

Chapter 14

“Gooooood afternoon Seeeeattle, and welcome to Crime Beat. Your afternoon drive time show that keeps you up to date on all the criminal activities in the Puget Sound Area.” The DJ leaned into his microphone. “I’m Dave Lawrence and I will be your host this afternoon.”

In the six months since Dave pitched the idea for Crime Beat to the station Manager at KRKO-FM, it had become a regional phenomenon. People had a morbid curiosity about crime. It scared them shitless to think that there might be a serial killer living next door, yet it was like going to an auto race. Even if they wouldn’t admit it, they wanted to see a crash. They wanted to know all of the gory details.

And Dave Lawrence brought them the gory details. Every weekday afternoon he had reporters, cops, DA’s, hell, he even had criminals on his show.

He often took his tape recorder to the local jail or state prison to interview the perpetrators of these horrible events. And they talked. Once they had been convicted and no longer had anything to lose, they actually bragged about their crimes.

Ratings soared. His show moved from an obscure night time slot to drive time. Now it was the number one drive time show in the market. He couldn’t wait. There was talk about going national. He ever heard rumors that KRKO-FM’s network affiliate, NBC, was interested in making it a summer replacement show.

Dave knew how to sniff out a story that would grab the public’s attention, and this was one. How could the disappearance of the owner of a chain of seedy sexpresso stands not grab headlines?

“Today on Crime Beat, we investigate the disappearance of sexpresso stand owner Dick Randall.” He loved the term, sexpresso stand. It really told the story.

“Mr. Randall, owner of eight Beach Hut Bikini Barista stands in the Puget Sound area disappeared two weeks ago. His burned out Toyota pickup was found along Route 395 in the California desert.

“Was he murdered or did he fake his own death? You be the judge. On today’s show, we have Mr. Randall’s brother-in-law, Dan Anderson and his son, Richard Randall Jr. to give their opinions.”

Dave sat back in his chair and smiled. He knew that this was yellow journalism at its finest. A little smut, a little gore, stir up the masses, and he didn’t have to prove anything. Rumor and innuendo were his stock and trade.

“Dan Anderson, you knew Mr. Randall well, we’ll start with you. What’s your opinion?”

“Well Dave,” Anderson stammered a little. Nerves. “I think he’s dead. I think his no-good wife, Karen, had him killed.”

“So you’re thinking murder-for-hire?”

“Yes. Karen and Dick were always fighting. She wanted to run his business. She was always telling him how to do things, that she could do it better than him. I think she did it to take over his business.”

“How about you, Dick Junior, what do you think?”

“I agree with Dan. I think my dad’s dead, Mr. Lawrence. But I don’t think she hired anyone to do it for her. I think Karen Randall is an evil woman. I wouldn’t put anything past her. She forged my signature so that she and my dad could adopt my son. She’s capable of anything. I think she killed my dad herself.

“It’s her style. She wouldn’t trust anyone else and she’d want to see that it was done right.”

“Okay, Dick. Let’s explore that thought for a minute,” Dave said. “Let’s say that she did do it. The burned out truck was found over three hundred miles from Las Vegas where she lived and where your dad was last seen. That’s at least a five hour drive each way.

“Mrs. Randall told the police that she was home by herself that evening. The police stopped by her house in the morning to question her. She didn’t look like she’d been up and driving for ten hours, much less killing your dad and disposing of the body.”

“My son wasn’t home that day,” Dick Jr. said. “She was by herself in the house all day. We don’t really know when my dad was there. We just have her word for it.”

“She could have stashed a car in the desert, then drove with my dad to where the car was, then killed him.”

“I’m sorry, Dick, but that theory just doesn’t hold up.” Dave was enjoying this exchange. “Your father’s tenant saw him at the rental house that afternoon. He helped your dad load an expensive espresso machine in the back of his truck.”

“Uh . . .” Dick Jr. stalled a moment to think. “Well, we don’t know that he didn’t go back by Karen’s house. You know, to pick her up.”

“Okay, say he did pick her up. How would she know what route he was going to take?” Dave Lawrence saw all sorts of holes in this theory. “He was supposed to be driving back to Seattle. The route he took would take him through LA, hundreds of miles out of his way.”

“Well, maybe she didn’t drive with him. Maybe she followed him. She trailed him and pulled him off the road and shot him.”

Dave turned to his other guest. “Dan, what do you think? Does this theory hold water?”

“I don’t know, Dave.” Dan Anderson adjusted his position in his chair, then leaned in to the microphone. “I don’t think so. She’s a tall woman, but she isn’t that strong. Dick’s a good sized guy. The body has disappeared. I don’t think she could have moved him by herself. I think she had help.”

“What kind of help? A professional hit man? A lover?”

“I don’t know. It could be either, I guess. I know she’s capable of doing this kind of thing, I just don’t see her getting her hands dirty. She wouldn’t want to break a finger nail. I told the police to look at

her a little closer. I bet that she has a boyfriend stashed somewhere. Maybe some young guy she could manipulate.”

“If she did do it, what did she have to gain?”

“I hate to tell stories out of school, to speak ill of the dead, but Dick and Karen weren’t living together. She lived in Vegas and Dick had a house here. I hate to say it, but Dick had another girlfriend. It was just a matter of time until he filed for divorce. He’d been married six times, you know.”

“And so you think that Karen did him in to prevent that? To take over his evil empire?”

Dave Lawrence loved it. Sex. Murder. Betrayal. His ratings would soar today. The phone lit up like a Christmas tree.

“I see we have calls stacking up here. Let’s go to the phone . . . “

This was the hottest story he had covered. It would make a great plot for a prime time TV series. Maybe after he got his TV show, he could pitch it to the network execs. It was the hottest thing on Seattle radio.

Until he got his next story.

Leah Sykes wore long, long jeans and an orange and black turtle neck sweater. The colors of her sweater clashed with the fiery red color of her kinky hair.

Ted took another look at her. He had seen Leah many times and she always dressed to cover up her body. He sensed that she was embarrassed by her height. Now that he had seen her nude, he had a greater appreciation for what lay underneath all the denim and wool.

Okay, maybe it wasn’t the gentlemanly thing to do, but Ted was a red-blooded American boy. He couldn’t resist. He had to check out the dirty pictures before he destroyed the revenge.com website.

“Mornin’ Leah,” he said as he reached for the purple and gold coffee mug on his desk. “You ready to work today?”

“Yeah.” Leah had a radiant smile on her face. “I’m feeling a lot better today.” She plopped down on the chair that Ted had scooted next to his and took his hand. “I don’t know how to thank you.”

“Don’t worry about it.” Ted smiled at his friend. “All in a day’s work. We save damsels in distress and fight fire-breathing dragons.”

Leah took a deep breath. “Well, let’s get to work. You said you’d dug up a bunch of financial data on Richard Randall?”

“Yeah.” Ted had yet to run into a system that he couldn’t hack. Randall’s home network was child’s play. “He kept all his records in QuickBooks. I can’t believe how stupid people can be. His password was ‘password.’ That’s got to be the most common password in the world.”

“Well, let’s see what you’ve got.” The tall redhead leaned in to look at Ted’s computer screen. For an hour or so, they searched through Ted’s pirated data. Neither of them had the slightest qualm about illegally accessing their target’s systems.

“He’s not much on keeping receipts, is he?” Leah asked.

“No. I’m not an expert, but he looks pretty sloppy to me.”

“Well I am an expert,” Leah said. “And I can tell you that he couldn’t pass an audit if the auditor was deaf, dumb and blind.”

Leah was an expert. She graduated from Washington State University with a bachelor’s degree in accounting. After several years at a Big Four accounting firm, she struck out on her own. Her specialty was forensic accounting. She had been certified by the courts and often testified as an expert witness.

She loved the freedom of working for herself. She also liked the variety. No two days were ever the same. Today she might be working for attorney Jennifer Trask on a divorce case. Tomorrow she was tracking down securities fraud or embezzlement.

Her favorite client was her close friend Catrina Flaherty. She and Cat went back several years. Cat hired her to track down a husband's missing assets for a client and they hit it off. She probably had dinner or drinks with Cat at least once a week.

She still hadn't gotten over the death of Jonathon Jefferson. She loved the handsome black man. Even though he was ten years younger than her, she could really have fallen for him. Too bad he played for the other team.

But Ted was okay. He wasn't someone she could ever be interested in. He certainly was good looking, with his olive skin and dark hair. She could get lost in those dark eyes. But he was twenty years her junior. Even that wasn't the worst. He was at least four inches shorter than her, being with a short man made her feel even more self-conscious.

She liked Ted's sense of humor and that he didn't take anything too seriously. Cat told her about their recent adventures in Mexico and she decided that she didn't want to be on his bad side.

"You know," she said. "Something isn't right here."

"Like what?" Ted asked.

"Well, where there's smoke, there's usually fire. Look here." She pointed to the screen. "His bank deposits. Now look at his receipts. Do you see it?"

"See what?"

"His deposits are routinely more than his receipts. How can he deposit more money than he takes in?"

"Hmmm . . . you're right."

Leah leaned back in her chair. "And look at this. He's spending way too much money on a few of his suppliers. Take his garbage bill for instance."

"Uh-huh." Ted leaned in to his screen.

"That's way too much. That kind of garbage bill would be appropriate for a big supermarket or a shopping center. But for eight little coffee stands? It doesn't make any sense."

She looked over at Ted and saw the wheels turning in his head.

"And look at this dairy bill. It's from a jobber," she said.

"A jobber?"

"Yeah. The deliveryman is an independent businessman. He buys his products from the dairy, then delivers them to his customers."

"Okay, so?" Ted leaned back in his chair and scratched his head.

"So, his dairy bill is way out of line with industry standards. If you brought me in as a consultant, the first thing I'd tell him is to get a new dairy vendor."

"You know what this has me thinking?" Ted asked.

"What?" She turned to Ted.

"Who controls the garbage companies?"

Leah shrugged. "I don't know. Who? Some big corporation?"

"Yeah, but not who you think. The mob. The mob controls the garbage business."

Leah laughed. "Ted, don't be so naïve, you've been watching too much *Sopranos*. There's no mob in Seattle."

"Look who's being naïve." Ted laughed, then his voice took on an icy tone. "I've met them. I did a job for them a few years ago. That's how I first met Cat. Rico Caglione. He's the big mob boss in Seattle."

"Yeah, but he's in prison. He was put away a couple of years ago in the Strippergate case."

“Just because he’s in jail doesn’t mean his organization isn’t still active. Someone is still running his strip clubs. I’ve been in his network. I know he has other businesses, including the garbage company.”

“So you think this is mob money?”

“My spider sense is tingling. I’d bet you even money that Randall was laundering money for the Mafia.”

Monroe was a pleasant little town in the rolling hills north and east of Seattle. Rico Caglione had driven through town numerous times on his way to Steven’s Pass to go skiing. What he never wanted was to be a guest of the state at the correctional facility there.

Caglione had been caught up in the Strippergate scandal. He was convicted of funneling illegal campaign contributions to three Seattle City Council members in exchange for their favorable votes on a zoning waiver to allow more parking for his Dirty Bird strip club.

The hell of it was, here he was, doing five to seven in Monroe, while the council members had all been re-elected and were serving out their terms on the council. Where’s the justice in that?

“Caglione, you have a visitor,” the tall guard said as he opened the door to Caglione’s cell.

“Yeah, who is it?” He didn’t have any visits scheduled for today.

Caglione’s family regularly visited him. Every visiting hour he received reports and gave orders to keep his business empire running. Tony Lamot, his second-in-command, was doing an outstanding job of keeping the machine oiled.

But today? He wasn’t expecting anyone today.

“Your lawyer,” the guard said as they walked down the hallway.

My mouthpiece? What could he want?

Abe Weinstein had been Caglione's lawyer since he could remember. Actually, since before he could remember. His old man used Weinstein. He thought the world of him.

Caglione wasn't so sure. After all, he had ended up here, in the big house. But Weinstein was a valuable piece of the puzzle. He could bring information in and out of the prison with impunity. The guards couldn't search a lawyer's brief case. Attorney/client privilege.

"Rico, how you doing?" the short, dark attorney said as Caglione entered the visitor area.

The mouthpiece sat on the other side of a glass wall. There was a louvered opening like at the movie theater box office for them to talk through.

"How should I be doing?" Caglione sat in his chair. "What's up?"

Weinstein leaned in to the grate. "I have news for you. You remember Dick Randall? The guy with the bikini barista stands?"

"Yeah. What about him?"

"He's gone missing."

"Missing?"

"Yeah. Like permanently missing."

Caglione leaned in and spoke in a hushed voice. "What happened?"

"No one seems to know. I've talked to the police. They say they found his truck alongside the highway, burned out. There's no trace of Randall."

"The bastard's skipped. How much of my money did he have?"

"I don't know. It was in seven figures."

"He was small potatoes. But he did a good job. He cleaned up my money and made it legit. Why would he have skipped?"

Weinstein pushed his wire rim glasses up his long nose. "He just lost a case. He was looking at five to ten in here with you. I think he skipped to stay out of jail."

"But he skipped with my money. Talk to Tony. Tell him to find the little rat. Find out how much he's into me. You know, this isn't big stuff, but I can't let it go. I let it slide and pretty soon all my laundries are doing the same thing."