

## CHAPTER ONE

### The Discovery

Scott Joseph Dunham is a trucker based in Las Vegas. He puts in long hours hauling freight, and in the early-morning hours of December 14, 2005, he was driving his truck west on State Route 160 — a mostly desolate stretch of highway that serves as the main artery between Pahrump and Las Vegas.

Dunham was nearing Mountain Springs — roughly midway between Las Vegas and Pahrump — shortly before four a.m. and he was tired, but he decided to keep his truck plodding along as he descended a hill a few miles short of the Sandy Valley Road on 160.

Then, he noticed two vehicles quickly approaching from behind.

“A high rate of speed, and I was already doing sixty-five miles per hour,” Dunham said.

The vehicles appeared to him to be a truck and a small compact car. They flew by his truck like he was standing still.

“The two vehicles were like right on, right up against each other,” Dunham said. “Like they were almost connected by a cord. That’s what really caught my eye. I was like, wow, these guys are, like, really on each other.”

Dunham didn’t think a lot of it until a few minutes later as his

truck approached the rural Sandy Valley Road. There, at the intersection with State Route 160, he saw the truck again, and it was speeding back onto the highway from Sandy Valley Road.

“What really caught my eye was that white pickup that passed me with that other car come flying out of Sandy Valley Road and, not even stopping at the highway, it went sideways in the intersection,” Dunham said. “I went damn, that’s the same truck. And then I saw the fire.”

In the desert, off State Route 160, he saw flames flickering.

Days later, when he saw the news, he called the cops and told them about the truck and the car that had passed him on the rural highway.



Dick Draper is a crucial cog in the community of Mountain Springs. He is the chief of the volunteer fire department, meaning he and his fellow volunteers give area residents protection from fire when the firefighters from the Las Vegas Valley’s Clark County Fire Department are tending to their own problems.

In the early-morning hours of December 14, Draper got a call from Clark County dispatchers in Las Vegas, and dispatchers were reporting that a motorist driving on State Route 160 had spotted a fire on Sandy Valley Road, which slices through Route 160.

Draper headed out alone, and when he arrived he noticed the fire illuminating the still-dark desert sky.

“Basically they just told me it was on the Sandy Valley Road, just south of 160, and I could see the flames from it when I came around the corner,” Draper said.

Draper called dispatch to give details of the car fire. A 2003 red

Jaguar was fully engulfed, flames licking up 10 to 15 feet in the air.

“A vehicle fully involved from the back seat forward,” Draper said. “It was flaming up pretty hard and the rig I had [had] a limited amount of water on it ’cause it’s my quick attack [fire truck,]” Draper said.

Draper figured he would use the small volume of water and foam on his truck to knock the fire down, then return to the station to get a bigger truck to finish the job.

“There was a lot of magnesium in that car,” Draper said. “I returned . . . I believe it was about 5:15 a.m. or something like that and continued to knock the fire down. I had a lot of problems with the gas leaking out of that tank. It kept flaming up underneath. But I finally got it knocked down by drowning everything.

“I thought it was a torch job,” Draper said. “We get . . . yeah . . . a lot of them [vehicle insurance scams] out here.”

As steam rose from the once-luxurious Jaguar, Draper took a closer look at the car’s interior.

“The back seat was gone,” Draper said. “The back of the back seat, and you could see into the trunk. And I seen the body then.”

Draper saw a partially burned body in the rear of the vehicle.

“You can see what appears to be a skull and teeth, and, uh, the body’s got a shirt on it,” Draper said.

Las Vegas police officer Jeff Hodgekins arrived and Draper called in to update dispatch of the scene.

“I told ’em at that point, I said that I’d found what I thought was a body in the back of the car, so it was going to be more than just a fire inspection,” Draper said.

Las Vegas homicide is one of the most respected divisions of the massive Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department. The twenty-four detectives, four sergeants and one lieutenant ply their trade out of an office on West Oakey Boulevard with the sole goal of fulfilling their mission — catching cold-blooded killers in the devil’s city.

On December 14, 2005, a team of detectives from the division was assigned to the case of the dead body in the burned-out car on Sandy Valley Road.

They are veteran investigators Rob Wilson, Ken Hardy, Dean O’Kelley and Cliff Mogg. Their supervisor, Sergeant Rocky Alby, would oversee the investigation with assistance from homicide Lt. Tom Monahan.

Wilson is a five-year veteran of the homicide division. Mogg is a ten-year veteran of the police department who has been assigned to homicide for three years. O’Kelley is a fourteen-year veteran of the force with three years on homicide and seven prior years of investigation in gang crimes.

Hardy is a long-time veteran of the homicide unit and has been on the police force for more than twenty years.

The detectives drove the forty-five minutes or so through the southwest side of Las Vegas to State Route 160, which wound its way into the mountains and through the desert to the crime scene.

Upon arrival, the detectives observed what Draper had reported — a female body in the trunk of the smoldering car.

To help process the crime scene, the detectives relied on Senior Crime Scene Analyst Jessie Sams and Crime Scene Analyst Marnie Carter, who described their arrival at the crime scene at 9:30 a.m. in testimony later offered to a Clark County grand jury.

“It was a desert scene, somewhat remote-looking,” Sams said. “It was kind of cool that day and a little bit windy, just desert scrub area, and there was a lot of wetness and, like, mud, water, from where they had put out the fire.”

Sams offered her observations of the torched red Jaguar.

“It was burned out,” Sams said. “There was very little color left on it. It was just a few spots of red that you could see. All the windows were gone, the tires were pretty much blown, the handles, the lights, all the trim, everything like that was burned up.”

A Clark County Fire Department investigator, Mark Passalaqua, did some preliminary tests on the vehicle and concluded an accelerant was used to start the fire.

On the ground near the vehicle was a flashlight.

“It was lying in front of the vehicle and some broken pieces of it in the middle of the road,” Sams said. “There were some apparent tire marks, partial tire marks, and footwear in front of the vehicle, and there was a beer can to the west of the vehicle.”

Sams documented all the evidence. The tire marks and footwear impressions were somewhat difficult to secure, because of the risk that wind would blow them away prior to casts being made.

Also, to the rear of the car was a partial license plate with the number 9-PPL. The rest of the tag number could not be discerned, but Draper wrote down the plate number before it was destroyed, and the car came back registered to a Kelly Ann Ryan, who lived at 9539 Adobe Arch Court in Las Vegas. The car was a leased vehicle financed through Primus Financial and Ford Motor Credit under Ryan’s name.

The detectives entertained at least the possibility that the victim in the trunk could be Ryan.

The crime scene analysts, meanwhile, snapped photos and a police helicopter was called to take an aerial snapshot of the crime scene. An inventory of items in the car was made by Sams.

“There was a suitcase frame, there were bits of what looked like personal items, clothing items, keys, there were tweezers, there was some little ceramic salt and pepper shakers, there were some what appeared to be syringes,” Sams said.

“There was a part of a barbecue set, purse, it looked like part of a purse or a little make-up case,” Sams said. “There were lots of things that were almost unidentifiable because of the fire.”

The body was in the trunk, and it looked like the victim was a female, according to a narrative Detective O’Kelley would later pen for a warrant in the case.

“The remains were burned beyond recognition and appeared to represent the physical size of a small person as indicated by the length of the remaining torso, legs and small rib cage,” O’Kelley said. “Remnants of the victim’s clothing, a blue hooded sweater, denim jeans and red panties, along with items of jewelry, indicated the person was most likely female.”

Sams noticed there were blankets in the trunk, several of them fleece material, and the victim’s “head was covered so you couldn’t see the face.”

Sams and the detectives inspected the body more closely.

“It looked like there was a wire that was like in the neck area,” Sams said.

The parts of the body that were left were removed and again photographed, and detectives noticed the remaining portions of the victim’s face were covered with a weave pattern fabric that was likely secured to her head with the wire. The officers and CSIs did not remove what was on the

victim's face or the wire. That would be the job of the coroner.

As the body was removed, detectives also noticed some small loose bones in the trunk.

The body was placed in a sealed body bag and removed by a mortuary service, then transported to the Clark County Coroner's Office.