the window, he thought of what he could ask next. The vibrant green oak leaves, glistening green grass, and the sunny sky contrasted with his somber mood. His initial enthusiasm was waning. This line of questioning was getting him nowhere. Sheets decided to come straight to the point.

Staring squarely into Smith's jaundiced face, he asked firmly, "Did you shoot the girls?"

"Huh? What?" she cried, her droopy eyes suddenly widening.

Sheets did not wait for a reply, but asked in a frustrated tone. "Where were you on the night of the murders?"

"Huh? Where was I when . . . what?" Smith was not fully aware and had answered feebly, not grasping the gravity of his questioning.

“Where were you when the girls were killed?” he repeated.

“The girls killed? What girls? I . . . I don’t know anything about girls,” she mumbled.

“The girls at High’s. Where were you that night?” Sheets insisted.

“Huh? High’s . . . When was it?”

“In 1967. It was April 11—a Tuesday night,” Sheets said slowly.

There was a long silence. Smith looked out the window. Two white fluffy clouds billowed in the bright blue sky, but she barely saw them for her thoughts were blurred and vague. She felt tired. Turning her head slowly back toward Sheets, she answered, “I don’t know. I worked at Western State. I was probably there.”

Sheets moved irritably on his seat. “Did you go to the funerals?” he asked, trying to stay calm.

“I can’t remember. Probably . . .” she said indifferently.

A nurse suddenly burst energetically into the room. She wanted to know what Sheets was doing there. He explained that he was an old acquaintance and had come to see how Smith was feeling. The nurse ordered him to leave before attending to the drip and pillows that supported her sickly patient. Disgruntled and dissatisfied with his questioning, Sheets stood, said good-bye, and walked dejectedly out of the room. He would have to find the answers to his questions elsewhere or return when the nurse had gone. Sheets felt that Smith wasn’t likely to tell him who had killed Connie and Carolyn. That had been the mystery and he thought she could have solved it for him.

At least I found her, Sheets thought as he drove back to Staunton. Smith was one person who had worked in the store at about the time of the murders, but the police apparently had not considered her as a suspect. Hartless had been unable to find her, but the tip that Joyce Bradshaw had given him and now his visit to the hospital to confirm that she had worked there was one positive thing that he had.

He had not wasted his efforts, but his tedious searches, the checking of old records, and his frustrating talks with people had eventually brought him what he wanted. *This is a break-*

through in this cold criminal case, he thought. He had wanted answers to questions about this case, but the police had not been of any help. They had not found the killer. The person who had shot his cousin and her work colleague was still free. All the clues that the police had followed led to a farcical investigation and a short court case. The arrest of Bill Thomas a year after the slayings was a Keystone Cop situation and his speedy acquittal had just compounded the mystery.

Sheets had met Smith, as she now called herself, and when she was feeling better, he could probably get more information from her. He wondered why she had changed her name from Diane Crawford to Sharon Smith . . .

Sheets drove south but he did not go home. He went through Staunton and headed west to Hartless's office. It was next door to Staunton Foods on Morris Mill Road. Hartless's business, Blue Knight Investigations, was in a small red brick cottage set back from the road. His dark blue pickup was in front of one of the two large picture windows that faced the street. Sheets turned off the road and parked in front of the office.

Hartless was at his desk. The retired police officer had worked many cases, but this one had him perplexed. He kept his gray hair trimmed short. A neatly clipped, gray moustache grew thickly over a wide serious mouth. A pair of rimless glasses perched on his broad nose. Papers littered his desk and stacks of files leaned precariously like miniature towers of Pisa. Framed certificates filled the wall behind his desk.

Hartless looked up as Sheets entered, but he did not speak. The two men had known one another for more than twenty years. Sheets paid Hartless to help investigate the unsolved case of his cousin's murder. The family just wanted to know who had killed Connie and why. It had been forty-one years and no murderer was behind bars.

"Have I got news for you!" Sheets said excitedly, breaking the silence.

"Good to see you, Lowell," Hartless answered. He stood and reached across the desk to shake Sheet's hand. Lowell Sheets sat in the chair opposite Hartless.

“I found Diane Crawford,” Sheets said with a beaming smile.

“That’s terrific. Where?” Hartless asked, impressed.

“Actually, she calls herself Sharon Smith now. I spoke with her briefly today. She’s in the Harrisonburg Health and Rehab Center,” Sheets explained.

“What’s she doing there?” Hartless wondered.

“Ailing. I don’t know what her health issue is, but she’s there. Are we lucky? I tell you our luck has changed, Roy. Finally, we’re making progress. I ran into Joyce Bradshaw last weekend at Verona. There was a yard sale and we both went. It was a coincidence; I hadn’t seen Joyce in many years. We got to talking and reminiscing—she’s a good talker. She said that Diane was in the hospital,” Sheets said. “Apparently Sharon—*Diane* I mean—collapsed at her home and they took her to Harrisonburg. Joyce didn’t give me any details. Anyway, it turns out that Joyce is Sharon’s aunt. That’s how she knows about Sharon being in the hospital.”

“So, what’s that got to do with the case? We know that Diane—Sharon now, Diane then—worked at High’s, but the police didn’t believe that she was involved or knew anything,” Hartless said, wondering why Sheets seemed giddy to tell him some piece of trivia.

“Well—and this is the interesting bit that Joyce told me—just listen to this. I couldn’t believe it myself when I heard it . . .” Sheets said with wide eyes.

“Okay, so what’s the interesting bit?” Hartless asked, waiting.

“Well, Joyce told me that a couple of weeks before the girls were murdered, she received a phone call from Diane inviting her for a bite to eat. They went to the Kenny Burger. While they were sitting in the car, Diane told Joyce to look in the glove compartment of her car. Joyce told me that she looked and was surprised by what she saw; there was a pistol,” Sheets stopped for dramatic effect. “Joyce remembers clearly what Diane said, ‘Look at my baby. There are two bullets in it; one’s for Emmett and the other one’s for the Hevener girl who lives on Grubert Street.’”

Sheets paused again, looking for a reaction from Hartless. Hartless did not quite understand what he had heard. He was

still thinking of the file on his desk and had not been giving Sheets his full attention. “What? Say it again slowly. Did you say that Joyce told you that Diane had a gun and a bullet for Connie?” Hartless asked.

“Yep! ‘One for that Hevener girl.’ Connie, obviously, because she lived on Grubert Street—and one for Emmett,” Sheets replied. “The only Emmett I know who could be connected to Diane is Emmett Bradshaw, Diane’s stepfather. And Joyce married Emmett’s brother—that’s the connection.”

“Wow! That’s amazing. There’s nothing in the police files that I’ve read that says anything like that. Are you sure that’s what she said?” Hartless asked, lifting an eyebrow.

“That’s it,” Sheets nodded.

“What Joyce said raises several more questions,” Hartless said, running his fingers through his thinning hair. “It still doesn’t make any sense to me. Why did Diane want to kill Connie? Why did she want to kill her stepfather? Why didn’t the police find her pistol? Did Joyce tell the police about the gun when they were investigating the crime?”

“You never let me finish my story,” said Sheets, getting agitated. “Joyce told me that she had spoken with Detective Sergeant Davie Bocoock about the incident with the gun in Diane’s car. She saw him about two days after the murders.”

“There’s nothing in the files about Joyce’s statement though,” said Hartless.

“Apparently, Bocoock gave Diane a lie detector test soon after the murders and she passed it. Joyce also told me that Bocoock said that the ballistics examination on Diane’s gun came back negative. So, from what she could make out, it was obvious that Bocoock didn’t think Diane was involved,” Sheets explained.

“Did Joyce say anything else? Did she say why Diane had bought the gun or why she wanted to kill them?” Hartless asked.

“No, but Joyce said that Bocoock had told her, in making a passing comment, that Diane was a crack shot with a pistol,” added Sheets, pleased with his detailed reporting of their conversation. “Oh! There is one other thing she did say. Wait, what are we going to call her because this is going to get confusing .

. . . I'll call her Diane; that was her name after all back in 1967. Well, Diane was living with Sharon Paxton on Vinson Street up until she was taken to the hospital."

"I see what you mean. We don't want two Sharons on this case. There's enough confusion anyway," Hartless said smiling. "Tell me what Diane said when you saw her in the hospital."

"Nothing really. She couldn't tell me anything," Sheets sighed. "She only confirmed that she had worked at High's, but she said she couldn't remember Connie or Carolyn. I took her picture. It's on my camera. I'll leave that with you for your records. We can take another one later if you'd like."

"Thanks," Hartless replied. He spliced his fingers together, leaned back in his chair, and put his joined hands behind his head. "You've done extremely well, old friend! You've raised more questions and interest in this case than we've had in a long time. We should revisit some of the key players again. I'll also recheck the police records in case I've missed something. It's a shame that Bocoock is dead. I'd have liked to ask him some questions about his investigation . . ."

Sheets watched Hartless as he thought. He had great respect for the man because he had seen him operate before. Hartless was a real sleuth, a bit like Sherlock Holmes, Sheets thought. He, himself, was a bit like Watson.

Hartless looked at Sheets knowingly. "The first thing to do is to talk with Carroll Smootz and Millie Hevener to find out if they can shed any light on why Diane would want to kill Connie. If Carroll can tell us anything about his sister's relationship with Diane, it would help confirm Joyce's story. There must have been some trouble between those two," he said enthusiastically. "We need to ask Diane the same thing. I don't know whether Mrs. Hevener can tell us much; she's also ill. Then there's Carolyn's husband. Danny may remember something that happened or an argument that Diane had with Carolyn that slipped his mind . . ."

"There's also one of the first responders, Kenny Grant. Don't forget! He might remember something that Carolyn said on the way to the hospital," Sheets added.

“Yes, that’s true. There’s nothing in the police records,” Hartless agreed.

“The police always thought the motive was robbery because of the missing money. That’s why they arrested Bill Thomas, but there’s got to be more to it than that. No one has figured out another motive . . .,” Sheets said. His voice trailed off.

“I hate to raise this with you, Lowell—because she’s your cousin—but Connie could’ve been having an affair. Was there a love triangle? Did some jealous hothead shoot Connie, and because Carolyn was a witness, he shot her, too? He could have made off with the money from the till to make it look like a robbery gone wrong,” suggested Hartless. He sighed. “But that doesn’t seem right if what you just told me about Diane is true—that she had a bullet for Connie. It still doesn’t make any sense.”

“I don’t know, Roy. I was too young to remember what Connie was like. I used to deliver newspapers on my bike and I can recall throwing papers onto their porch,” Sheets said, frustrated. He paused, remembering his cousin.

“Don’t forget that Connie and Larry were just recently married before she was shot,” Hartless said. He thought about what Sheets had been saying and pushed his glasses back along his nose. He proposed another motive. “Maybe they argued and Larry shot her. It’s a long shot—sorry about the pun—and then he killed Carolyn.”

“I’ll forgive you for the pun, but it still doesn’t tie in with Diane having a gun or what Joyce told me. If you forget about her for a minute, we’re overlooking Carolyn and Danny. They had a two-year-old daughter at the time and maybe they argued?” suggested Sheets. “Maybe Danny wanted a divorce or something and they fought. Danny might admit to arguing—every couple does—but he’s not going to admit to killing his wife and shooting Connie.”

“The puzzling thing about all this is that the police records don’t contain any interviews with Diane, Danny, Larry, or Mrs. Hevener . . . or any of the part-time store staff for that matter. It’s just what Bocoock did on the night of the shootings and some useless interviews from people who went past the store before

the killings. There's only Bill Thomas and the newspaper reports of his trial. We *know* what hell he and his family went through to get an acquittal, don't we?" said Hartless. He rolled his eyes.

"Yes, it's frustrating, but we now have Sharon—Diane, I mean—and maybe she can tell us about the relationships and whether there was a love triangle going on in the store that no one knew about," concluded Sheets.

"We have to ask her about the gun and what Joyce said about having a bullet for Connie. *That's* the key to solving this case," Hartless replied.

"I'll talk to Danny Perry and then see Kenny Grant, Mrs. Hevener, and Larry Hevener to see what I can find out before I go back and ask Diane some more questions," said Sheets. "I'll ask her about the bullet thing Joyce told me. Can you recheck the police files and then we'll see where we are after all of that?"

"Sounds like a plan," agreed Hartless, nodding.

"Let's do it then!" said Sheets. He stood up and shook Hartless's hand.

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