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# Tacoma Confidential

By **Rebecca Leung**

For a lot of people in the Pacific Northwest, Gig Harbor is synonymous with the good life.

It's a place where local detective Dave Crocker doesn't concern himself too much with violent crime. There's been only one murder here in 60 years.

At least that's what people thought before April 2003.

What happened in Gig Harbor would not only shake up things in this quaint little town, but also have major repercussions across the bridge in Tacoma, Wash., a big city filled with a lot of dark, little secrets.

**Correspondent Bill Lagatutta** reports on this unusual case that was first broadcast last September.

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No one knows more about Tacoma's secrets than John Hathaway, a bartender at Lincoln Lanes, a neighborhood bowling alley.

He's part Phillip Marlowe, part Raymond Chandler when he's not tending to his customers. And when Hathaway gets whiff of a story, he publishes it on his Web site, "The New Takhoman," which is dedicated to getting under the skin of Tacoma's power brokers.

"John is talking to all sorts of people who don't usually make it to the pages of a newspaper," says David Zeeck, executive editor of the Tacoma News Tribune. "That's where the great stories come from."

Hathaway's Internet tabloid has developed a cult following, and last April, one of his sources slipped him some documents that would soon blow the lid off City Hall.

Crystal Brame is married to David Brame, one of Tacoma's most powerful men. The documents that Hathaway received were the ones that Crystal filed for divorce. And the words weren't pretty.

According to Crystal, David, a baseball and basketball star in high school, was a monster.

"She said he was a completely controlling man," says Marty Conmy, who lived next door to the Brames in Gig Harbor.

He says they were a quiet suburban couple, until one day, Crystal approached him and told him that David had pulled a loaded gun to her head, and said she wouldn't be getting out of the marriage alive.

"She said that a restraining order was coming and that he was not to be in the neighborhood," recalls Conmy. "If we did see him in the neighborhood, call 911 immediately."

But calling 911 on David Brame may have presented a problem - since Brame was the chief of the Tacoma Police Department.

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Just 15 months earlier, Crystal had proudly pinned the badge on her husband's chest as their two young children, Haley and David, looked on.

Brame came from a family of police officers and had campaigned hard for the job. For him, and seemingly for Crystal, it was the culmination of a dream.

"It just kind of broke my heart to see Crystal up there with him pinning the badge on and making it look like she was very happy," says Patty Judson, Crystal's mother. "We were sitting there in the audience knowing we knew different."

But after 11 years of marriage, Crystal felt anything but safe. She had begun talking to her parents, Lane and Patty; her sister Julie and her husband, Dave; shopkeeper Linda Lee Clark; and Debbie Phillips, who works at a local tanning parlor.

"She was on a time schedule. David kept very close tabs of her time," says Phillips.

"He'd mark the time, check the receipts," says Conmy. "He used to give her \$100 every two weeks for the family of three and then four, and that's all the money she had," adds Clark. "From the first time I met her, I would see her count out pennies and nickels and dimes."

"He would make it a point that he was the one who brought home the paycheck," says sister Julie. And he'd make a point, Lane says, to "say it says David Brame on the check. It doesn't say Crystal."

There were also allegations of abuse, both physical and emotional. "There was always yelling and screaming and telling her how horrible she is, how no man would ever want her because she's fat and she's ugly and she has kids," recalls Phillips.

"He would say, 'You know, I can choke you so quickly or I can snap your neck,'" says Crystal's mother, Patty.

Even David Brame's sexual demands were revealed in the divorce papers. "He also had a peculiar sex life and wanted partners," says Phillips.

"She said the last straw was he had put a loaded gun to her head and was wanting her to participate in threesomes and foursomes," recalls Conry.

Hathaway read the papers and decided that the secret would finally come out when he published "Tacoma Confidential."

"He actually told her, 'There's only one way you're gonna leave me and that's dead,'" says Hathaway.

Within days, the story made it to the front pages of the mainstream papers, and everyone knew what Crystal thought about her husband, the chief of police.

But what happened next would shock everyone.

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Crystal Brame had finally broken free from the clutches of David Brame – and those closest to her noticed a profound change.

Her mother, Patty, says she didn't even recognize her: "Crystal ended up looking just like she did when she graduated college. She was bubbly and she told us she felt free."

"It's kind of amazing that when you get out of an abusive situation, you become happy and you begin to like yourself and you begin to lose weight. And that's what she did," says Phillips

When Crystal left her husband and took the kids with her, friends say she actually had something to look forward to.

But however liberated she may have felt, Crystal could not forget that her husband was still the chief of police, and that he had hurt her in the past.

She decided to do something to protect herself, and talked to Bill Kortenbach, a martial arts instructor who had given her son karate lessons. He also teaches an intense course on personal safety.

"It was a horror story. I believed her immediately. There's no faking that level of terror," says Kortenbach. "It came off her in waves, absolute waves."

Kortenbach, a fifth-degree karate black belt, signed Crystal up for his course. But in reality, he told her that he saw only one option: "What I would do, if I were in your shoes, is I would go to the bank and I would withdraw the largest sum of cash that you could and I would get your children and I would disappear."

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Meanwhile, Chief David Brame was facing public humiliation and under tremendous pressure. The newspapers were calling for an investigation, and some city officials were suggesting that he be placed on leave and surrender his badge and gun.

But Brame's boss, City Manager Ray Corpuz, stood by him and called the divorce a private matter.

The next day was Saturday, and everything was about to change. David Brame was in his car running errands with the kids, driving toward a shopping mall in Gig Harbor. Crystal was in her car at the same time, talking on the cell phone with her mother.

"Then she says, 'I think I see David.' I don't know where she is at this time. I know she's driving," recalls her mother, Patty. "And then all of a sudden, she said, 'I've got to go, I've got to go.' And I said, 'Well Crystal,' and the phone went dead."

For some reason, David and Crystal ended up in the same place at the same time. Det. Ed Troyer

of the Pierce County Sheriff's Office said the two wound up parking near each other.

Brame told the children to wait in the car, and that he wanted to talk to their mother. "At some point, she got out of the car and he sat down in the driver's seat of her car with his feet out on the ground," says Troyer. "From what witnesses state, they heard some loud voices but nobody could give us the details of exactly what was being said. But the last thing heard was 'Oh no, don't. Don't!'"

No one was prepared for what happened next. Chief Brame suddenly pulled Crystal's head down toward his lap and shot her at point-blank range. He then fired a second shot into his own head.

The two Brame children heard the gunfire as well and ran toward their parents.

"The girl grabbed, her mom was on the ground. She was literally pulled off by a witness. She was screaming, 'Daddy shot mommy. Daddy shot mommy,'" recalls Troyer.

With a crowd gathering, one witness grabbed Haley and David and took them inside a store where she worked.

Back at home, Patty and Lane Judson were still waiting for Crystal to call back when the police called instead. Crystal was still alive, despite her injuries, and so was Chief Brame. Both were rushed to the same hospital as the horrible news broke all over the area.

In Tacoma, Hathaway got the news. "I felt no sense of guilt," he says. "I just felt sick to my stomach."

Within hours, David Brame died of his self-inflicted gunshot wound, but Crystal was still alive and airlifted to a hospital in nearby Seattle. Her parents lived at her bedside, and the wait was agonizing.

Crystal's condition improved and her family was hopeful, but they tried to make sense of the tragedy - and wondered whether they ever really knew their son-in-law at all.

"With our family, he was really quiet. Really an outsider," says Dave Ahrens, who is married to Crystal's sister Julie.

But when surrounded by other officers, Brame was a different person – with a good reputation.

"Whenever he was put into a unit, if there was a problem, he would manage to fix it," says Det. Troyer, who knew Brame by reputation. "He was known as somebody who was a professional. He was liked by the guys, but none of us knew his personal life, or knew him socially, away from work."

## **Part II: Dark Secrets From The Past**

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