

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

ANN RULE



Shattering
New Details:
The Josh & Susan
Powell Family
Tragedy

FATAL FRIENDS, DEADLY NEIGHBORS AND OTHER TRUE CASES

ANN RULE'S CRIME FILES: Vol. 16

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About Ann Rule

*For Susan, Charlie, Braden, Max, Becky, Opal, Burl, Marci, Nadine, Sonia, Dina, Sue Ann, Kit,
Rose, Jeffery, and Wendy.*

In the hope that losing you and your innocence will teach us to save others.

Introduction

Most murder victims know their killers. Some were afraid of the stalkers who would one day rob them of their very lives; some had no idea of the danger that waited quietly for them. Stranger-to-stranger homicides are committed by serial killers and rapists, or during the process of other crimes such as armed robbery or violent home invasions.

Still, the last face the majority of murder victims see is that of someone they know—intimate or casually. And so superior detectives look first for connections, the interweaving of lives that may have led to homicide. Those who are naïve and inexperienced prefer to believe that they can discern some hidden menace in those who intersect their paths.

I used to think that. Now, I look back and see how smug I was when I believed I was foolproof. I had many courses in abnormal and criminal psychology at the University of Washington. After I graduated, I worked at Hillcrest, the Oregon State girls' reformatory, was a Seattle police officer, and studied for weeks in basic homicide investigation school. I have both attended and lectured at scores of law enforcement seminars, and I've pored over what seems like miles of police reports and research thirty-three books and over a thousand articles on criminal cases. After so many years of writing about true crimes, I still haven't been able to grow a thick enough emotional hide so that tragic stories don't affect me. And I'm glad that I haven't; black humor abounds in the homicide units I visit when I'm researching a book—but I know the detectives there joke to keep from crying. The sadder the case, the more they joke.

It never means they don't care. And I have never reached a place where I don't care deeply for the people I write about. But I am also an avid student of human behavior, always wondering how and why lives interconnect in scenarios that end in violence.

Despite all that, as the years have passed, I have come to realize how limited my own powers of perception are when it comes to *really* knowing what someone else may be thinking . . . or hiding.

In this book, the sixteenth in my Crime Files series, I relate some of the weirdest and the most chilling cases I have ever come across. Some are recent, even current. There are others that I first came across three decades ago. The first two investigations are novella length.

The first case is "Fire and Ice: The Powell Family Tragedy." This began with the baffling disappearance of Susan Powell from her Utah home in December 2009. A blizzard raged outside on the last night anyone saw Susan. The main "person of interest" in this case was her own husband, the father of their two small boys.

Months ago, I promised Susan Powell's parents that I would write her story, and I am honoring that promise. None of us knew then how horrifically the Powell story would play out in 2012. Had I known, I probably would not have attempted it.

The second case—"Two Strange Deaths in Coronado"—is only a year and a half old, and it raises the question of why the San Diego County Sheriff's Office closed their July 2011 death investigation after only seven weeks. There are myriad theories on how and why Maxfield Shacknai, six, and Rebecca Zahau, thirty-two, perished in a billionaire's mansion in Coronado, California, within forty-eight hours. Are any of these possibilities the true story?

I don't have all the answers. I cannot tell you exactly what happened over the course of a few black days in sunny Coronado. I can only share with you what I have managed to glean. This case made sweeping headlines and was the subject of numerous newspaper articles and television air-

radio reports, as well as a surge of gossip in the popular resort area where it took place.

~~And then, almost as suddenly as it happened, Max's and Becky's deaths faded to newspapers' inside pages and from the top of the news, only to be quickly replaced by other mysteries, leaving family members of the deceased with an overwhelming sense of emptiness.~~

I am still wondering what could possibly have happened to two very unlikely victims. And I am not the only one still pursuing answers in a baffling case that cries out for a final chapter.

“Double Death for the Kind Philanthropists” explores the deaths of two lifetime philanthropists. It is such a sad case for almost everyone involved that it still haunts me.

“Fire!” tells the story of a real-life towering inferno, the end result of a dangerous arsonist's fantasies. No one was safe in the many-storied hotel, and the casualty count could have been disastrous. When the smoke and flames were finally extinguished, the prime suspect was *more* unlikely.

In the case I've titled “An Obsession with Blondes,” I cover a serial rapist's lust and deception as he carefully targeted his victims. He found them in seemingly safe venues, but he took them to locations where they were ultimately vulnerable. Luckily, an astute Oregon detective proved to be an adversary he could not overcome.

“The Last Valentine's Day” recounts an inexplicable tragedy that took place back in the seventies and was eventually stored away in cold-case files as unsolved, and probably unsolvable.

Until recently.

After a very long time, one of several suspects I wrote about at the time of the crime finally emerged as the real killer of a trusting sixteen-year-old girl.

“The Man Who Loved Too Much” describes a murder case that embodies the familiar—and selfish—threat, “If I can't have you, then no one can!” Those words can be an idle warning, but too often they are voiced by someone who means every word. Human beings are not possessors to be caught in an inescapable net. In this case, what once was love gradually became desperate entrapment for a frightened woman named Sue Ann.

“Terror on a Mountain Trail” pits a highly trained and powerful military man against two vulnerable women. A member of the U.S. Army's elite 75th Ranger Regiment, the stalker may have killed more women, including an airline ticket clerk who left her job one day and has never been seen again. As I traced this Ranger's life since, I was surprised at what I found—an warning concerned for all women who fail to realize the perils of being alone where human predators watch them.

“No One Knows Where Wendy Is” is about every parent's worst nightmare. All too often people who seem to be safe, kind, and trustworthy are anything but. After *Small Sacrifices*, I vowed that I would never again write about the death of children, but there are some cases where I *need* to write cautionary tales that may save other children. Wendy's story is one. Susan Powell's sons' fate is another.

Over time, many of the unsolved cases that I believed would never come to a satisfactory conclusion *have* been closed successfully. Often, the person or persons arrested were the last individuals I—and the initial investigators—suspected. After the fact, they make complete sense as all the gears mesh and physical evidence provides proof. It wasn't nearly this easy from the other side.

The emergence of DNA testing and advanced forensic science in general are primarily responsible for these latter-day arrests and convictions. We can also thank the cold-case squads that have been added to major crime units in larger police departments throughout America.

One of the earliest theorems in the art of solving homicide cases is that the chance of successful conclusion diminishes in direct proportion to the passage of time. If a murder is solved in the first forty-eight hours, chances are that it never will be. That is still true today, but detectives who investigate murder have more of a head start now.

Sherlock Holmes—if he were real and not fictional—would be amazed by the new tools that can track and trap killers. Still, I don't count out the homicide detectives whom I wrote about back in the day when I had to use my male pen name: *Andy Stack*. I was supporting my five small children by writing for magazines such as *True Detective* and for several Sunday newspaper syndicates. These publications fascinated crime buffs long before infamous murders were instantly covered on the Internet. But no one believed a woman could possibly know much about solving crimes, so I had to choose a male pen name. I became “Andy” for many years.

Police work is tough on the body and tougher on emotions, and many of those great detectives who were so kind in the beginning as they helped me find cases to write are gone now—retired or deceased. Without almost-miraculous forensic science updates, they solved crimes just as horrifying and seemingly impenetrable as those in today's media. They knew how to gather and preserve evidence, and they also “hit the bricks” or went out “heel and toeing” as they canvassed neighborhoods looking for witnesses and clues. Moreover, they had the native-born intelligence and empathy—even psychic sense—that all first-rate detectives use to winnow out suspects.

In the seventies and eighties, most police departments had an 85 percent homicides-solved rate. What we now call “cold cases” were referred to as “losers,” an appellation homicide investigators dreaded.

It takes a special kind of police officer to become a detective; it always has.

Over the years, the killers themselves haven't changed all that much; they remain convinced that they won't be caught—ever. Sometimes their consciences bother them—if, indeed, they have consciences. More often, they barely think of the lives they end. Even when—*especially* when—their victims knew and trusted them.

If it wasn't so trite, I might have called this book “Too Close for Comfort,” because it is full of violent crimes committed by people whose faces and voices were familiar to the victims. They shared their lives in certain ways, sometimes for years and occasionally for only a brief period when fate placed both murderer and victim at the same crossroads in time and space.

FIRE AND ICE

THE POWELL FAMILY TRAGEDY

Chapter One

One of the questions I am asked frequently is “Don’t you have nightmares about the cases you cover?” Usually, I don’t. There is nothing as cathartic for me as emptying my brain of the awful details I learn about murders and pouring them onto a blank screen. Yes, I have had nightmares over the last forty years—but only a handful.

The twisted maze of horrendous events that began on December 6, 2009, in West Valley City, Utah, however, has given me dark images as I slept. I will never forget writing about what has been deemed “pure evil.”

Only in retrospect can I see where many of the tragic aspects of this story could have been avoided or should have been prevented. If only they had been.

Of the nine cases in this book, I have put off writing this one until the very last. I know why. I didn’t want to think about it day after day, as I knew I would have to once I began to dig into the mental cesspools of two depraved minds.

* * *

Loving parents treasure their babies and watch over them as they grow. The irony of parenthood is that as much as we want to protect our children from any kind of harm, we have to prepare them to leave us and enter a world where there are dangers we can neither perceive or prevent. It can be so worrisome the first time children walk to school by themselves, or have a sleepover at a friend’s house. And, before we know it, they are old enough to date and to drive a car, or ride in a car with drivers we don’t really trust.

But we bite our tongues and give them wings to fly by themselves. When grown children fall in love and choose someone to marry, we hope that person will be good to them. Sometimes we can see trouble ahead, but the more we find fault in whom they’ve picked, the more likely they are to cling to them. Our eyes are not blinded by infatuation or love, and we can see personality traits that give us cause to worry when we know in our bones that our beloved children may end up with broken hearts and broken marriages. But, again, we keep our mouths shut and hope for the best.

* * *

Chuck and Judy Cox, who currently live in Puyallup, Washington, married for love, and they raised their four daughters in a happy and safe home. Mary was their firstborn in 1977, then Denise in 1979, Susan in 1981, and finally, Marie in 1984. Although many men might have been disappointed that they had no sons, Chuck was quite happy with his quartet of daughters. From the moment they were born, he was a protective father, doing his best to look after his girls.

The Coxes are devout members of the Mormon faith. They met in eastern Washington, near Medical Lake, and Chuck soon decided the pretty young woman with long dark hair was the one for him, and it’s obvious that he sees Judy today as he did then. He finds her as lovely as she was when she was a teenager, and she clearly cares for him the same way. As often happens, Chuck is the extrovert and Judy is the quiet one. Their likenesses and differences have bonded to make their marriage very successful over the years. At this point in their lives, they should be enjoying the retirement years most couples look forward to.

Instead, they have lived with terror and despair.

~~Chuck Cox is a pilot and a flight instructor, and Judy has made a home for him and their girls~~ in many places around America: Denver; Minot, North Dakota; Holloman Air Force Base; Alamogordo, New Mexico; and Anchorage, Alaska. When he was in the air force, Chuck was an air traffic controller—a “Tower Flower,” as he puts it—and he scanned the boards constantly when he was on duty to be sure that all the planes he was responsible for were “laddered,” and that no two planes were ever on the same altitude and flight path at the same time.

It is a high-stress job, of course, but Chuck was good at it. He learned to live with having the responsibility for so many lives in the air, and he never lost his cool. Back in civilian life, he had to choose whether to be a full-time pilot or a civilian air traffic controller. He chose the latter and worked at Portland International Airport and Troutdale Airport in Oregon. After that he was an Aviation Safety Inspector in Renton, Washington.

Cox investigated crashes and near-crashes, and all of his jobs involved one aspect of flying or another. He recalls examining the circumstances of a particular collision in Moses Lake, Washington, where navy jet pilots in training routinely practiced low-level, high-speed flying maneuvers.

“A navy A3 jet flying low and at high speed collided with a crop duster. The A3’s right engine impacted the biplane’s left wing, and the propeller of the crop duster scratched and punctured the external fuel tank on the navy plane,” Chuck explained. “Both of the military pilots ejected safely, and the crop duster plummeted to the ground, which was freshly plowed and soft. A local man heard the crash and he was able to pull the biplane pilot out and call for help.

“While I was investigating the accident, some military investigators claimed, ‘That agricultural plane hit our jet.’

“I asked them how a hundred-mile-an-hour crop duster could catch up with and hit a five-hundred-mile-an-hour jet. They didn’t have an explanation for that. I was just happy that all three pilots lived!”

Chuck Cox was always able to keep a level head when he had to, something that is a prerequisite for both a pilot and an air traffic controller. Those jobs, however, involved people he didn’t know well—or at all. They didn’t deal with the people he loved and devoted his life to.

Cox speaks his mind, and he can be stern when he needs to be. Lesser men would have broken long ago—but not Chuck Cox. When he commits to a cause, he is a bulldog and nothing can shake him. His cause now is one that no one on earth would envy.

Before Chuck Cox retired in February 2011, both he and Judy looked forward to a serene life. His father suffered from heart disease, but with a pacemaker, he was expected to live at least ten years. Chuck and Judy and his parents considered creating one household to reduce living costs, so both families would be able to travel while they were still young enough to do so. Sadly, events involving Susan Cox Powell, Chuck and Judy’s daughter, would put unbelievable stress on both couples and end their hopes for rewarding retirements.

“My dad died suddenly in January 2011,” Chuck said. “I think what happened to Susan put so much worry on his heart that it killed him. There were so many things that we all needed to say in response to attacks on us—but we couldn’t. We had to remain silent.”

Since the Christmas season of 2009, the Cox family has lived with huge anxiety about Susan, their third daughter. Chuck and Judy have no idea if Susan is alive or dead. She vanished from the Utah home she shared with her husband, Josh, and their two little boys—Charlie and Braden. She had allegedly left home in a blizzard on a frigid Sunday night. There was no word at all from her

no sightings, nothing. She was simply gone.

~~The circumstances of her vanishing defy any rational explanation. For her family, dealing with them was excruciating. Susan's parents and sisters wanted to believe that she was alive and would come home again, but as the days and weeks passed, they sought for her in vain. Her case was so bizarre that the search for her spread across America. Dozens of publications, including *People* magazine, covered the story, which was picked up by the Associated Press. Surely, the Coxes thought, if Susan was able to she would have come forward. In a way, it's harder for families not to know where someone they love is than it is to accept their death and begin to recover.~~

Judy, Chuck, and Susan's sisters were in limbo.

Josh Powell was quite sure that his wife was safe and well, and he reassured those who were baffled and grieving. Indeed, Josh explained that he hadn't wanted to raise an alarm when Susan left their home on the night of December 6, 2009, because he didn't want to upset anyone prematurely.

He was positive she was okay, even though she had seemingly disappeared into the whirlwind of snow and ice. Josh appeared to be embarrassed as he confessed that he believed Susan had run off with another man, leaving him alone to care for Charlie and Braden, who were only four and two.

Although the Josh Powells sometimes seemed an unlikely couple, and had their share of problems, most of which they kept between themselves, the idea that Susan would have an affair with another man and desert her family to be with him was mind-boggling.

Susan was a devout member of the Church of Latter-day Saints and she adored her little boys. She believed in her religion's tenets that marriage was for life—and beyond—and she had fought to save her own union. To everyone who knew her, the thought that she would abandon her children for a sinful affair was unbelievable.

* * *

Susan Cox was a bubbly, happy little girl and she remained that way into adulthood.

She was a romantic who wanted to make the world better—or, in her case, “prettier.” When the Coxes were living in Alaska, and she was four or five, she once used crayons to draw a flower on a newly painted wall. She explained why to her perturbed parents: “I wanted to make the world prettier.”

Hearing that, they couldn't punish her. Chuck cleaned the wall and Susan helped.

In high school, one of her teachers asked her what her philosophy of life was.

“What do you mean?” Susan asked.

“What do you want to do with your life?” the teacher explained. “How do you look at the world?”

“I want people to be pretty,” she said. “So they will be happy.”

After graduation, she attended the Gene Juarez Academy of Beauty in Seattle, preparing for a career in that field. Her dream was to have her own beauty salon one day.

Susan herself was attractive—in a young Debbie Reynolds sort of way. She had bright blue eyes, wavy brown hair, and dimples. Dozens of photographs of her have been published and it's hard to find one in which she isn't smiling.

Conversely, there are few pictures of Josh Powell where he *is* smiling. Once Susan's goal was to make Josh happy, to help him forget his abusive childhood.

She was sure she could do that.

~~Like many young Mormon singles in their late teens and twenties, she and her sisters often~~ went to an LDS Stake Center at Twelfth and Pearl streets in Tacoma to interact with their peers in the single adult ward who were eighteen to thirty.

“It was a marriage pool,” Chuck Cox explains. “She met Josh Powell there. She was nineteen and he was twenty-six. We felt he was hunting for someone who believed that the husband was the head of the house. Susan was in love—you know, like the songs ‘I Am Sixteen Going on Seventeen’ or ‘They Tried to Tell Us We’re Too Young.’ She was in love with Josh Powell, and no one could change her mind.”

On the surface, Josh didn’t seem that bad a choice for Susan. He gave the impression that he believed in all the Mormon tenets, and Susan saw him as a very mature “older” man.

While she was very well liked by the group at the Stake Center, Susan was aware that Josh lacked social skills: He had trouble fitting in. That didn’t make her like him less; she actually felt a little sorry for him and tried to draw him into her circle of friends. It wasn’t that Josh was shy; it was more that he talked too much about himself and his many accomplishments, and didn’t seem very interested in other people. His affect was awkward, even a little peculiar. At first, of course, Susan didn’t find him odd.

Chuck and Judy couldn’t understand Susan’s fascination with Josh, and sometimes they argued about it, although they tried not to—aware that the more they criticized Josh, the more their daughter would be attracted to him. She was a teenager and parents’ opinions aren’t usually appreciated at that stage of life.

“I asked her once ‘Why Josh?’” Judy Cox recalls, of when Susan started dating him seriously. “And she wouldn’t answer me. I think she wanted to help him.”

Although judging others’ attractiveness is a most subjective position, most people would not describe Josh Powell as prepossessing. Rather than being a handsome, dynamic man, Josh looked like he was no older than sixteen or seventeen. At five feet, ten inches, he was slender and somewhat weak appearing. He had bright blue eyes and rosy cheeks, and scarcely any beard. Even though he was seven years older than Susan, he looked younger.

Maybe he seemed so full of himself because beneath the surface he felt he didn’t really measure up.

Everything about Josh seemed weak. No one realized then that he was a “control freak.”

But he was.

To her family’s continuing bewilderment, Susan Cox saw something in Josh that others didn’t see. He had originally tried to date Susan’s oldest sister, Mary, who didn’t care for him at all. On the night of one of Mary’s dances—where she had a date with someone else—Josh came over to the Coxes’ home to ask her for a date, unaware that this was totally inappropriate. He hung around her house, waiting for her until she came home. It was an awkward situation.

Mary didn’t want to go out with him, and she was alarmed when his attention turned to Susan. She kept warning Susan about Josh and advised her not to date him; there was just something about him that Mary neither liked nor trusted.

Josh Powell often exaggerated or told outright lies. Susan was so thrilled with her new romance that it never occurred to her to check out some of the things he said. He told Susan and her parents that he had a degree in business administration from the University of Washington. But he complained about his professors, saying that he knew more than any of them did.

Years later, when Nate Carlisle, a Salt Lake City reporter, attempted to verify Josh’s degree

from the University of Washington, he found there was no record of it. Josh countered by saying he was on a “special list.” That was a lie, but he would never admit it.

Susan wanted to marry and have a family; her parents had been young when they wed and she had never known anything but a happy home. She was in love with love. When she looked at Josh she was impressed that he had a job, his own apartment, and his own car. She either didn't know that he'd lived with his father, Steven Powell, until he was twenty-six—just before they started dating—or it didn't seem important.

To her, Josh seemed stable and ready to settle down.

“Josh wasn't stable,” Chuck Cox says. “After ten minutes, anyone could see there was something wrong with him. He talked *all* the time.”

And it was mostly about himself. He was a braggart, and Susan's parents didn't agree with him that all he needed was love. And then he proposed to her.

“I tried to tell her that you don't marry a ‘project.’ ”

Judy Cox and Susan's friends threw a bridal shower for her. There weren't many there—only her friends Rachel, Terry, Jody, and Josh's sisters Alina and Jennifer. All of a sudden, another person walked into the room. They were all shocked to see that it was Josh. He was wearing a skirt, and lots of makeup, all dressed up as a female.

“He wanted to attend the girls' bridal shower, and be in the spotlight,” Judy recalls. “It was really odd and embarrassing, and we told him he had to leave.”

“When he did, I said to Susan, ‘You're not going to *marry* him, are you?’ And Susan was upset.”

Judy remembers seeing “blackness” as the wedding approached and having a “very bad feeling.”

Susan married Josh Powell on April 6, 2001. She chose the Portland LDS temple, in Clackamas County, Oregon. She looked lovely and was thrilled with her beautiful wedding gown. It was white satin with a deep round neckline, fitted bodice, and full skirt. Josh wore a tuxedo and had a white rose in his lapel. Both of them looked very happy.

Outside the temple, plum and cherry trees were in full bloom. A sudden wind scattered the white petals over the grassy lawn as Susan posed in her wedding dress.

Susan's and Josh's families hadn't met each other before the wedding rehearsal. While Chuck and Judy Cox were picking up the wedding expenses at a cost of several thousand dollars, they were shocked to hear Josh's father, Steve Powell, grouching over the cost of the wedding party post-rehearsal meal at the Old Country Buffet, something just over a hundred dollars.

Although Steve and Josh's mother, Terry, were divorced, they attended the wedding and the wedding reception. Judy and her family had provided the flowers, decorations, wedding cake, and a lavish spread of food. The wedding guests ate heartily, but the cake was only half-gone and there was quite a lot of food left over, too. Even so, Judy Cox was shocked when her daughter's new mother-in-law asked if she could pack everything in her car to take back to Spokane for the wedding reception she planned for Josh and Susan on the east side of Washington.

“I couldn't believe it,” Judy recalled. “She wanted it all—from the cake to the decorations and the flowers. I told her no. And she couldn't understand why!”

The couple had a short honeymoon—one night in the Columbia Gorge Hotel.

Like so many women before her who believe marriage will change a man, Susan felt sure that she could make Josh happy, and that her family would see in Josh what she did.

Josh had held a job for several years. He worked for his father. Steve Powell's titular employ

was the Washington State Department of Corrections, but he actually had nothing to do with the prisoners themselves. He was an “account executive” for the company that sold the furniture the convicts built under the Correctional Industries (CI) program. Their consumers were schools from kindergarten to twelfth grade and nonprofit companies.

Josh was an installer, which meant, basically, that he put legs on school chairs, tables, and desks. He chose the hours that he wanted to work, had complete control of his own time, and worked when he wanted to.

“Two weeks after their wedding,” Chuck Cox remembers, “Josh came to me, wanting to borrow money. I suggested that he either take on more installations or get a better job.”

Josh didn’t follow his father-in-law’s advice. Instead of working harder, he asked the furniture company to pay him mileage. But he went further. He insisted that, legally, they *had* to pay him for his travel costs from job to job. Instead, they fired him.

“He called them two weeks later,” Chuck says, “to ask them if they missed him! They told him they didn’t, and they were doing just fine without him.”

It is an understatement to say that Josh Powell lacked tact; he had a severe deficit in getting along with people, particularly anyone he worked for. He didn’t appear to have trouble *getting* a job; his problem was keeping it. He was hired next by the Home Depot. Within a short time, he told his boss he had hurt his back on the job and couldn’t lift heavy items—a big part of his job description—and he also couldn’t resist pointing out things that the Home Depot was doing wrong. Once again, he was fired.

Susan was the one who worked steadily. She was a hairstylist for Super Cuts, and then Regis, and she really liked her job, but she wasn’t making enough to keep them afloat financially.

Josh took a job as a car salesman. He lasted a week before, once again, he was let go.

He and Susan could no longer afford to keep their apartment and they had to move in with Josh’s dad, Steven Powell, for three weeks. Steve had been divorced from his children’s mother, Terry, since the early nineties. Terry and her daughter, Jennifer, were living then in Spokane, but Steve’s other children all lived with him: Josh’s sister, Alina, and his two brothers, John and Michael.

There really wasn’t enough room in Steve Powell’s house for two more people, but he hung a sheet in the dining room to mark off a makeshift room for the recently married couple.

It was an untenable situation for Susan. They had no privacy and the Powells’ living setup was so different from the Coxes’ home. Almost from the beginning, her father-in-law made her nervous. He stared at her and made remarks that seemed much too personal to her, and were full of sexual innuendo.

Susan was relieved when Josh’s next job was at an assisted living facility for the elderly. Both Josh and Susan were in training to be assistant managers. Providentially, the position came with an apartment and three meals a day. The couple qualified because they had no children and no pets. Susan longed to have children but their financial situation was too precarious to think about it for a while. And she was only nineteen; there was time.

At last, she and Josh had some privacy and she was happy to get away from her father-in-law’s creepiness. After their training, Susan and Josh were assigned to a home for the elderly in Yakima, Washington. Susan hoped that the assisted living field might be a niche where Josh would fit in. She got high praise from the company but he didn’t. Two months later he was out of a job again, and they had to move.

Susan grew alarmed as she realized that her bridegroom simply could not get along with

people, especially anyone in authority. He complained and criticized his bosses until he was let go. His résumé was a mishmash of short-term positions.

Josh clearly needed to be in control, and he felt most of his jobs were beneath a man with his intelligence and education. A lot of men in their twenties go through the same thing, but they learn to bite their tongues and learn as much as they can on a job in the hope that they can move up.

Every place they moved in Washington State, Susan got along fine. People liked her, and she was able to keep her job with Regis. But she had to resign when she and Josh were sent to their new—if short-lived—positions in Yakima. It was Josh's third try—and the company owner finally deemed him "untrainable."

Then they had to move to Oregon for training seminars on his next job. "He insisted that Susan stop cutting hair and follow him wherever he moved," her father said. "But Josh went to the Oregon seminar and began to tear down management in front of those attending. And of course he got fired again."

Even if Josh Powell had taken only a few courses in business administration at the University of Washington, it was obvious that nothing had sunk in. He was at an entry level in all of his short-lived jobs, but he could not keep his mouth shut. His own ego was his stumbling block, and he acted as if he were smarter than anyone.

Chapter Two

In 2004, Susan Powell was pregnant with their first son, Charlie. This gave her even more reason to want her marriage to succeed. Josh and Susan decided to make a fresh start in Utah. Although Susan didn't go into details with her family, they knew that she felt uncomfortable around her father-in-law and believed he intruded on her marriage too much. She hoped that moving out of state would lessen his impact on their lives. Susan and Josh hoped to find job opportunities in the Salt Lake City area and get themselves on a solid financial program.

Chuck and Judy Cox worried about Susan, who was more than eight months pregnant and living far away in Utah.

"We didn't know if she could count on him when she went into labor or after the baby came home," Judy recalls. "So we made a trip down there in January."

Charles Braden Powell was born on January 19, 2005. Susan's parents' instinct that she might need them was right on target. When she went into labor, Josh inexplicably said he couldn't drive her to the hospital because he had something important to do. He asked Chuck and Judy to take her. They were happy to do that but hoped her husband would at least show up for his first child's birth.

When Josh did show up at the hospital two and a half hours later, he brought his laptop computer with him. What had been more important than being with his wife as she labored to deliver? Josh explained that he had to back up the hard drive on his computer!

Indeed, he sat in a corner of the labor room and worked at his computer, barely noticing what his wife was going through. Chuck Cox watched, silently fuming.

"When she was in transition and really in pain, I went over to Josh and told him to put his computer down. Susan needed him to hold her hand and comfort her. He kept delaying, I finally said, 'Put your computer down, *now!*'"

Josh finally complied when Susan was only a few pushes away from delivering, and she gave birth to Charlie in a few minutes. "See," she told her father. "Josh was here when I needed him!"

Chuck didn't have the heart to tell her what really happened.

Susan was thrilled to be a mother, and Josh appeared to be genuinely pleased with baby Charlie. He held the infant proudly, but he refused to let either Judy or Chuck hold him.

"Charlie was his possession—he *belonged* to Josh," Judy said. "And he shut us out completely."

* * *

At first, Susan and Josh's move seemed to be a good idea. They had bought a nice home in the 6200 block of West 3945 South in West Valley City. A close southwest suburb of Salt Lake City, West Valley City has a population of something over 130,000 and is the second-largest city in Utah. There were plenty of job opportunities there in 2004.

Susan and Josh made friends with their neighbors, Kiirsi and John Hellewell, who were members of the Mormon church, and they connected with other members of the closest LDS stake.

The Powells and Hellewells spent a lot of social time together, sharing picnics, barbecues, and movies. Kiirsi and Susan were soon best friends, and Kiirsi's husband accepted Josh, saying, "I

you're friends with Susan, Josh is part of the deal.”

~~Both Josh and Susan were hired by a brokerage firm, Fidelity Investments. She quickly became a trusted employee popular with her coworkers. But, once again, Josh Powell became too verbal about his opinions about the faults of his new employer. Once again, he was fired.~~

It was only his first job in Utah, and Susan tried to believe it was just a wrong fit, and that Josh would soon find another position.

While Susan stayed on with Fidelity, Josh decided that he'd be better off working for himself and chose a career in real estate, where he thought he had what it took to be a success. Using money that Susan had managed to save for opening a beauty parlor in their home, Josh bought signs, lockboxes, and other paraphernalia Realtors need. The housing market was going great at the time. People were remodeling and flipping houses, and buyers were actually bidding against one another for homes, standing in line to make the best offer.

Josh sold a few houses, and he was enthusiastic about his success. He wanted Susan to get her real estate license, too, and join him in his business. As she usually did, she agreed to do that and got her license. She also went to work for Wells Fargo to ensure that they would have a steady, predictable income and medical insurance.

At Josh's suggestion, they took out life insurance policies—five hundred thousand dollars on each of their lives. If one of them should pass away, the other would have resources to pay for child care and other expenses.

Susan was pregnant again, and very happy about it. She called her mother in mid-2006 and impishly told Judy, “Seven. *Lucky seven!* Guess what's happening?”

Judy had six grandchildren at the time, and she quickly figured out that Susan and Josh were going to present her and Chuck with a seventh one.

Susan gave birth to Braden Timothy Powell on January 2, 2007. That was the second time that she and Josh had lost out on an income tax exemption by days, but it didn't matter. Charlie had dark hair and blue eyes, and it looked like Braden would be blond like his mother, with the same blue eyes that both she and Josh had.

One of Susan's friends would comment later that Josh's eyes had been as blue as Charlie's, but they began to change. Sometimes they were almost black.

Again Susan and Josh were happy with their new baby. Both the little boys seemed very intelligent and they were ahead of most babies in talking, walking, and showing other signs of maturation. Josh was often mean and demanding in the way he treated Susan, but he showed affection for his sons.

With his few house sales accomplished, Josh had dreams of glory about becoming one of the most successful Realtors in the Salt Lake City area. Without much planning, he bought a huge ad in the DEX Yellow Pages for ten thousand dollars, assuring Susan that it would bring a flock of house hunters to them. When she demurred, he explained that he didn't have to pay for the ad for a few months, not until after his ad was actually published. Josh figured he could well afford the ten thousand dollars by then.

When the new edition of the DEX directory came out, however, Josh was livid. Some of the phone numbers for his business were wrong, and he hated the pictures that appeared in the ad. He was right to be upset; house hunters who called the wrong numbers wouldn't reach him, and probably wouldn't bother trying to find his office. The directory printers had made a major error.

Josh went to Chuck Cox and asked him what he should do.

“I told him the first thing he should do was to be sure he had the phone directory company

admission of their mistake *in writing* so he would have proof,” Chuck said. “That letter would be ‘gold,’ I said.”

With the wrong phone numbers in print, Chuck felt that Josh would be off the hook for the money he owed on the ad. He knew Josh couldn't afford such an expensive ad in the first place for what was only a fledgling company. Josh got a letter from the customer service manager, who was fired. The company started the collection process and Josh buckled.

“He didn't take my advice,” Chuck recalls. “He filed for bankruptcy instead!”

It turned out that Josh and Susan had other debts that Josh couldn't pay. They had bought their house in West Valley City when they first arrived in Utah. They could make the mortgage payments at that time because they both had jobs. But, of course, Josh's steady employment ended shortly after that. Susan was the main breadwinner.

Josh had run up all the credit cards they had to the maximum limit, and those creditors were hounding them for payment, too.

Although Susan was embarrassed to ask her parents for more help, she had no choice but to stand behind Josh when he asked them for a loan.

“We gave them five thousand dollars,” Chuck says, “so they wouldn't lose the house and they could pay their overdue mortgage debt. Susan promised to pay us back, and after Braden was born, she went right back to work at Wells Fargo. She was making payments to us as soon as she could.”

Josh took a job as an assistant to an accountant, but he never varied from his usual path. He complained to Susan that he was much smarter than his boss, and he soon made that clear to his employer, too. He lost his job.

It was not a good time to be jobless. By 2009, the bottom had fallen out of the economy, scaring off house hunters who discovered that loans were drying up. Many recent home buyers found themselves upside down with their mortgages. Josh didn't sell any more houses.

Charlie and Braden were very young—only four and two. Susan would have loved to work part-time and be able to stay home with her children. Her goal was still to have a beauty parlor in their home, but she didn't manage to save any money. With a business in her home, she couldn't make money and be with the boys, too.

As always, Susan was the main wage earner in the family. Even so, she had to use the money Josh doled out, and then explain everything she bought to him. She wasn't even allowed to withdraw money from the bank; Josh kept changing the PIN number so she wouldn't have access to it.

To be sure Susan didn't “overspend,” Josh instructed her to go through weekly supermarket ads and check off the cheapest items offered. Then he told her what groceries she could buy, and he entered a list of those items on a spreadsheet in his computer. When she returned home, he scanned all her receipts into his computer to be sure she hadn't spent more than he'd allowed. If she went even pennies over the list he'd authorized, he would rail at her.

Trying to stay on such a frugal budget, Susan found it almost impossible to feed her family properly. She planted a ten-by-forty-foot garden. She grew everything from green beans and carrots to watermelons and pumpkins. By cooking fresh produce from her garden in the summer and foods she canned in the winter, she hoped that Charlie and Braden would have enough to eat.

Susan made everything from scratch when she cooked. For her, pumpkin pie meant growing the pumpkin, roasting it, scooping out the seeds, and also making the crust.

Susan was a vegetarian, and luckily her little boys liked carrots better than candy. She froze

and canned the bounty from her garden and their fruit trees.

~~Josh was even more tightfisted when it came to other purchases. When Susan spent six dollars on shoes for Charlie, Josh was furious with her. She wasn't allowed to buy socks; Josh told her to knit them. But he complained if she spent too much money on yarn, especially when she knit baby bonnets, booties, and sweaters for her friends, one of her biggest pleasures.~~

When their day-care mom saw that Charlie and Braden often came to her without socks, she bought each of them a dozen pair. Susan was a little embarrassed but grateful.

Susan had to ask Josh's permission to drive their blue minivan, so she usually bicycled to where she had to go. And she rode a bike without gears to help on hill climbs. Most of the roads she traveled had no real shoulders so it was dangerous for her, but she rode on the pavement on busier streets.

No one but her best friend, Kiirsi, and a few others knew how Susan was struggling. Susan finally told her sister Denise how stingy Josh was, and Denise was appalled. None of the Cox family *really* knew how bad things were; Susan was too proud to tell them, and she didn't want them to resent Josh if somehow they managed to pull their marriage together.

Josh spent hours on the phone almost every day talking with his father, but he resented it when Susan took or made calls to Denise. Susan and Denise, the two middle daughters in their family, had always been close. They'd shared confidences, fun, and had even managed to breed parakeets and fish when they were in their teens.

"Those two once had *twenty-seven* parakeets," Judy Cox marveled.

One of the times Susan really grew impatient with Josh was when he disapproved of her phone conversations with Denise.

"You talk to your father for hours, and he fills you full of how hateful Mormons are," she argued. "And then you won't let me talk to my sister? That isn't fair."

Jennifer Graves, Josh's older sister, saw what was going on, and while she loved her brother, she felt sorry for Susan. Jennifer saw that Josh was "regressing," going downhill as the years passed. With every year, he was more of a failure at every job he had and in turn he seemed to control Susan more.

Personal power meant everything to Josh Powell, and the less he had, the more demanding he became. His appearance had changed so much in the seven years since he and Susan were married. He had bags under his eyes, and his face had a pinched look about it. Josh affected a wispy beard and mustache, and he usually had a frown on his face. The fresh-faced, teenager-like man that Susan had married had disappeared.

Chapter Three

The summer of 2008 was especially bad. Susan didn't mind working while Josh stayed home with their little boys, but she knew they needed to see a marriage counselor. Her husband was "angry, irrational, and unpredictable" that after one prolonged fight, Susan threatened to call the police. He was beginning to frighten her. But when she said they *had* to get counseling, he adamantly refused, using one excuse after another.

At first he complained that there was no point in counseling, because he knew what they would say.

"Then do it [what they say]," Susan retorted.

Next he said counseling would be too expensive. When Susan said Wells Fargo would pay for counseling, Josh claimed that their private lives would become public—everyone would know—and they wouldn't be able to get any more life insurance or health insurance with that on the record.

Susan made an appointment with her bishop. She was living a life of despair, trying to save her marriage, even though most women would ask, *Why?* She was almost in tears when she arrived for her appointment.

The bishop opened their session with a prayer, and Susan realized she was rambling as she told him about the emotional chaos in her home. To her surprise, he agreed with her on all points.

"Josh has mental issues," she emailed a friend, "and isn't dealing with reality. My bishop agrees I'm a stressed, overworked, neglected/abused mother down to her last straw.

"And then my bishop said, 'What can I do to help?'"

Susan wanted counseling so much—not together with Josh at first—but for herself and Josh separately. She believed Wells Fargo would cover most of that under her health insurance. The bishop assured her that the church would pay the twenty-dollar-a-session copay that was Josh's current reason to refuse counseling.

For a time, she had hope. It was nearly the Fourth of July in 2008. When Josh asked her when she'd gone to see the bishop, she told him she'd asked for help on groceries and bills and Josh was okay with that.

Susan was working full-time, bicycling to work and back. It took her forty minutes in the morning and fifty minutes after work because the last mile was all uphill. Josh was still unwilling to go to counseling. Instead, she told friends that he gave her a list of things that would have to change in their marriage "so *he* won't be stressed . . . and everything will magically be all right."

Josh accused her of spending ninety dollars on groceries instead of the thirty she'd really spent. Her garden had yet to come to fruition, and Josh complained that watermelon at twenty-five cents a pound was too expensive, but then he spent more for one that was smaller.

"You have utter contempt for me because I don't have a job!" Josh shouted at Susan. He accused her of thinking he wasn't a man.

She denied it, but it did no good.

Josh no longer went to church. "We were with our friends while they were doing family scriptures and he looked bored, uninterested, and like he was finding reasons to leave the room," Susan wrote.

Kiirsi Hellewell recalled how Josh would make it almost impossible for Susan to go to church

“He’d belittle her, and tell her she shouldn’t pay tithes or go to church. He would fight her over everything she did as far as her faith. When she was trying to get the kids up and ready for church by herself, Josh would say things like ‘You want to go to boring, boring church with Mommy—do you want to stay home and have cake with Daddy?’ ”

He often criticized her to the little boys, and young Charlie sometimes shouted at her, “Can you see I’m busy—trying to work?” Words he echoed from hearing his father’s complaints.

Susan’s life was getting harder and harder.

“I don’t know how you can help, except talk with me,” she emailed a close friend. “And b/c I’m another individual that would know about the situation if questioned b/c things went crazy late. Sad that I’m this paranoid.

“My huge problem is I don’t know what to believe or what to do. I don’t want to divorce or separate or take the kids somewhere and [he’d view] that as an act of war . . . My current tactic is to pretty much not make waves and try to ignore the problems. I read mystery books checked out at the library and [try to] be a good mom for the boys. I came home from work on Sat. and felt so depressed that I couldn’t make a decent dinner for my boys.”

Susan was concerned that Charlie and Braden weren’t getting enough protein. Hot dogs were the only meat products she could afford, although she sometimes had eggs on hand. Beans and rice took several steps to prepare—culling, soaking, and a long time cooking. Often she was just too tired to do all that.

She was frustrated that Josh didn’t stick to the food budget he demanded of her and then made impulse purchases like “cheap donuts and individual yogurt servings.” Susan would have suffered his wrath if she dared to buy something like that. She wouldn’t have anyway—but that money could have gone to buy meat for the boys. She did her best to give the boys a proper diet with what she had in her cupboards.

“I just kept trying to disguise their food with sour cream and catsup, etc.,” she emailed. “And I finally laid [sic] down on my bed and went to sleep around 7 P.M. I had only gotten 4 hours sleep the night before so I’m sure Josh just thought I was tired . . . I took another nap (out of depression) the next day, but I’m sure he has no clue/doesn’t care.”

In retrospect, it’s easy to ask why Susan didn’t just leave Josh. How could she stay in such a punishing relationship? She would have been welcomed by her own family in Washington State. But unless a woman has been there—and so many women have—it’s difficult to explain.

Although Susan avoided Steve Powell, even he seemed sympathetic on one of their visits to Puyallup, telling her that his whole family knew how badly Josh treated her. That was unexpected support from a surprising source, but it didn’t make Susan less wary of Steven. When she and Josh had moved from Washington State, his father’s attention and inappropriate touching were among *her* main reasons for wanting to get away. He sometimes touched her breasts and they acted as if it was accidental.

She was still nervous when she had to visit him and Josh’s siblings on holidays, or when Steven came to West Valley City for a visit. Her father-in-law seemed to dangle Josh like a puppet on a string. Every time now when Josh ended a phone conversation with his dad, it seemed that she and Josh had a fight.

Susan felt safe enough to confide information about Steve Powell’s “weirdness” to Kiira Hellewell. “A few months after they moved here,” Kiira remembered, “Susan told me the real reason they moved to Utah was to get away from her father-in-law. I just kind of stared at her thinking I know people have troubles with their in-laws sometimes, [but wondering] why such

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