Hi, crime junkies. I'm your host Ashley Flowers.

And I'm Brett.

And the story I have for you today is about a woman who was found dead after a fire mysteriously broke out in her home.

Even with a long list of suspects, investigators hit a wall and they seem to have given up,

despite numerous pleas from her family to find answers.

This is the story of Nanette Crentel.

Music

Things have been pretty quiet at the District 12 fire station in St. Tammany Parish in Louisiana.

It's a warm July day in 2017, but the peaceful warm afternoon is shattered around 2.30pm.

That's when they get a call that a house in the town of Lecombe is on fire.

The call comes from a neighbor's daughter who says that she saw smoke rising over the trees while she was riding her bike down the rural road that the home sits on.

But this isn't just any house.

It's the home of the fire chief, Steve Crentel.

So firefighters jump into action, but by the time they arrive, Steve and another firefighter are already there.

He had gotten a call from his cousin who lives nearby that the house was on fire.

And while I can't tell if the call came in before or after the neighbor's daughter reported it, as soon as he realized that something was wrong, he and the coworker hopped into one of their work vehicles

and sped to the house ahead of his team.

But by then, it was too late because the house is completely consumed.

I mean, it is literally crumbling to the ground under the flames.

But even though the loss of his house is a tragedy, everyone's heart sinks even further when they spot a red Mercedes sitting in the ruins of the garage.

Because that's the car that Steve's wife, Nanette, who everyone calls Nan, drives.

And she's inside?

Well, that's what Steve tells the firefighters.

He says that she was still home when he left for work that morning of her cars in the garage, then she's probably still there.

But there is no way they can get inside to check.

The fire is totally out of control.

So they work to put out the flames.

But by the time they do, the home is burned to the ground.

And there is no way that Nan could have survived if she is still inside.

So they start searching the rubble.

And they quickly find her charred body lying face up on what once was the primary bathroom floor.

Next to her are the remains of her dog and two cats are found in the primary bedroom, also deceased.

An article for Fox 8 reports that it shortly after 2.30 p.m.

when investigators from the Louisiana State Fire Marshals Office are dispatched to the house.

And when they arrive, they take over the investigation.

They search the remains of the home and they start collecting even the smallest bits of evidence

that could tell them what the heck happened, specifically how the fire started.

Now, right away, this scene feels strange.

Like, there's something more going on here than just an accidental fire,

especially because they find two firearms within the vicinity of Nan's body.

How close?

Well, it's a little TBD, like literally all I can find is it says that they are quote-unquote near her body.

So no word if they're like in the bathroom with her, in the bedroom, like literally by her hands.

I have no clue.

Got it.

But the thing they're not finding, though, is what the hell started this fire.

So after they remove Nan's body, they bring in a dog that's trained to detect accelerants.

Like I said, there is nothing that's pointing to where the fire originated, what could have caused it.

You know, like you're thinking something electrical, something whatever.

But to everyone's shock, the dogs detect accelerant at at least two different places in the home.

So they find accelerant on the DVR in the living room and on one of the cat's carcasses.

So they're thinking this is an arson?

Well, investigators never use the like word arson, but they do say that the fire was set intentionally. I mean, is there a difference, like legally?

Well, so the FBI defines arson as the quote, willful or malicious burning or attempting to burn with or without intent to defraud a dwelling house, public building, motor vehicle or aircraft, personal property of another, etc.

End quote.

So arson is a legal charge, like someone is charged with committing arson.

Then there's also the term incendiary fire, which refers to a fire that's been intentionally set in a place where it shouldn't be set.

And that is not a legal term.

So the only thing I can think is like since they don't know any details yet, I don't know if they can call it arson just yet, if that makes sense.

Okay.

So technicality.

Yeah, because someone obviously did intentionally set it.

And so they start to get an idea of how Nan died.

They think by looking at just what they're seeing initially that she may have died by suicide.

So they think that she started the fire?

That seems like a pretty big jump to conclusion.

Unless they know something we don't, like what proof of this do they have the history of mental illness?

I mean, is there anything?

No, like it feels out of the blue in this moment because it kind of is out of the blue.

She doesn't have a history of mental illness.

And as far as the fire, they're kind of insinuating, right?

Like it had to have been set by her.

Now, what's weird to me, though, is like they're saying all of this based on just the evidence that they're finding in these, again, charred remains.

There is no video footage of her doing anything because here's the weird part.

Even though the house was equipped with a home security system, which included nine cameras.

So again, if they're like, we saw her do something, you're okay.

Nine cameras, all of that was completely destroyed in the fire.

So they don't have video proof of anything.

And unfortunately, the footage was stored in a DVR which had been burned beyond recovery.

So there is nothing there, nothing to like concrete say she did it.

And Steve, her husband says that there weren't even any red flags when he left earlier that morning that would play into this theory.

So, I mean, my question is, then, where is this theory coming from?

Your guess is as good as mine.

Now, the good news is that they're not just closing up shop and moving on.

They are at least going through some of the investigative steps that you would expect, like an autopsy.

And it's the good thing they do because when they conduct Nance autopsy the next morning, which is July 15th, the coroner finds that things just don't add up.

The first huge red flag is that there is no soot in her airways.

So, she was dead before the fire?

Exactly, because if she was breathing at all when the fire was going, even if she was sleeping or incapacitated in some way, you would expect to see soot.

Yeah, smoke inhalation.

Right, and it's no surprise that Neon wasn't breathing based on what the coroner finds next because Neon has a gunshot wound to her head.

It is located just a little bit above her right ear and the bullet is still in her head.

And this piece of information changes everything because now investigators from the St. Tammany Parish Sheriff's Office step in to work Nance death investigation while the fire marshals continue to look at the cause of the fire.

Do they rule on her manner of death at this time?

No, not yet. They're still unsure as to what happened again. Even though they have this theory, they're not ruling anything yet.

So, the first thing investigators want to do is see if those guns that they recovered from the house match the bullet that was found during the autopsy.

But those results are going to take some time, so while they're waiting, they start trying to build a timeline of Nance last day.

First, they find a surveillance video of her Mercedes going through the McDonald's drive-thru the morning she died.

From what I can tell, they can't 100% tell if it is Neon driving, but they believe that her dog was in the car with her or with whoever's driving.

And they do know that her cell phone data and credit card activity also indicate that they were used in or at least located in that area.

So then they find footage from a neighboring property that showed the car was going back to the house at around 9-11~a.m.

And more of her phone records show that Neon made outgoing calls at 10-03 and 1-30.

And it's confirmed that it was her on the other end?

Well, yeah, maybe I should say they confirmed that her phone made calls because it's not quite that simple.

Unfortunately, the calls weren't made to people who knew Neon really well.

The first call was to a Kmart about a prescription, so I doubt that they know her voice or even remember that call.

Well, and that's if she even talked to someone.

I mean, you can fill a script through an automated system on the phone.

Totally, totally.

And the last call was actually to a local person who investigators tracked down.

But whoever this person is, they claim that it must have been a mistyle because they didn't answer the call and they don't know Neon or no Steve.

So no one talked to anyone on that line.

Now, all of that being said, investigators are pretty sure that whoever made that call to this person who didn't know them was Neon.

So they account for her being alive until at least 1-30 p.m.

Now, meanwhile, Neon's family is coming into town from where they live in Iowa.

And you would think that police would want to, I don't know, bring them in for interviews because Neon was pretty close to her family.

But according to Neon's sister, they don't, which is super frustrating because they have a lot to say, especially about her husband, Steve.

Neon and Steve had been married 22 years.

And while their marriage seemed healthy on the outside, Neon's dad says that he often felt like Steve controlled his wife's access to her family.

And her cousin says that Neon always seemed to be healing from like mystery injuries that she could never really give a clear excuse for.

Like her shoulder would be bothering her, but she couldn't exactly say how she'd heard it.

And both of those are pretty massive red flags.

Yeah, and what her family knew was that Steve had previously had an affair with another woman that Neon knew about.

And so her dad knows that Neon was really unhappy with Steve recently, but it actually wasn't because of the things that I even just mentioned.

It was because she claimed that Steve wasn't protecting her well enough and she was thinking about kicking him out soon if things didn't change.

Protecting her from what?

Well, it turns out that Steve and Neon recently had been threatened by Steve's brother, Brian.

And it was like a very specific threat.

He said that he would kill her and burn their house down.

What? Ashley?

I know, I know.

So investigators turn all of their attention to Brian.

And they learn that he has a long rap sheet, including assaults and DWIs, but he was still family.

And so whenever he got in trouble, Steve and Neon would help him out.

However, that all changed a few years ago.

So there was this one time where he had called Steve for help after he'd been drinking and driving.

Now, I couldn't 100% confirm if he had crashed his car, but from the sounds of it, I'm pretty sure he did.

And he was calling Steve to hopefully just get a ride, help take care of everything before the police could get involved.

And Steve and Neon agreed.

They said that they were going to go help him out, but Neon's family says that when they showed up, the cops showed up as well.

Brian ended up going to jail.

And for whatever reason, he blamed Neon.

According to an episode of Unsolved by Crime Watch Daily, as he was being arrested, he said that he would get out of custody and kill Steve and Neon and then himself.

And this terrified Neon.

Yeah, I can't blame her. I'd be terrified too.

Same. And so you get why Neon was scared when he got out of prison the year before.

The family says, like him getting out of prison was the reason that they even installed those nine cameras around their home to begin with.

Neon made Steve do it.

And of the 30 guns that they owned, she always kept one in her purse, one in her car, and one in her house outside of the gun locker at all times because she was so terrified she needed to protect herself.

And what they find out is there was even a separate gate camera for their home that ran on its own system, like outside of these nine regular ones.

Oh, so where's the footage from that one?

Yeah, I'll give you one guess.

Do not tell me it wasn't working, Ashley.

Yeah, it wasn't working. Surprise, surprise.

Of all the cameras.

I know, I know.

Okay, but I mean, are police at least going to talk to Brian or, I mean, at this point, do they even know about him?

They haven't interviewed her family. They haven't heard any of this.

Well, so good question. I know they're talking to Steve, who tells them about Brian, but you're kind of getting ahead of me just a little bit because Brian isn't the only person Neon's family suspects.

There is also Steve's son from a previous marriage, this guy named Justin.

And Justin is about 22 or 23 when all of this is going down.

And I guess Neon had mentioned that he made her uneasy several times because Justin had a bad temper that made her fear for her life.

So where is Justin? Like, did he live with him?

No, no, no, he's an adult. He lives in Virginia with his wife.

Okav.

But if all of this wasn't enough, Neon's dad also knows someone had been stalking Neon.

He says that a couple of weeks before her death, she sent him an image of a man lurking on the property near their front gate.

And when she went to that spot later on, she said she found a knife and a cigarette butt, and she told

her dad that she was being followed a couple of other times too.

Okay, okay. Let me just make sure I'm following this and I have everything straight.

Neon wasn't happy with Steve and there are some major red flags in their relationship.

But she and Steve had been threatened by his brother, Brian, who basically said he was going to kill her in the exact same way that she had died.

Correct.

Then there's her stepson, Justin, who has this temper and she was like fearful for her life around him.

And on top of it all, there's this mystery man who was stalking her.

Yeah. So four men, four possible suspects, you got it.

So this stalker, was that ever reported to police? I mean, a knife, a cigarette butt, like those would have prints or DNA or something.

No, yeah, not that I can tell. I don't see reports of that or any mention of reports of that.

We don't have the actual like files. Okay.

So you can understand police have their work cut out for them to say the least.

They still haven't interviewed Nan's family, but by this point they know about Brian, they know about Justin and this mystery guy,

likely from their conversations with Steve. Again, even though they haven't talked to her family who also know about all of this.

But before they can dive into those leads, they are getting the results back on the ballistics from the guns found at the scene.

Now they know the guns belong to Steve and Nan, but the problem is neither one of those guns is a match to the bullet that killed Nan.

So five days after the fire started, investigators go back to the remains of the home and do another search.

looking for anything that they might have missed the first time, like the gun for instance.

Wouldn't the killer have taken it though?

Well, not necessarily because remember, I mean, they're still kind of have this theory that Nan might have done this to herself.

So yeah, if they can't find a gun to them, that might make it more logical.

But I think that they're still trying to find a gun that could potentially prove their theory.

That makes sense. Yeah.

So yeah, it makes sense, but they're facing a problem.

I'm not sure what they'll be able to prove whether they find something or not, because up until now, they haven't preserved the scene and it's been contaminated.

See, after the initial search, they had released it back to Steve, who then hired his own private investigator to search the rubble.

And that guy found another gun that hadn't been collected by police.

How do you miss that?

No idea, but there's even more than that.

So the PI finds the gun, then he finds the carcasses of the cats and the security camera DVR that apparently had just been like left there out in the open.

Those were where the fires were started.

I mean, you'd think that they'd went to collect it for evidence.

You'd think?

And obviously this didn't sit well with Nan's family because after this one, they decide to do their own search.

So the scene by now when police are going back has been gone through by this PI, has been gone through by the family.

It's like extra contaminated.

Yeah, it's been touched by numerous people.

So on Wednesday the 19th, police re-secure the scene and they conduct a grid search.

And in a twist that is completely, I want to say it's surprising, but honestly it is unsurprising to me at this point.

In this now fourth search, they find another gun.

That everyone has missed at this point.

And this one is a handgun lying apparently near where Nan's body was found.

And the type of gun that it is actually uses a caliber of bullet that matches the caliber that killed Nan.

Again, with this near measurement, I don't like it.

Yeah, and so what they end up doing too is so they obviously learn about this other search the family did.

And so they take the DVR that the family had gotten, they take that from them, they send it to the FBI for analysis just on the slim chance that they get something.

Spoiler alert, they're not able to recover any footage.

Okay, okay, but back to the gun. Did it belong to Nan and Steve?

Well, so according to Katie Moore's reporting for 4WWL, the gun that they find this last time is the gun that she would carry in her purse.

But at this point, they're not sure if that's the gun that actually killed her.

I thought you just said that it matched.

No, no, no, so it had the same kind of caliber.

So the gun shoots the same kind of bullets, but they haven't done actual ballistics testing yet to say whether it was the exact same gun.

Okay.

And I mean, it seems like any evidence that might have been on it like fingerprints were destroyed in the fire.

So they're not able to tell if anyone else like handled it.

So after this other search, a bunch of stuff is sent off for testing.

And in the meantime, investigators start going down their list of potential suspects and they start with Steve.

He's cooperative. He says that besides feeling threatened by Brian, Nan seemed fine.

She knew how to handle the guns that they owned and he'd put up the cameras to make her feel safe.

He even said that he also worried about Brian to the point where he didn't just put up cameras at their house.

He also put up cameras in his mom's house where Brian was staying because he was worried about something bad happening.

Now, nothing in my source material mentions investigators asking Steve about abusing Nan,

but they do ask him about that affair that he had and he admits to it.

He says that it took place years ago and that Nan not only knew about it, but was okay with it. Was she really though?

I don't know how much I buy that part, but I don't know their ins and outs of their relationship.

And if it was something that they were okay with, you know, Nan isn't here to speak.

Right.

The thing is, everything else he's saying is checking out.

He even takes a polygraph and passes.

And of course, his alibi was that he was at work.

Now, they obviously asked him about why the gate camera wasn't working,

because really that's the only thing that seems suspicious at this point.

But he has an explanation for that.

He says that on Thursday night, the system that was running the gate cam had gone out

and Steve said that he was just too tired when he came home from work,

so he hadn't stopped to fix it on his way home.

And by Friday morning, he had just forgotten about it,

which is either really convenient timing or just really bad timing.

And I think at this point, police were leaning towards bad timing.

Like it doesn't make Steve look great, but investigators think it's also a pretty reasonable explanation.

Now, when they're talking to him, he also gives them his two cents on his brother, Brian and his son, Justin.

Now, as far as Justin was concerned, an episode of Somebody's Watching produced by People Investigate states

that Steve says while Nan and his son were having some quote-unquote growing pains and that their relationship was strained, it wasn't strained to the point of murder.

And when investigators look into Justin, they don't find any evidence that he had ever threatened Nan or anything like that.

On top of that, he had a rock solid alibi.

He was working out of state in Virginia at the time of her death.

Now, Steve says he is definitely more suspicious of Brian,

but at the same time, he felt pretty safe leading up to the fire.

Brian was on house arrest. He had to wear a GPS tracker.

And there was this geofence like around Steve and Nan's property that would send an alert if Brian had been there.

And from what I can tell from my sources, an alert never occurred.

So can they see him on the cameras at their mom's place?

Yes, so the camera that Steve had put up around his mom's home shows Brian there the night before and the day of the murder.

And the GPS tracking confirms that too?

Well, that's a whole different story.

It turns out Brian's GPS tracking was never turned on.

Uh, excuse me?

Yeah, I have no freaking clue what's up with that.

Like none of my source materials offer an explanation as to why it was never activated.

So it would be super helpful to corroborate like his alibi.

Yeah.

But it seems like maybe it's not necessary for the purposes of this investigation based on the video footage alone.

Or at least that's what police are saying because based on the video footage, they're like clearing him of being involved in Nan's death.

Okay, I'm still kind of reeling from that.

Yeah.

Um, what about that fourth guy, the mystery stalker?

Well, according to that same episode of Somebody's Watching, Steve wasn't all that worried about it. I guess their cameras had captured this guy lurking outside, but Steve said he didn't find it suspicious.

Okay, then what about the knife?

Nobody talks about the knife, I don't know.

Cool. cool.

So police just take his word then?

Pretty much because I think in their minds, they don't think it makes a whole lot of sense for him to lie about there not being a stalker.

Like if he had anything to do with his wife's death, you would think that he'd want there to be a stalker, right?

Someone that you could blame it on?

Yeah.

And beyond that, it doesn't even seem like they're looking hard at Steve.

So at this point, investigators aren't really sure who else to even look at.

And by the end of August, Nan's case is going cold.

But her family is understandably not happy about this, especially when out of the blue, they hear that the coroner's office is planning on ruling Nan's death a suicide.

How does that make any sense though?

That's what her family wants to know.

Okay, Ashley, did I miss something?

Did they confirm the gun they found in the second search, the one with the matching caliber at least, was in fact the one that killed her?

If they ever confirmed that, that's never been said to the public.

It has never officially been confirmed that that was the weapon that she was killed with.

Okay.

So this whole thing is really just the icing on the cake for the family because they don't feel like they've been kept up to date when it comes to what's going on behind the scenes with the investigation.

Take the gunshot wound, for instance.

The police knew that she had been shot prior to the fire being started.

They knew that the day after she died, but they didn't tell her family that.

Her family had to find out from like a freaking blog who published that information a week after she was killed.

And then, you know, take into account everything that was missed in the initial search of the property.

So needless to say, by this point, they don't really trust the investigators.

And now that her death might be ruled a suicide, they're putting their foot down.

So on August 17th, they file a lawsuit to preserve her remains so they can have another autopsy done by a private pathologist.

Thankfully, the police cooperate with the request.

And by the beginning of September, there are not one, but two additional autopsies performed.

And it's, I think, a really good thing because after they're complete, the coroner officially rules her manner of death as homicide.

But that being said, on September 14th, the sheriff's office holds a press conference.

And out of the blue, they tell everyone that they aren't quite sure that they agree with the coroner's findings.

What's there to disagree about? You've got three autopsies all saying the same thing.

Well, so they claim that there are some pending lab results that haven't come back yet.

So they can't make an official determination.

Okay, what lab results could possibly lead to her manner of death changing?

Again, we have three autopsies.

I have no clue. I couldn't find anything about what tests they were running.

If they eventually got results, what those results said? I mean, literally nothing.

Now, it's also around this time that the investigators publicly clear Steve.

However, less than two months later in November, there's another investigation revolving around him that is open.

This time it's by the civil service board, but it has nothing to do with the fire that his wife died in.

According to reporting by Rob Masson for Fox 8, a coworker filed a report accusing Steve of having an affair with a woman who was under him in the chain of command.

He's also accused of having stolen some air conditioning units, damaging property belonging to the fire district, and public intimidation.

Now, the affair in question happened two years ago, and Steve claims that the woman was a willing participant.

Plus, he says that since he wasn't the fire chief when it took place, she wasn't actually under his command.

So it wasn't a situation where he had any power control over her.

Right, and had Nan known about this too?

Well, actually, I'm pretty sure this is the same affair that I mentioned earlier.

Oh, okay.

But since it happened two years ago, I don't think anyone's looking at it and thinking, again, they're not piecing any of this together with her death.

This is totally separate.

Now, this investigation goes on for about six months, and in May 2018, Steve is removed as the fire chief, although he is allowed to return as chief of administration.

And then time just goes on.

No arrests are made for Nan's homicide, and her family is left in the dark about what's being done to solve her murder.

But they have been getting these emails from this random account, giving them tips about questions to ask investigators, like what is or isn't being done, why certain people were given polygraphs really early on, stuff like that.

At first, it seemed like these emails were coming from someone from maybe the community who was just following the case.

But as time goes on and they're getting more and more, her family has realized that whoever's emailing them seems to have insider information.

So it's got to be one of the investigators?

Or at least someone close to the investigation?

For instance, in December 2017, the emailer tells the family that a consultant had been brought in to help out with Nan's case.

And I mean, her family hadn't known anything new was even being done, anyone new was being brought in, so naturally they do go ask about it.

And when the investigators are like, hey, who told you that?

They ended up forwarding a bunch of the emails that they had got from this mystery person.

So naturally, the investigators get a search warrant for this email, and they narrow the sender down to one person.

A guy named Jerry Rogers, who is a federal agent who used to work for the sheriff's office and knows some of the investigators on Nan's case.

So what, he just went rogue to give Nan's family this info that he felt that they deserved to know? Well, maybe, but even if some of the info he leaked was helpful to them, the emails were also full of conspiracies and insults about the investigators on the case.

And just to be clear, Jerry isn't actually on the case, right?

Right.

So he has an insider like who in the department is telling him all this information.

Right. So that's the next question that investigators have to like find out once they've gotten to him. And they do get to the bottom of it. They find out that it's his former partner.

So the former partner is fired and Jerry is arrested and charged with criminal defamation.

Why defamation? Why not something to do with hindering an ongoing investigation?

Well, so it seems like the sheriff's office is more pissed off about the insults and the actual information that he was sharing to the family.

Okay.

But Jerry like wasn't about to go down without a fight and he later ends up suing the department saving that the arrest was unjust and a judge agrees.

Over the years, Nayan's family has tried to do what they can to keep the investigation going and to figure out some answers for themselves.

And they actually end up coming to the conclusion that Nayan might not have died the day of the fire.

They started thinking that she might have died the night before.

Okay, explain.

Well, so there's a few reasons why they believe this.

For one, in 2018, they were allowed to watch the surveillance footage of Nayan at the McDonald's drive-thru.

And I think what they were expecting is this like crisp, clear footage, but they were shocked to see

that it was super grainy.

So it made them wonder how police could have even determined that she was really the one in the driver's seat.

They also pointed to the fact that I guess all of her social media activities stopped the night before at around 10.30 p.m.

So does that change who they're looking at or who they have as their suspect?

Honestly, I'm not sure.

They have never shared publicly who they think is responsible.

But hopefully there are some answers coming soon.

In October of 2020, the district attorney's office filed a subpoena against the sheriff's office for all of their case files on Nayan's death.

According to an article by Kendra Smith Parks for Fox 8, investigators are fully cooperating, but the DA wants to look into everything on their own with fresh eyes.

Which is kind of interesting because I don't know that I've ever seen a DA's office file a subpoena against like an investigating agency. Have you?

No, that seems very, very out of the ordinary.

Usually they're willing to like cooperate together.

They're like collaborators.

Yeah, right. And I looked and looked. I haven't found any updates about the case since that subpoena a few years ago, two and a half years ago, which is a long time to just sit in silence.

But I hope that it's taking a long time because the DA's office is getting everything and going through everything with a fine tooth comb that will hopefully lead to a suspect and lead to an arrest and lead to justice.

So if you have any information about the murder of the net rental, please contact the St. Tammany Parish office at 985-898-2338.

Or you can contact Crime Stoppers at 504-822-1111.

You can find all of the source material for this episode on our website crimejunkiepodcast.com.

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