

SUSPICIOUS CIRCUMSTANCES. Constable Kathy Stewart got the call on her cruiser's mobile data terminal. The message mentioned a garbage bag beside a house. The woman who phoned the police was afraid to open it, afraid that what she'd been told might actually be true.

Continued from WR2

It had been a grey day. Started off cool, then abruptly warmed, the sun showing itself in glimpses. By late afternoon the air was heavy and wet with a gathering storm.

Stewart had done a park-and-walk at the Mountain Plaza. Wrote some parking tickets. The holiday weekend was always ripe for people leaving their cars where they shouldn't.

And now she pulled away from the convenience store. Before she could open the Doritos a call came in on the mobile data terminal. It was 5:44 p.m.

Back then the MDTs were narrow message display centres, the cruisers not yet equipped with laptop-size screens. She pulled over to read.

"Suspicious circumstances. 12 Burns Place." Scroll down further in the message: Do not broadcast over air, the text continued. Check it out. Let us know if you need another unit.

Stewart typed a reply. "If the hairs on the back of my neck start tingling, I'll call you."

She turned the cruiser east onto Concession Street and headed to the call. Today was just her fifth solo shift on the job. Kathy Stewart had always wanted to be a police officer.

She was a big fan of the original Law & Order TV show, hungrily devoured mystery novels by writers like Patricia Cornwell and James Patterson. She was an athletic teenager, played basketball. But when she first applied to the Hamilton Police Service she didn't make the cut. Missed the mile-and-a-half distance run standard by about a minute.

She went to Brock University. Took a biology course in first year, when she was thinking of pursuing a career in physical education. Dissected pigs, cats. Ultimately she pursued law, got a law clerk qualification, ended up working in Toronto as a paralegal.

After six years in Toronto, she was 30 years old and ready to chase the dream again, serve her home community. She applied for Hamilton police, trained hard for the run — a standard that is no longer used — and nailed it. She was hired on Sept. 1, 1998.

The long road to uniform was probably a good thing, she came to realize. Gaining life experience helps you deal with things you'll see and do on the job that might shake a younger person.

Three months training at police college, and then a beat on the Mountain. Nothing ever happens on the Mountain, that's how cops joked about the beat. Some domestics. Nothing major.

Kathy Stewart might not have been working April 3, 1999. She had almost switched with a rookie colleague.

Stewart didn't hit the flashers or speed en route to 12 Burns Place. The call might amount to nothing. Dispatch had said a woman who called police would be waiting for her outside the house. There was no immediate emergency.

At 5:53 p.m., nine minutes after receiving the call, she pulled the cruiser into the driveway of the house. Rookie mistake. Always park down the road a bit, not right in the driveway. But this was a cul-de-sac, not much room to park on the street.

She got out of the car, walked up to two women standing by the driveway.

"Which one of you called?" Stewart asked.

"I did," said the woman with blond hair.

The woman seemed quite nervous. Both of them did, they stood close together.

Stewart looked at the house. The glass from the front storm door was broken, pieces on the porch. At the side of the house sat a box, a box big enough to hold a small microwave. On top of it sat a full green garbage bag.

The MDT call had mentioned the bag. The woman who called in was afraid to open it, afraid that what she had been told might actually be true.

Stewart slipped on a pair of latex gloves as the three of them walked to the side of the house.

"We feel like idiots," said the blond woman.

"Why?"

"Here's a couple of girls afraid to look in the bag, and then they send a female officer?"

"Well, I don't want to look either, but I have to, it's my job. Let's take a look."

Stewart grabbed the top of the tied garbage bag and lifted it off the box. The bag had weight to it, maybe eight pounds. She set it down, untied the top knot, looked inside.

There were a few plastic containers inside, like margarine buckets. Empty Coke bottle.

Stewart looked deeper into the garbage bag. There was an empty white plastic tub. Sitting in the tub was a small bag, a bag that soil or peat moss would come in. She took the bag out. Opened it.

A sobering thought was running through her brain: if this is a crime scene and I mess it up, Abi-Rashed will kill me.

She had just finished one of his training sessions on crime scene management. Detective Sergeant Peter Abi-Rashed, Major Crime Unit. He showed the class photos, examples of sloppy crime scenes, officers trampling over evidence.

"Now this is the worst crime scene!" he bellowed to the trainees. Didn't name names, but you never want to be the one he's holding up as an example of how not to do things, even anonymously. Word will get around, you'll be found out. Abi-Rashed struck fear in the hearts of new recruits. He came across old-school cop, the booming voice, meticulous work habits, everything by the book. Do not screw up, he'd tell them. We cannot afford to screw up.

Inside the soil bag was something wrapped in fabric, like a baby's receiving blanket. Stewart peeled back the layer. There was a plastic-wrapped bundle inside. And inside that was a clear bag. Something reddish inside.

Life experience. She knew basic biology from university. Red on one side. White on the other. Follicles. Flesh.

"What is it?" asked the blond woman, who was shaking now. "Is it from a cat?" The two women watching held each other tightly now.



Constable Kathy Stewart was the first police officer on the scene at 12 Burns Place that Easter Saturday evening. She was a rookie, but a mature one. Her education and life experience stood her in good stead that night.

"No," Stewart replied. The blond woman started to cry. "Oh my God," she said. Constable Kathy Stewart called for backup.

"Abi-Rashed." Homicide detective Peter Abi-Rashed took the call at his home on the west Mountain. Saturday night. Nice. Not a good sign, a call coming in from Central Station.

He only got phoned off duty when there was a suspected homicide. And it meant the next few days could be what detectives call "the marathon" working around the clock in the critical early part of an investigation. Might work 30, 34 hours straight off the mark, depending on the case. It's part of the job. Murderers don't honour a schedule.

But still. Long Easter weekend. Family time. Get some yard work done. He was not pleased.

About to plunge back, again, into the dirty work of murder, rejoining his Major Crime Unit colleagues, "the merchants of misery" as he dubbed them, Peter Abi-Rashed showered, shaved, and put on a suit.

He was one of the original four detectives when the unit was created in 1992 to focus on Hamilton homicide cases. Abi-Rashed hung a print in his office, a sketch of the original four: Abi-Rashed, Fred Mueller, Frank Harild, and Steve Hrab.

From the start Major Crime had an aura within the Hamilton Police Service. Part of it was the look: on the job its detectives always wore suit and tie. When they showed up at a scene, some of the uniform officers would say, "The big guns are here; the suits are here."

Abi-Rashed always insisted on the dress protocol. None of this talk about going business casual. In Major Crime you deal in life and death, with victims' families, and the perps. Wear a suit. Carries authority, seriousness. You are a professional. Dress like it.

Abi-Rashed walked from his house. "See ya in a couple of days," he cracked to his wife. He was joking. And he was serious.

Abi-Rashed cut a complex figure. He was built like a retired football running back. Stocky, broad shoulders, thick hands. Befitting his look, he could come across blustery, cut to the chase, salty language. He even wrote his e-mails in large type.

He could also be sensitive, thoughtful. Did lots of charity work. Rough around the edges, yet also meticulous, a neat freak, a military-style sense of order. In the kitchen at home, all the canned goods ordered smallest to largest, all of the labels facing the front. In his office, move a paper clip where it doesn't belong, he will know. "And hunt you down."

That Saturday night he headed along Fennell Avenue West, left onto Upper James and down the Mountain to the lower city. The call filled him in on basic details. Body parts may have been found at 12 Burns Place, a house. He knew little else, but Abi-Rashed's critical mind was already going full bore.

It might have nothing to do with a homicide. You



Constable Kathy Stewart looked deeper into the garbage bag. A sobering thought ran through her brain: if this is a crime scene and I mess it up, Abi-Rashed will kill me.

get a call about some tissue, organs, found in a bucket left out with some garbage. Well? Think about it. Easter? Let's make it easier. Certain cultures at Easter time? Think: sheep, lamb. They buy it at the butcher, put the remains out with the garbage.

Abi-Rashed wasn't looking for more work. He already had plenty on his plate. Had been up to his neck with the Frost homicide. In February, 80-year-old Clyde Frost's bludgeoned body was found in a Dodge Road Trek van in Regent Park in downtown Toronto. Hamilton's first homicide of 1999.

And there was ongoing court preparation for the Baby Maliek case. A young mother and her boyfriend, charged the year before with murdering the woman's infant son, Maliek. In that investigation, Abi-Rashed had gone for the hot button when he interrogated the boyfriend, Carlos Clarke, face to face, no cuffs or restraints in the interview room at Central Station. Accused Clarke of being a pedophile, knew that would get him. Clarke charged. Abi-Rashed kept his hands down, tightened his jaw and braced for the blow. Hoped he'd punch him in the face on videotape. But Clarke stopped just short of it — all Abi-Rashed got was a shot of some nasty breath.

He turned left off Victoria Avenue, along King William Street to Central Station. It was just after 7 p.m. He beeped himself up to the second floor and into the Major Crime department. A briefing was held for detectives called in to work the new case.

There was a buzz in the room, the word they were getting was that the remains found in the garbage bag were in fact human. Suspected homicide. Abi-Rashed was in charge.

He started making calls, handing out assignments to the others. Is the victim male or female? Where is the rest of this individual? Is there more than one victim? Need to secure the site, now. Where is the crime scene — is it in fact the house? Canvass the neighbourhood and interview anyone who might have seen or heard anything. Interview the woman who called it in. Get the command van up there.

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