

# Heart Full of Lies: A True Story of Desire and Death

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An idyllic Hawaiian wedding held the promise of a wonderful future for handsome, athletic Chris Northon, an airline pilot, a confirmed bachelor-turned-devoted family man; and Liysa, an acclaimed surf photographer, loving mother, and aspiring Hollywood screenwriter. But few, including Chris, had seen Liysa's other side -- her controlling behavior and dark moods, her insatiable hunger for money and property. And no one anticipated the fatal outcome of a family camping trip in an Oregon forest. Liysa soon revealed herself as a victim of domestic abuse that culminated at the campsite, where she shot Chris in self-defense. But crime scene evidence led detectives to wonder if Liysa was a killer, not a victim. Her controversial trial stunned all who thought they knew her. A lifetime of sociopathic manipulations and lies had been expertly hidden behind her façade of perfection -- as was her rage to destroy any obstacle to her ultimate happiness, even if it was the man she vowed to love forever.

Ann Rule wrote thirty-five New York Times bestsellers, all of them still in print. Her first bestseller was *The Stranger Beside Me*, about her personal relationship with infamous serial killer Ted Bundy. A former Seattle police officer, she used her firsthand expertise in all her books. For more than three decades, she was a powerful advocate for victims of violent crime. She lived near Seattle and died in 2015. Chapter One

The mountains and high plains of extreme northeastern Oregon are so far from well-traveled freeways that even most Oregonians have never been to this wilderness area where the sky seems close enough to touch. These are the "Oregon Alps." Serious outdoorsmen and those with family ties to Wallowa County follow the thin red lines on the map that promise at most only "paved highways," up and up through the mountains from Pendleton or La Grande. The summits are more than five thousand feet high, and then the roads descend through tiny villages whose buildings are mostly gray shadows of their former incarnations, tumbled with old-fashioned perennials and weeds, fading storefronts and little churches with peeling paint: Adams, Athena, Elgin, Minam, Wallowa, Lostine. Near the end of the road is Enterprise -- the county seat -- and finally the hamlet called Joseph, named for the great chief of the Nez Percé tribe. All these towns, so far-flung from city lives, have a presence and a feeling of serenity that comes only with long history and time without urgency.

Enterprise and Joseph blossom in the summer as tourists who have discovered Wallowa County arrive. Sheltered between the Wallowa Mountains to the west and the Hells Canyon National Recreation Area to the east, Enterprise, population 1,900, is a wonderful place to live, but only if one is self-employed, working for the county or the city, or serving the needs of the residents. It is too distant from the larger Oregon cities along the coast or in the center of the state to make commuting feasible. The only industry of any sort is up the road eight miles, in Joseph. Perched on the shore of Wallowa Lake, Joseph has embraced sculpture and bronze foundries as a very successful economic lifeline; every street corner has a statue that seems to burst with life frozen in mid-movement -- maidens and cowboys and eagles in flight -- each statue large enough to require a truck to pack it out.

In the summer, Wallowa Lake is a burning hollow in the mountains, with its azure water reflecting the sun and the sky. The water there is cold, but not cold enough to deter boaters and water-skiers, who seem somehow out of place on the waters where Native

Americans once fished. The mountains and the soaring trees have always been there and will always be there; the humans playing on the lake seem, in contrast, quite temporary.

Deer wander at will in Joseph, strolling along the narrow roads, peering into windows, and mingling with tourists at food stands and riding stables. A lift carries tourists who aren't afraid of heights far up the Wallowa Range. Flowers of every variety burst forth in the short summer season, boldly defiant against winter for their precious few months in the sun.

The center of Wallowa County government is in Enterprise, where a courthouse built in 1909 sits in the center of parklike grounds. Ninety-four years' worth of feet have worn away the interior stairways as generations of citizens went about their business with public records and the laws of Wallowa County. Bright greenswards and paths crisscross the courthouse square, and baskets of trailing geraniums, ivy, and sweet alyssum make it resemble a set for *The Music Man*. There are concerts in the bandstand on the court-house lawn, and the melodies floating on a summer's night are nostalgic enough to sting the eye with tears.

In 2000, Dan Ousley was the district attorney of Wallowa County. He was a familiar presence before judges and juries in the courthouse in Enterprise. But he was well into his second term in office before he ever had to deal with a murder that wasn't an open-and-shut case. And when he did have to prosecute a baffling homicide, it was a case that would have challenged prosecutors in Portland or Seattle or San Francisco, a crime that defied all reason, one that could be viewed straight on or through a microscope, and even then failed to reveal all its incredible variables.

Was the victim ultimately answerable for the bloody crime? Or was the accused capable of a meticulously choreographed execution? And perhaps even more important, who was the person who had held the weapon? There seemed to be a dozen different answers, and no way of telling if the personality shown to the world was truly the one almost everyone had perceived. Or was it all a clever masquerade, hiding evil?

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It isn't easy to get to the camping sites on the Lostine River near the Maxwell Campgrounds trailhead that leads mountain hikers into the Eagle Cap Wilderness. To reach the campgrounds, one has to turn off Route 82 and head south from the town of Lostine. The first six or seven miles are partially paved, but that soon gives way to a gravel road. Even a four-wheel-drive vehicle skitters along the washboard road that carves a path through the trees, the road so high-centered that it is a challenge for even the most competent drivers. It isn't a Sunday sightseeing drive; one misjudged stomp on the brakes and a car or truck can slide and roll over and over.

Twelve miles or so from Lostine, fir forests cluster thickly along the road. On the right, there are a few cabins that were once occupied by the late United States Supreme Court justice William O. Douglas when he craved the solace of deep wilderness. They are spartan and overgrown now with brush. On the same side of the road, there is a forest ranger station -- usually the last outpost where a phone of any kind will work. Beyond that, the Wallowas rise

up and up, shutting off radio and cell phone transmission. In this tunnel of trees, it is impossible not to think of the danger of forest fires and wonder how quickly this road could be closed off by flames.

Almost twenty miles in, just before the trailhead, thin rutted paths begin to appear, wide enough apart for tires to traverse. They lead to campgrounds, maintained by the U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service, that are situated so each camping party has privacy. Much sought after in the warm months, the riverside campgrounds are empty in winter, buried beneath snowdrifts, next to a river as cold and clear as ice.

On a weekday morning in the autumn of 2000, most outdoorsmen who enjoyed hiking had gone back to civilization. More so than in many other places, October brought the empty sense that comes with a season's ending. It would be only a matter of weeks before the road in -- or out -- would be choked with snow.

If anyone was camping in early October, their vehicles parked close to the river campsites were nearly invisible from the road. Campers could drive at least seventy-five feet off the main road before they reached the horizontal tree trunk barriers that delineated parking spots. Trees and shadows hid their rigs, and from there, they had only to walk down an easy slope to the sandy shores of the Lostine River.

The Lostine itself is narrow, not more than forty feet or so across, shallow and crystalline with little ladders of rapids frothed with white. It is an icy cold river, stemming from alpine lakes high in the mountains. A storm runoff from the mountains has occasionally turned the Lostine dangerous, but in October it is usually a tranquil upstart of a river two or three feet deep at the most, surrounded by sentry rows of fir trees standing perfectly straight, their feathered tops piercing the sky hundreds of feet above.

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It was early Monday afternoon, October 9, 2000, and the Shady Campground -- one of the closest to the trailhead -- appeared to be unoccupied. There were no sounds at all, save for the wind high in the trees and the occasional cry of a bird. For the moment, it was totally silent in the deserted camping area next to the winding Lostine River.

Rich Stein was the undersheriff of Wallowa County. He had been involved in law enforcement for eighteen years, and he had worked in the Wallowa County Sheriff's Office for fourteen and a half of those years. He was hoping to become sheriff the next month through a flourishing write-in campaign. Sheriff Ron Jett didn't plan to run again.

Stein halfway believed that he was on a wild-goose chase as he drove slowly along the gravel road close to the trailhead. He wasn't quite sure what he was looking for, a lost camper or someone who was injured. Sheriff Jett had sent him up to the campgrounds after Jett received a couple of phone calls from outside the county.

"I want you to go on up to the trailhead -- maybe check things out along the river, see if

anybody is there." Jett had said. "I'm not sure what you might find...."

Stein wasn't really familiar with the campgrounds. His primary job was to oversee the deputies and run the patrol, but in Wallowa County, even the undersheriff had to pull shifts and work patrol. Sheriff Jett had told him to check out all of the overnight campgrounds. Stein thought there were about a dozen of them nestled down by the river. The one he thought was the last campsite was the Williamson Campground, and he drove in, parked, and walked down to the sandy beach but found no one there.

Stein estimated that the area he was searching was about eighteen miles from the town of Lostine. He couldn't raise anyone on his sheriff's radio, so he drove back along the forest road until he came to a high spot where his radio worked. He thought that maybe if he could get a little better idea of what he was looking for, he could be more effective. He called the Sheriff's Office, and Jett said that the latest information indicated that it was probably the Shady Campground he should check out. "It's the last one down the line."

This time, Jett's voice was more serious. It was possible that Stein was looking for a person who was critically wounded. He passed a campground and saw a lone car parked there. He checked that and found nobody in or near it. Now he could see there was another campsite. He glanced toward the sign marking it as shady campground and saw a newer model white Chevy Suburban parked against the log barrier.

Stein pulled his pickup close to that vehicle. Like a lot of cops who have ridden patrol cars for years, he had a bad back, and he winced a little as he eased out of his truck and crossed the uneven ground to look into the Suburban. He could see that the locks were pushed down. Inside, there was camping gear and other items, the usual stuff that people brought up to the wilderness -- but there was no sign of a driver.

The Forest Service's picnic table just beyond the Suburban had camping equipment on it, too. It looked as though a family had enjoyed a picnic. "I walked over there and called out -- announcing that I was a deputy sheriff," Stein recalled. "And I was shouting, 'Is there anyone around?' But there was no response."

There was a tent pitched nearby, but there was no movement inside, and no answer to his calls.

Two trails led down to the river, one shorter and steeper than the other, although neither demanded that a hiker be in good condition. Stein took the shorter trail that went straight down. Even though he knew there was probably a simple explanation for his feeling of dread, he acknowledged the eerie sensation. He shook it off; the people who had come here in the Suburban were probably just taking a short hike from the trailhead. An empty vehicle wasn't unusual.

And then he glanced to the south and caught a glimpse of bright blue fabric spread out down by the river. It was a sleeping bag.

"I yelled again," Stein recalled. "No response."

Gingerly, Stein walked down toward the river, his boots sinking and skidding a little in the sand.

The sun was high in the sky and it cut through the mist in the treetops, casting a glow over the sleeping bag. It was bright enough to awaken even the heaviest sleeper. The mummy-style bag lay at right angles to the river, with the "head" part almost touching a log the Forest Service had placed there just where the sandy beach began. The shallow edges of the Lostine lapped softly against its shoreline. Otherwise, it was completely quiet.

Stein called out again, more softly now, "Anybody here? Sheriff's office..."

Nobody answered. As he got closer, Stein could tell that there was somebody in the sleeping bag. "I approached it very cautiously," he said. He wasn't afraid. And it wasn't as if he hadn't investigated reports of a possible body before; it was more that this was one of the loneliest places he had ever been.

The form zipped into the sleeping bag was as motionless as the scattered boulders on the shore. Stein saw tufts of hair just above the one ear that showed. Either it was reddish blond naturally or something had stained it pale mahogany. He thought it was probably blood or some other dark liquid, although the sleeping bag wasn't stained as far as Stein could see.

At this altitude, in October even the glaring sun wouldn't warm the air in the shadows enough to make a sleeper perspire and peel down the confining layers. But maybe the person who lay there was no longer able to unzip the sleeping bag and crawl out. Maybe the person had fallen and sustained a head injury. Or maybe someone had struck the still form on the head while the camper was sleeping -- or passed out.

Had someone abandoned the sleeper and the camp in the scenic wilderness deliberately? Or had the camper come alone to this small cleared area high in the mountains to get away from the problems of the world, possibly never intending to go back? Was it an accident -- or a homicide? It was so isolated in the Shady Campground that it would have been a long time before hunters chanced on the scene and discovered whatever had happened here. And if a sudden early blizzard came -- as it often did in Wallowa County -- it might have been spring before anyone came in.

Except for the blond hair stiff with blood, and a folding chair tilted at an odd angle in the river, the campsite had an almost benign air.

Stein slipped his hand carefully into the sleeping bag, still hoping that he'd discovered only a drunk sleeping it off. He touched skin and found it cold as marble. He pressed against the flesh just below the ear, searching for the reassuring beat of blood pulsing through the carotid artery.

But there was none.

Stein chose the gently sloping trail back to the picnic area and returned to his pickup truck. He couldn't take the steep route back because he didn't want to walk through the death scene again. It was only when he slid into the driver's seat that he realized he didn't know if it was a man or a woman who lay dead in the sleeping bag.

The undersheriff hadn't touched anything beyond the cold flesh of the neck, and he wasn't going to, not until the sheriff had a complete crew on the scene. Assuming that his radio wouldn't work, Stein drove a mile south to the trailhead. There was an open spot there where he thought he might be able to get through to the Sheriff's Office, but his radio wouldn't work there either. Once more he drove two miles north past the Shady Campground and tried again.

This time he got through.

"Sheriff," Stein said hurriedly, "I need you up here. We do have a body. We need the medical examiner and a lot of help up here."

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The calls that had originally sent Rich Stein up to the Shady Campground had come in to Sheriff Ron Jett from two law enforcement officers who were some distance away from Wallowa County -- one in Washington State and another in Umatilla, Oregon, on the Oregon-Washington state line. The details were blurry, but the callers said they had been in contact with a woman who suggested that someone should check the Maxwell Campgrounds. Either the woman had been there or she knew something abo...

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