

Tacoma Confidential

A True Story of Murder, Suicide and a Police Chief's Secret Life

By

Paul LaRosa

Chapter One

“I LOVE ME”

It was the night of February 15, 2003 and David Brame and Crystal, his wife of 11 years, were fighting again. Their house on Eagle Creek Lane in Gig Harbor, Washington sits in a cul de sac and because Gig Harbor is so quiet, it was easy for the neighbors to hear what was going on. But not one of them called the police. There were a couple of reasons for that: they'd heard the ugly words a hundred times before and they knew who lived in the house. David Brame *was* the police, the Chief of Police in Tacoma, the city that sits just north of Gig Harbor. Calling the cops, well, what good would that do?

“I told you before and I'm going to tell you again. I'm not going with you,” Crystal told her husband David.

Brame sat on the bed, barely looking up. He was putting on his best dress shoes and he was concentrating on them, having noticed a small spot. “Yes you are.”

“No David, I'm not.”

The couple's children, Haley, 8, and David Jr., 5, were just a few feet away, over in the living room watching television, but it hardly mattered to either parent. There had been years of fighting and yelling and screaming. It was normal to them. The kids couldn't help but notice and it certainly upset them but there was little they could do.

They processed what was happening and put it away for another time. David and Crystal

Brame argued so often that they didn't try to hide it anymore. It had become a way of life. Crystal later said when she re-told the story of this night. A neighbor disagreed; he said he once saw little Haley after one such fight and could see that she was not used to the fighting, not at all. After one such fight, he said, he noticed that Haley "had the saddest eyes I've ever seen."

As for David Brame, well, everyone agreed that he loved his kids but he was nothing if not self-absorbed. His administrative assistant recalled a time when he called her at nearly 11 p.m. and asked what she was doing. "I'm driving my son to the emergency room," she told Brame. Without hesitation, he said, "Well, let me tell you what's going on with me." She couldn't believe it but that was David Brame. He was No. 1 and the rest of the human race was a distant second.

David Brame wiped the spot on his shoe to his satisfaction and stood up. He walked over to the mirror above the sink and brushed his hair. Standing straight, he smoothed his good pants and smiled at his reflection. As he often did, he folded his arms across his chest, admired his reflection and whispered: "I love me." It was a weird little habit but Crystal had seen it before. She was shocked the first time but now it was just another strange little thing that David did and he did plenty of them. At least this one was harmless. He was a narcissist, handsome and proud of it. For a person who liked to keep secrets, he had a remarkably open and friendly face; a small lock of hair that fell onto his forehead only accentuated his boyish charm. David Brame had charisma; he was a born leader. *That*, there was no denying.

He smiled at his reflection a second time. He had come a long way from his upbringing in East Tacoma, the perennial poor side of town. And now, here he was: he'd

achieved his lifelong dream, becoming chief in his hometown of Tacoma, Washington. And it felt good. He was 44 years old and looked like a man in his prime, a powerful man. He was just over 6 feet tall and had put on a few pounds but so what? He had power and he looked great when he wore that police uniform. If you were making a movie and looking to cast someone in the role of David Brame, Police Chief, you would pick someone imposing but with all-American good looks, perhaps Kevin Costner in his prime. That's how handsome David Brame was. And he knew that plenty of women would do whatever he wanted.

Plenty of women, but not Crystal. And that's what galled him more than anything. For the first time, he let sink in what she'd been telling him for the better part of an hour. She didn't feel well and wasn't going to accompany him and his cop buddies over to Anthony's, a terrific seafood restaurant that sits on the Gig Harbor waterfront. It has views to die for; there are no bad tables at Anthony's. Brame enjoyed going there and this was a special night. They were celebrating the appointments of Brame's new Assistant Chiefs. He looked over at Crystal. She was just barely 5 feet tall and he towered over her. And he knew for a fact that she didn't weigh more than 105 pounds. He saw to that. Each morning after her shower, he made her stand on the scale while he watched. Still, she looked heavier than she used to. Must be gravity, he thought. Happens to every woman and, after all, Crystal had born him two children. But so what? Was that an excuse? There were plenty of female cops older than Crystal who looked a lot better and, truth be told, he'd already picked out one he especially liked. If only Crystal would do some exercise. He took a step toward her.

“Crystal, you’re going to make us late. I’m the chief. I can’t be late. Now get dressed.”

She bristled: “Get this right. I am not going with you.”

Crystal’s voice was an octave higher than usual and had a slightly hysterical edge. He wasn’t even sure he wanted her to come but he wasn’t going to give in that easily. She’d been challenging his authority much too much lately. He had to try to reassert his control over her.

“I think I need to change this shirt. Have you seen my blue turtleneck?”

“It’s in the closet.”

Brame took a step into the bedroom’s walk-in closet but then had a better idea.

“Can you at least show me where it is?”

Crystal slithered past him in her usual, scared-shit way. As soon as she did, he took a step and blocked the doorway, the only way out.

Then Brame reached out, clamped one hand hard onto her throat and pushed her to the very back of the walk-in closet. He pulled the door closed behind him. “You fucking bitch,” he snarled. “You’ll do what I tell you to do. Now get dressed before I dress you myself.”

“No,” she gasped.

Her voice reflected the strain of having Brame’s hand around her neck.

“Why do you have to be such a bitch? Do you want to spend another two hours in here?”

Her eyes jumped, registering fear. He’d locked her in here – this 6 by 9 foot closet -- once before and, when he went to get her, she was lying on the floor crying like a

whipped dog. He'd picked her up that time, thrown her into the bathroom and told her to clean herself up. Brame knew she didn't want to go through that again.

“So are you going to come?”

She said nothing and for a moment, neither did he. Deep inside, Brame knew something had changed in their marriage. He'd even let a couple of associates know he was having trouble. Crystal had been standing up to him more and more in the past year and he didn't like it one bit. She'd always had her moments when she lashed out at him, sometimes physically, but she'd always been under his thumb. Now she was talking back, gaining strength. He thought it had something to do with her dopey family. That pissed him off even more. There was her overweight, pathetic sister Julie, Julie's blustering husband Dave Ahrens who acted like he was better than everyone else, and Crystal's parents, Lane and Patty Judson.

Patty was especially annoying. Crystal had been talking to her, telling her things. Brame could tell by the way Patty had been treating him in the past year. She once even had the gall to tell him: “You'd be nothing without your uniform and your gun.” Brame hated her for that and to make matters worse, she was always around, always underfoot or on the phone. She was irritating him -- a human barnacle so that's just what he'd begun to call her: The Barnacle. And he wished he could crush her like one too.

Patty's entire goal in life seemed to be making sure her kitchen was spotless. Oh, she did have one hobby, Brame thought wearily. She liked to collect stupid figurines of roosters and she treated her hobby like it was fucking brain surgery. He hated it all the more because Crystal had picked up the hobby so that now his kitchen had all these stupid fucking roosters in it. Brame thought of Patty Judson as a sad, little woman, who,

like Crystal, was standing up to him a little too much lately. He was the chief but she showed no respect and somewhere down the line, he was going to make her pay.

And then there was Crystal's father Lane. A former Navy man who had worked for Boeing for decades, Lane was at least a man's man. But his talking, God, he never stopped talking. With his thick white hair and coke-bottle, oversized glasses, he was a dead ringer for Phil Donahue. And wouldn't you know it? The guy never stopped chattering on and on about the Navy, telling one boring story after another, popping open cans of Budweiser until he was red in the face. The guy had no restraint. He could never be a cop like Brame. Restraint. Strength. Those were qualities Brame admired. He liked to rule with those in mind like his hero, Michael Corleone, the Godfather. Brame kept a photo --- a signed photo --- of Al Pacino as Michael Corleone in his office to remind the cops beneath him that he was the Godfather of the department. They had all seen the movie of course and they all knew what happened to those who crossed Michael. Restraint and strength. Just like Michael Corleone. You would never see David Brame drinking beer and re-telling the same old war stories. Shit.

Brame looked again into Crystal's eyes. He wanted to just snap her neck right that instant like he'd always promised he would. But he had to act with restraint. And then his eye fell on his service weapon, a Glock .45 caliber, the gun he always kept in the walk-in closet.

Brame let go of Crystal's neck. She started whimpering and rubbing it, complaining that he'd hurt her. He picked up his gun. "Quit crying and look at me Crystal."

She looked at him and the gun.

He popped out the clip. "Okay, if you really want to stay home by yourself with the kids I'm going to teach you how to protect yourself. Here," he said, holding the gun by the barrel and handing it to her.

She withdrew. "I'm not touching that gun."

"No, really, I want you to learn how to use it. Don't worry, I took the clip out."

Crystal had her back to the closet wall. Her eyes flickered all over the place but she was trapped. He had her.

"No," she told him.

"Take it you stupid bitch. There's no live ammo in it. Look."

He raised the gun over his head and pulled the trigger. There was a click but that was it. Crystal still wasn't buying it. "I don't know how stupid you think I am but I'm not touching that gun."

"What if there's an intruder? Don't you wanna protect the kids?"

"David you must think I'm really stupid."

He sneered at her. "I don't *think* you're stupid, Crystal. You *are* stupid."

He shoved the clip back in with a violent thrust and put the gun back down on the shelf. But then he picked it up again and turned back to her. He stuck the barrel in her face. "Remember one thing, Crystal. Accidents happen."

Then Brame grabbed his blue turtleneck, pulled it on, turned and walked out. He passed right by the kids watching television and stormed out of the house without another word. Haley and David both looked up to their father but Brame never even said goodbye.

Crystal lay in the closet for a long time, trying to regain her composure. David had threatened to kill her before but this time, this thing with the gun, this was different. He had crossed a line. She'd majored in criminal justice at the University of Washington in Tacoma and had seen enough television programs about criminals to know that Brame had been trying to get her fingerprints on the weapon. This was more than just a fit of anger. This time, he seemed to have something more in mind. This time, she thought he was *planning* to kill her. He was thinking in advance. Once her fingerprints were on that gun, he could kill her anytime. In her sleep even and she knew he didn't care much about the kids. He wouldn't care if they were home when he did it. He was sick, a monster. But he was the police chief. No one was going to question him too carefully. He'd already filled the department with his friends and gotten rid of his enemies, just like Michael Corleone, the sicko movie mobster that he admired so much. For years -- Crystal knew, because Brame had told her -- he had let it slip to his colleagues that his wife was becoming more and more irrational, hyper, excitable. Even the kids had noticed it, he'd say. So if she wound up dead one day from a self-inflicted wound, so what? She must have just snapped. Case closed.

"Accidents happen."

Crystal could not shake those words. It was a threat. He was right. Accidents do happen and there would be no investigation. He's the Chief of Police, she thought bitterly. She'd be dead and that would be that. She could hear what Brame would tell those who came to her funeral: "Poor Crystal. She was really getting nuts toward the end there. I guess I should have gotten her help. Thank God she didn't hurt the children like that woman in Texas."

Crystal cried softly to herself. Thank God she had her escape already planned. She would get out and then he'd be sorry. But he'd also really be angry. How angry, that was the question? Lying there, Crystal couldn't help but wonder how had it come to this? How had her life gotten this bad? Not just for her but for her children too.

In her divorce papers and from what she told to others, this was the picture Crystal painted of her life with David but, when investigators later dug into the details of their lives, a different, fuller picture emerged that was not quite so simple.