



# IF YOU TELL

A TRUE STORY OF MURDER,  
FAMILY SECRETS, AND THE UNBREAKABLE  
BOND OF SISTERHOOD

**GREGG OLSEN**

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

## PRAISE FOR *IF YOU TELL*

“There’s only one writer who can tell such an intensely horrifying, psychotic tale of unspeakable abuse, grotesque torture, and horrendous serial murder with grace, sensitivity, and class . . . a riveting, taut, real-life psychological suspense thrill ride . . . all at once compelling and original, Gregg Olsen’s *If You Tell* is an instant true crime classic.”

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“We all start life with immense promise, but in our first minute, we cannot know who’ll ultimately have the greatest impact on our lives, for better or worse. Here, Gregg Olsen—the heir apparent to legendary crime writers Jack Olsen and Ann Rule—explores the dark side of that question in his usual chilling, heart-breaking prose. Superb and creepy storytelling from a true-crime master.”

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“Bristling with tension, gripping from the first pages, Gregg Olsen’s masterful portrait of children caught in the web of a coldly calculating killer fascinates. A read so compelling it kept me up late into the night, *If You Tell* exposes incredible evil that lived quietly in small-town America. That the book is fact not fiction terrifies.”

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—Diane Fanning

“A true-crime tour de force.”

—Steve Jackson, *New York Times* bestselling author of *No Stone Unturned*

“Even the most devoted true-crime reader will be shocked by the maddening and mind-boggling acts of horror that Gregg Olsen chronicles in this book. Olsen has done it again, giving readers a glimpse into a murderous duo that’s so chilling, it will have your head spinning. I could not put this book down!”

—*New York Times* bestselling author Aphrodite Jones

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**GREGG OLSEN**

**f** THOMAS & MERCER

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First Edition



*For Nikki, Sami, and Tori*

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## AUTHOR'S NOTE

Shared memories are like jagged puzzle pieces. Sometimes they don't exactly align with complete precision. I've done my best to put all of the pieces of this complex story in the most accurate sequence as possible. In instances where the narrative includes dialogue, I used investigative documents and recollections from interviews conducted over a two-year period. Finally, for reasons related to privacy, I elected to use a pseudonym for Lara Watson's first name.

# PROLOGUE

Three sisters.

Now grown women.

All live in the Pacific Northwest.

The eldest, Nikki, lives in the moneyed suburbs of Seattle, in a million-dollar home of gleaming wood and high-end furnishings. She's in her early forties, married, with a houseful of beautiful children. A quick tour through a gallery of family photos in the living room touches on the good life she and her husband have made for themselves, with a successful business and a moral compass that has always kept them pointed in the right direction.

It takes only the mention of a single word to take her back to the unthinkable.

“Mom.”

Every now and then, she literally shudders when she hears it, a visceral reaction to a word that scrapes at her like the talons of an eagle, cutting and slicing her skin until blood runs out.

To look at her, no one would know what she's lived through and survived. And outside her immediate family, no one really does. It isn't a mask that she wears to cover the past but an invisible badge of courage. What happened to Nikki made her stronger. It made her the incredible woman that she is today.

The middle daughter, Sami, eventually returned to live in her hometown, the same small coastal Washington town where everything happened. She's just turned forty and teaches at a local elementary school. She has corkscrew hair and an infectious sense of humor. Humor is her armor. It always has been. Like her older

sister, Sami's own children are what any mother dreams for their little ones. Smart. Adventurous. Loved.

When Sami runs the shower in the morning before getting the kids ready for school and heading off to the classroom, she doesn't pause a single beat for the water to warm. She jumps right in, letting the icy water stab at her body. Like Nikki, Sami is tied to things in the past. Things she can't shake.

Things she can't forget.

The youngest, like her older sisters, is a beauty. Tori is barely in her thirties: blonde, irreverent, and brilliant. Her home is farther away, in Central Oregon, but she's very connected to her sisters. Adversity and courage have forged a strong, impenetrable bond between them. This young woman has made an amazing life for herself developing social media for a major player in the hospitality industry. Her posts for work and for her personal life never fail to bring a smile or even a laugh out loud.

She did it on her own, of course, but says she couldn't have managed it without her sisters.

Whenever she's in the cleaning supply aisle of the local grocery store and her eyes land on the row of bleach, she turns away. Nearly a wince. She can't look at it. She certainly can't smell it. Like her sisters, it's the little things—duct tape, pain relievers, the sound of a weed eater—that propel her back to a time and place where their mother did things they swore they'd hold secret forever.

Enduring their mother was what bound them together. And while they might have had three different dads, they were always 100 percent sisters. Never half sisters. Their sisterhood was the one thing the Knotek girls could depend upon, and really, the only thing their mother couldn't take away.

It was what propelled them to survive.

# **PART ONE**

MOTHER

SHELLY



# CHAPTER ONE

Some small towns are built on bloody earth and betrayal. Battle Ground, Washington, twelve miles northeast of Vancouver, near the Oregon state line, is one such place. The town is named for an incident involving a standoff between the Klickitat nation and the US Army. The native people freed themselves from imprisonment in the barracks, but while a surrender was being negotiated, a single shot rang out, killing the Klickitat's Chief Umtuch.

It's fitting for Michelle "Shelly" Lynn Watson Rivardo Long Knotek's hometown to be known for a major conflict and a false promise.

As it turned out, it was pretty much the way Shelly lived her life.

For those who lived there in the 1950s, Battle Ground was quintessential small-town America with good schools, neighbors who looked out for each other, and a bowling league that kept the pins falling every Friday and Saturday night. Dads worked hard to afford the new car and nice house. Most moms stayed home taking care of the children, maybe later returning to the workforce or taking classes at Clark College to continue dreams thwarted by conventions of the day and marriage.

If Battle Ground had a Mr. Big Shot of sorts, it was Shelly's father.

At six feet, two inches tall, with broad shoulders, Les Watson, former Battle Ground High School track and football star, was a big deal around town. Everyone knew him. He was quick-witted and could pour on the charm, a smooth talker and a master of BS. Handsome too. All the girls in town thought he was a catch. Not only

did he and his mother own and operate a pair of nursing homes, Les also owned the Tiger Bowl, a ten-lane bowling alley complete with a twelve-seat snack counter.

That was where Lara Stallings worked in 1958. She'd just graduated from Fort Vancouver High School and was selling hamburgers to save money for college. Lara's curly hair was blonde, with a ponytail that swung back and forth as she took orders. With sparkling blue eyes, she was undeniably beautiful. She was also smart. Later, she'd lament that her brain wasn't in full gear when she agreed to date, and then eventually marry, Les Watson.

Les was also ten years older, though he'd lied and told his teenage bride that he was only four years her senior.

"I got caught up in all he had going for him," Lara said years later, bemoaning the choice she made. "I fell hook, line, and sinker. He just wasn't a great guy."

Lara's jolt into reality came the day after she put her hair up in a French twist—like Tippi Hedren in the Hitchcock classic, *The Birds*—and married Les in a civil ceremony in 1960 in Vancouver, her hometown. Only Lara's family was present, though her parents had been against the marriage. Les had had good reason not to invite his.

They knew what was coming.

When the phone rang early the next morning, Lara answered. It was Les's first wife on the line, calling from California.

"When are you coming to get these damn kids?" Sharon Todd Watson spat into the phone.

Lara didn't know what she was talking about. "What?"

Les had never mentioned to Lara that he'd promised to raise his children by Sharon: Shelly, Chuck, and Paul Watson. The omission of that little detail was typical of Les, though Lara knew that she'd never be able to fix that—and that her parents' concerns had been justified.

After the early-morning call, Les told Lara that his ex-wife, Sharon, couldn't raise the kids; she was a depressive and an alcoholic. Lara took a deep breath and agreed. And really, what

could she do about it anyway? They were her husband's children, and she knew she would need to buck up.

It turned out to be a very big request. Shelly was six and Chuck was just three when they moved in. Lara took on the role of stepmother—Sharon had kept the youngest son, Paul, still then an infant, with her. Shelly was a beautiful little girl, with wide eyes and thick, curly auburn hair. Lara noticed a strange dynamic, however, between Shelly and her brother. Chuck didn't speak a word. It was Shelly who did all the talking. She seemed to control the boy.

And as Shelly grew more comfortable with her new environment, she often voiced complaints or unkind words.

"She told me every single day that she hated me," Lara recalled. "I'm not joking. It was honestly every day."



Sharon Watson returned home to Alameda, California, after dropping off her two oldest children with Lara and Les in the fall of 1960. Once Sharon was gone, it was like she'd never existed. She never called or sent birthday cards to either Shelly or Chuck. No Christmas wishes either. There were few excuses for this "out of sight, out of mind" approach to child-rearing, though Lara later wondered if the course had been set long before Shelly's mother had married and divorced Les Watson.

"Sharon came from a very dysfunctional family," Lara recounted, having heard about Les's first wife. "Her mother was married five, six, seven times and she was an only child. I understood she had a twin that died at birth. I don't know if that's really true or not, but that's one of the stories I'd been told."

Regardless of what had led her to that point, it was understood that while Sharon had serious problems with alcohol, there was more pulling her down. She'd gotten caught up in a dangerous lifestyle. Family members speculated she might even be a prostitute.

Finally, in the spring of 1967, a call from the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department came to the Watsons' home in Battle

Ground. A homicide detective said that Sharon had been murdered in a seedy motel room and the coroner needed someone to identify her body—and to pick up her little boy, Paul.

Les didn't want to go get his son, whom he knew had exhibited myriad behavioral problems, but Lara insisted. It was the right thing to do. Reluctantly, they made the trip to California to get him and to identify Sharon's body.

Les reported to Lara what he'd learned from the police and the coroner.

"She was living with a Native American, but they were homeless," he told her. "Drunks. Living on Skid Row. She was beaten to death."

Later, when Sharon's cremains were sent to Washington, her mother refused to take them. Nor did anyone hold a memorial service for her. It was tragic but it fit her story. In images culled from a tattered old family album, there are only a handful of pictures of Sharon, almost never with a smile. Her perpetual despondency preserved forever in black and white.

When Shelly was told what had happened to her mother, the thirteen-year-old didn't seem the least bit interested. She barely reacted. Lara thought it was strange. It was as if there had been no true connection between Shelly and Sharon.

"She never once asked about her mother," Lara recalled.

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