OUT

A GIRL, A KILLER, AND

OF THE

A LIFELONG STRUGGLE TO

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FIND THE WAY HOME

GREGG

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF IF YOU TELL

OLSEN

AFTERWORD BY REBECCA BAILEY, PH.D.

PRAISE FOR GREGG OLSEN

The Amish Wife

"The details of the case are gripping enough, but Olsen elevates them with sturdy prose, meticulous research, and admirable journalistic tenacity. This addendum to a once-settled story lands as much more than a footnote."

—Publishers Weekly (starred review)

"Olsen has a gift for taking mountains of paperwork and interview material and weaving them into a cohesive narrative that is often difficult to put down, especially for die-hard true-crime fans. Because he frames the book as a step-by-step process of discovery, readers will feel like they're right there with him as he's knocking on doors and spinning out on the Midwestern ice. An engaging, well-researched historical excavation . . ."

—Kirkus Reviews

"The story is riveting . . . Folks interested in that peek behind the curtain will love this."

—Booklist

"While Olsen's extensive written character analysis is built with avid descriptors of human characteristics and quirks, fed by a black oddball sense of humor, his work is also imbued with great compassion—for human foibles, human loves and losses, and even for those who take human life . . . *The Amish Wife* is an absorbing and praiseworthy contribution to the understanding of murder."

—Splash Magazines

If You Tell

"This riveting account will leave readers questioning every odd relative they've known."

—Publishers Weekly (starred review)

"Olsen presents the story chronologically and in a simple, straightforward style, which works well: it is chilling enough as is."

-Booklist

"An unsettling stunner about sibling love, courage, and resilience."

—People magazine (Book of the Week)

"If You Tell accomplishes what it sets out to do. The result is a compelling portrait of terror and a powerfully honest, yet still sensitive, look at survival."

—Bookreporter

"This disturbing book recounts the unimaginable abuse and torture three sisters Nikki, Sami, and Tori Knotek endured from their own mother, Shelly . . . The strong bond they form to survive and defy their mother's sadistic tendencies is inspiring."

—BuzzFeed

"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!"

—Aphrodite Jones, New York Times bestselling author

"A suspenseful, horrific, and yet fascinating character study of an incredibly dysfunctional and dangerous family by Gregg Olsen, one of today's true crime masters."

—Caitlin Rother, New York Times bestselling author

"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."

—M. William Phelps, New York Times bestselling author

"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, heartbreaking prose. Superb and creepy storytelling from a true crime master."

—Ron Franscell, author of Alice & Gerald: A Homicidal Love Story

"A master of true crime returns with a vengeance. After a decade detour into novels, Gregg Olsen is back with a dark tale of nonfiction from the Pacific Northwest that will keep you awake long after the lights have gone out. The monster at the heart of *If You Tell* is not your typical boogeyman, not some wandering drifter or man in a van. No. In fact, they called her . . . mother. And yet this story is about hope and renewal in the face of evil and how three sisters can find the goodness in the world after surviving the worst it has to offer. Classic true crime in the tradition of *In Cold Blood* and *The Stranger Beside Me*."

—James Renner, author of *True Crime Addict*

"This nightmare walked on two legs and some of her victims called her mom. In *If You Tell*, Gregg Olsen documents the horrific mental and physical torture Shelly Knotek inflicted on everyone in her household. A powerful story of cruelty that will haunt you for a long time."

—Diane Fanning, author of *Treason in the Secret City*

"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."

I Know Where You Live

"In *I Know Where You Live*, master of suspense Gregg Olsen peels back layer after layer to reveal an ugly underbelly of family secrets and revenge. This unbearably tense, serpentine tale probes the darkest corners of the heart and mind. The suspense never wavers in this electrifying page-turner, guaranteed to keep your heart pounding until the very last page."

—Heather Gudenkauf, New York Times bestselling author

The Hive

An Amazon Best Book of the Month: Mystery, Thriller & Suspense

"Readers who relish the aftershocks of cult exploitation will turn every page with keen anticipation."

—Kirkus Reviews

"The Hive is Gregg Olsen at his finest. Exciting, anxiety provoking, and twisty . . . You will stay up all night reading . . . not wanting to put it down until the final and shocking conclusion. This book will take you right down a rabbit hole you never suspected."

—Mystery and Suspense Magazine

"Mesmerizing! Gregg Olsen tautly reveals layer after layer of lies, secrets, and betrayals in an increasingly horrifying exposé of one cult leader and her terrible sway over others. Forget the evil men do. These women will have you fearing for your life."

—Lisa Gardner, #1 New York Times bestselling author

"The Hive is a riveting thriller, a tsunami of a story that starts out strong and absolutely knocks you over at the end. The characters are fascinating, their

world so real and absorbing—I was transfixed from the very start. Gregg Olsen is such a compelling writer."

—Luanne Rice, New York Times bestselling author

"In this gripping thriller, everything is not as it seems, and beauty is only skin deep. *The Hive* is a brilliantly engrossing read—exactly what we have come to expect from Gregg Olsen."

—Karin Slaughter, New York Times and internationally bestselling author

"A charismatic wellness guru, a dead young journalist, and a slew of secrets are the ingredients that make up this fiendishly fun thriller. *The Hive* will have readers buzzing."

—Greer Hendricks, #1 New York Times bestselling coauthor of The Wife Between Us

"Gregg Olsen's *The Hive* is a fast-paced, intriguing, intense, and suspenseful read that is as creepy as it is fantastic. Brilliant, thought-provoking, heartbreaking, and original, *The Hive* will keep you up at night and leave you reeling long after you've finished it. Every page carries weight in this novel. There are plenty of twists and turns to satisfy even the most seasoned crime fiction reader, and the characters feel authentic and alive in ways that only Olsen can achieve."

—Lisa Regan, #1 Wall Street Journal bestselling author of the Detective Josie Quinn series

"Die-hard Gregg Olsen fans will love *The Hive*; new readers will become fans. Olsen deftly guides the reader through the pages, cranking up the suspense as long-held secrets rise to the surface. The result is compulsively page turning as Olsen keeps the reader's mind buzzing in suspense. He hooks the reader as a dark crime from the past collides with a crime from the present."

—Kendra Elliot, Wall Street Journal bestselling author

"Gregg Olsen's *The Hive* begins with a fascinating premise and a spellbinding opening scene that held me in its grip as I flew through the

pages. Olsen expertly weaves together a multilayered tale told by a complex array of unforgettable characters in his latest jaw-dropping thriller. In this dark and dangerously addictive read buzzing with secrets, betrayal, and murder, queen bees and wannabes take on a whole new meaning. Not to be missed."

—Heather Gudenkauf, New York Times bestselling author of This Is How I Lied

Lying Next to Me

"Lying Next to Me is a clever, chilling puzzle of a tale. A riveting, sharp-edged page-turner, it's Gregg Olsen's best book yet."

—A. J. Banner, USA Today bestselling author

"A dark, claustrophobic thriller filled with twists and turns. A brilliant book."

—Caroline Mitchell, #1 international bestselling author

"In Lying Next to Me, [Olsen] has given us a first-rate work of psychological complexity as well as a mystery that is full of twists and is quite a grabber."

—Popular Culture Association

The Last Thing She Ever Did

"Gregg Olsen pens brilliant, creepy, page-turning, heart-pounding novels of suspense that always keep me up at night. In *The Last Thing She Ever Did*, he topped himself."

—Allison Brennan, New York Times bestselling author

"Beguiling, wicked, and taut with suspense and paranoia, *The Last Thing She Ever Did* delivers scenes as devastating as any I've ever read with a startling, pitch-perfect finale. A reminder that evil may reside in one's actions, but tragedy often spawns from one's inaction."

—Eric Rickstad, New York Times bestselling author of The Silent Girls

"Olsen's latest examines how a terrible, split-second decision has lingering effects, and the past echoes the present. Full of unexpected twists, *The Last Thing She Ever Did* will keep you guessing to the last line."

—J.T. Ellison, New York Times bestselling author of Lie to Me

"Master storyteller Gregg Olsen continues to take readers hostage with another spellbinding tale of relentless, pulse-pounding suspense."

—Rick Mofina, international bestselling author of Last Seen

"Tense. Well-crafted. Gripping."

—Mary Burton, New York Times bestselling author

"With *The Last Thing She Ever Did*, Gregg Olsen delivers an edgy, tension-filled, roller-coaster ride of a novel that will thrill and devastate in equal measure."

—Linda Castillo, *New York Times* bestselling author

OUT OF THE WOODS

ALSO BY GREGG OLSEN

Fiction

I Know Where You Live

The Hive

Silent Ridge

Water's Edge

Snow Creek

Cougar Point

Final Victim

Lying Next to Me

The Weight of Silence

The Last Thing She Ever Did

The Sound of Rain

Just Try to Stop Me

Now That She's Gone

The Girl in the Woods

The Girl on the Run

The Boy She Left Behind

Shocking True Story

Fear Collector

Beneath Her Skin

The Bone Box (novella)

Dying to Be Her

Closer Than Blood

Victim Six

Heart of Ice

A Wicked Snow

A Cold Dark Place

Nonfiction

- The Amish Wife: Unraveling the Lies, Secrets, and Conspiracy That Let a Killer Go Free
- If You Tell: A True Story of Murder, Family Secrets, and the Unbreakable Bond of Sisterhood
- A Killing in Amish Country: Sex, Betrayal, and a Cold-Blooded Murder

 A Twisted Faith: A Minister's Obsession and the Murder That Destroyed a

 Church
- The Deep Dark: Disaster and Redemption in America's Richest Silver Mine Starvation Heights: A True Story of Murder and Malice in the Woods of the Pacific Northwest
 - Cruel Deception: A True Story of Murder and a Mother's Deadly Game
 If Loving You Is Wrong: The Teacher and Student Sex Case That Shocked
 the World
 - Abandoned Prayers: An Incredible True Story of Murder, Obsession, and Amish Secrets
 - Bitter Almonds: The True Story of Mothers, Daughters, and the Seattle Cvanide Murders
- If I Can't Have You: Susan Powell, Her Mysterious Disappearance, and the Murder of Her Children
 - American Black Widow: The Shocking True Story of a Preacher's Wife Turned Killer

OUT OF THE WOODS

A GIRL, A KILLER, AND A LIFELONG STRUGGLE TO FIND THE WAY HOME

GREGG OLSEN



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First edition



For Dylan, Slade, Brenda, and Mark. And for Shasta's children so one day they might understand.

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<u>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</u>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

PROLOGUE

Doctors gave the eight-year-old's family devastating news. Tears came with the subject, as personal and delicate as it all was. Shasta Rae Groene would never have children. Severe scar tissue on her uterine wall made pregnancy an impossibility. Shasta didn't really understand the full import of what the adults were saying when they finally told her. She *was* going to be a mom. She'd always wanted that. She had a favorite doll that—much to her brother's exaggerated annoyance—she carried everywhere. In the field behind their house. By the creek. In the car to town.

The prognosis presented in that Idaho hospital became a perpetual reminder of what he had done to her, a lifelong marker of a forty-eight-day ordeal in the remote forests of northwestern Montana during the summer of 2005. It lit a fuse, albeit a delayed one, to self-destructive and dangerous behavior that would follow Shasta like a distant, then closer, thunderstorm.

Some would rightly remind Shasta that having a child didn't define being a woman. Or that she could adopt if she really desired to be a mother. And anyway, even a few said, her own mother wasn't so great either.

Maybe the apple wouldn't fall far from the tree?

Shasta wouldn't have any of it. If people were trying to comfort or even distract her, they had embarked on a fool's errand. Her mother wasn't perfect. So what? Few were. Shasta understood that the bond between mother and child was unmatched and that the power of that love was enduring and sacred.

She and her mom were proof.

Brenda Kay Groene, forty at the time of her death, had given life to her only daughter twice. First in a Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, hospital, and then when she sent messages to her little girl in the woods of Montana.

By the time she was in her mid-twenties, Shasta had defied doctors and other naysayers and had become a mother five times over.

The man who brutalized her hadn't stolen motherhood from her.

He'd taken a lot.

Just not that.

Though called Green Acres Mobile Home Park, the area was one of a few green acres in that section of Nampa, Idaho. The flat land consumed by the trailer park had been farmland a generation ago. The area's claim to fame was as the nation's leading producer of sweet corn seed. While still in play, the crop shifted northwest as Boise suburbs expanded across the Treasure Valley.

Shasta Groene moved into a Green Acres double-wide in 2020 as another step toward a fresh start away from the Idaho Panhandle that had been home all her life. She'd undergone a multitude of starts and stops over two decades to find her bearings. Some were court-ordered. Some, her own making.

It was about 10:00 a.m. on March 6, 2024, when two-year-old Sylan rousted his mother with a kiss on her sleepy face. He had done that countless times, snuggling, kissing, waking up his mom, who'd taken every moment to crash and for as long as she could. Her days as a maid at a Boise motel and the toll of single motherhood tapped her reserves. She was always exhausted. There was never enough time to sleep, or even catch her breath. Shasta lifted her heavy eyelids and snuggled her son. His face felt cool, and she held him close, noticing for the first time that it was so chilly inside that she could see the warm vapor from her breath.

She got up and carried Sylan down the hallway where—with her estranged husband in federal prison on drug charges—she lived alone with her five children.

What the?

Every switch in the breaker box had been shut off. Of course it was cold inside. She asked Omari, six, and Natas, four, if they had messed around with anything. Her oldest, Lorenzo, eight, was away spending the night with his grandmother.

The two little boys insisted neither had touched the panel.

Weird, she thought, flipping each breaker back to the "on" position.

She checked one-year-old Dreko, gave him a change, and went to shower.

A beat later Natas bolted into the bathroom.

"Mommy!" His eyes were huge. "Fire!"

Shasta turned off the water and jumped from the shower. She could smell something right away. The acrid scent of smoke filled her nose.

"What are you guys doing?" she yelled from the doorway. The boys could be a handful, because, well, they were boys. "What are you getting into?"

Sylan emerged from the bedroom with a stream of smoke trailing him like a shadow.

Holy crap. This is a fire!

Shasta leaned into the doorway and caught the sight of flames lapping the bedroom walls. In a split second, she went into mom mode. No time to throw on a robe or grab a towel. Smoke and flames had started to fill the home. As quickly as possible, still naked, she herded up her little ones and told them they were getting out.

"Right now!"

Amid the confusion of the terrifying first seconds of the fire, Shasta's bearings on who was where were compromised. Only Omari, Sylan, and Natas were in her sight line when she made it to the door.

"Where's Dreko?"

Neighbors who'd suddenly congregated at her doorstep didn't know what she was talking about. They just stared at the nude woman and her frightened little boys. While it was a mobile home park and the spaces were tight, not everyone knew everyone. Most people kept to themselves. And to be fair, Shasta was like that too. She didn't let many get close to her.

There were a million complicated reasons for keeping some distance.

Trust had always been her kryptonite.

"Where's the baby?" she called out again.

Her other kids didn't know.

"Is he in his room?"

Her heart was thumping so hard, Shasta was convinced it would explode. She took a big gulp of air and went back inside. She found Dreko in his diaper in the dining room. She scooped him up and started for the door. Her heart was racing and everything was happening so fast. She had to get everyone out of harm's way. She loaded the kids into her burgundy 2005 Blazer parked in front of a lean-to just outside the front door.

And then she realized she had left her car keys behind.

Double holy shit.

By then flames had blocked the hallway.

She was never going to find those keys.

She returned to the car and another panic set in. The car might blow up if the flames got close.

"You need to get out," she said, swinging open the car door. "Now. Hurry. We have to get out of here."

Natas was so scared, he couldn't move.

"Baby," she said, doing her best to keep calm, to remain in control. To make sure her children understood they would be all right. She wasn't going to let anything happen to them.

"This is an emergency," she said. "We're all scared, but we can't be here right now."

Natas put his arms out and she carried him across the street.

It was about that time when Shasta realized the family dog, Gucci, was still in his crate. She told the kids to stay put and she went back in. The blaze had spread. And if not for the eerie yellow of the flames that went from the walls to the ceiling, she would have been unable to see anything—so heavy was the curtain of black smoke.

Gucci barked from his kennel.

I got you.

Shasta tried to release the dog, but she couldn't manage the latch.

I'm not going to let Gucci die.

She hunched down under the smoke and dragged the kennel to the front door. She was coughing so hard that she started to gag on the smoke. She held her breath to suppress her cough. At least tried to. Somehow, she opened the kennel door, grabbed the dog by the collar, and made her way into the street. An elderly woman offered slippers and some sweats, and she put them on. It had been so fast. So scary too.

The fire department arrived at 10:37. Twenty-three minutes later the fire was out.

Over the past two decades, Shasta Groene has done something that returns her to the public eye, or the media has come looking to drag her back into it. Five years after. Ten. And so on. She has been charged with several nonviolent offenses, mostly drug related. At twenty-one, she was arrested for leaving methamphetamine in proximity to a one-year-old and an infant, a charge she denied, but pled guilty. That incident, more than any, crushed her soul.

She would never endanger her children.

Sirens screamed and once more all eyes were on Shasta. Her hair was damp and nearly frozen to her head, as people gathered and studied her like they always did. Tattoos on her face and body pushed forward the narrative she wanted them to see. Shasta was twelve when she got her first tattoo, courtesy of a cousin, a high schooler at the time. "Sister Ghost" was spread across her lower back. It was a way of deepening a connection with a fractured family. Brother Vance was nicknamed Ghost, because he was so pale, and brother Jesse was called Baby Ghost, because he was the younger of the two. In time, there would be more tattoos, each with a meaning. Tattooed over numerous thin, white striations from self-inflicted slices to her arm is the word "Family" in large Gothic letters. "Fear God" is one of many on her face.

Shasta doesn't fear a single person in the world, but she does fear God.

She knows that when people look at her, judge her, or even feel sorry for her, they are only thinking of what had happened to her. Not who she is now or, maybe even more crucially, who she wants to be. None capture what she sees when she looks into a mirror.

Until the birth of her children, Shasta had been alone in the world.

While the trailer spat traces of smoke, a paramedic administered oxygen through a clear plastic mask. Shasta's head hurt like it never had before. Her lungs were tight, clamped down, constricted. Her eyes burned. She heard her children's anguished cries inside her head. They had been so terrified. They *all* had been. She talked with an investigator and made arrangements to check in later to see if the Red Cross could help with a place to stay. Her home, the last remnant of a trust set up for her future twenty years prior, was a total loss.

The media quickly discovered who owned the double-wide and a GoFundMe was launched, and once more, people felt free to share opinions about Shasta. She was embraced and derided. Even shamed. Some finger-wagged she'd had enough chances and the well of goodwill she'd benefited from had long since dried up. Or should have.

A few saw her as a celebrity victim.

A greater number, however, held her in their hearts because they knew no one alive had ever walked in her shoes.

Three days after the fire, Shasta and her new love, this time a woman, returned to Green Acres to survey the damage with the assistance of the fire

department. In a very real way, the fire was a metaphor of her story. Things that meant so much could be taken away in a flash. Just gone. They were just things, and Shasta knew that. At the same time, some items were a bridge to things taken from her once before. Touchstones that sparked happy memories in a life that had so many of the other kind.

Shasta poked through the smelly black debris, looking for anything salvageable. Anything that would bolster the good times that had come and gone. It was hit and miss. The plastic bracelets each of her babies wore home from the hospital had melted into a clump. A magenta Mary Kay cosmetics bag she'd retrieved from her mother's hiding space at the house where everything started was smoky but intact. The silver necklace with a toggle clasp and the Black Hills Gold band with three diamonds her mother was wearing on her pinky finger the night she died, also safe.

A firefighter proffered a Bible that had belonged to Shasta's father. While every other thing on the bookshelf was waterlogged or charred beyond recognition, somehow Steve Groene's Bible had been left untouched by flames or water from fire hoses.

"Shasta," the girlfriend said, "this is a sign."

Shasta looked up from the Bible.

"God is saying you need to turn over a new leaf."

Shasta couldn't disagree. Not this time. The impetus for a do-over wasn't about personal belongings being destroyed or even that she was suddenly homeless. It was about those boys of hers. She was a mother, a protector. She had to right the ship because it was sinking into an abyss. Since the birth of each son, their lives had been riddled by the consequences of living on the edge. Drugs. The law. Court dates. Family discord. Estrangement. Their father was in federal prison. Their home was gone. How much more could they take and still be okay?

It was a familial cycle that had started in Wolf Lodge even before Shasta was born.

Shasta knew the mistakes she'd made—and they were legion—couldn't continue because the stakes were so high. The future of her children was on the line. The mom inside her was a fighter, every bit the equal of the little girl who'd survived.

To begin to break the cycle of bad choices and give her boys a chance, Shasta was sure that the best way, maybe the only way, was by telling her truth.

Even if no one wanted to hear it.