

# HER MOTHER'S AVENGER

When Ruby Morris vanished, country singer Dawna Kay Wells turned detective and helped snare the killer: Her father



**O**N SUNDAY, JUNE 4, 1989, SITTING IN her modest Hollywood apartment, Dawna Kay Wells enjoyed a moment of fantasy. The aspiring country and western singer saw herself outside the Grand Ole Opry, surrounded by fans, her name up in lights. That evening, in fact, Dawna Kay, then 28, and her father, Gaylynn Earl "Rusty" Morris, a Phoenix accountant who had helped nurture her career since she began singing in honky-tonks as a teenager, were scheduled to meet with a concert booking agent. Her dad was due in from Phoenix in a few hours.

Then Dawna Kay received an urgent phone call from her sister, Cyndi, 23, a waitress in Phoenix. Crying hysterically, Cyndi said she was supposed to go shopping that morning with their mother, Ruby Morris, 47, but when she had arrived at their parents' house,

Ruby was nowhere to be found. The day before, Ruby complained that she had been up all night arguing with Rusty. "I'm worried," Cyndi said. "I think Dad did something to her."

In March, following a six-week trial rife with tales of infidelities, incest and family secrets, Rusty Morris, 53, was found guilty of murdering his wife. Two weeks ago he was sentenced to life in prison. It was Dawna Kay's tireless detective work that helped police crack the case. "We faced an uphill battle because nobody had been found," says prosecutor Bill Clayton. "She went out, pounded the pavement and found vital evidence."

"When you grow up idolizing your father, it's hard to admit he could do something like this," says Dawna Kay. "I knew he had affairs, and at first I

Though Rusty Morris (below) was convicted of murder, Dawna Kay says, "It would mean a lot to me if he would show some anguish."



thought maybe a girlfriend had killed my mom. But I kept open the possibility he had committed murder."

The day Ruby Morris disappeared, shortly after Cyndi had alerted her

▼ "I still have dreams of my parents together," says Dawna Kay (with Ruby and Rusty in 1987).

► The day her mom disappeared, Cyndi searched the hills around her parents' home outside Phoenix.



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◀ A TV crew happened to film the Morrisses' burning boat as it sank with Ruby's body aboard.

sister, Morris phoned Dawna Kay and said his 1985 El Camino had broken down en route to L.A. Dawna Kay canceled her meeting with the booking agent and, frantic with worry about her mother, flew to Phoenix the next day. She met Cyndi and her brother, Randy, 34, at their parents' home several hours before Morris drove up in a rented car. "He said he thought Mom had left him," says Dawna Kay. "And then he simply stopped talking."

That night Dawna Kay stayed alone in the house with her father. "I kept asking about Mom, and he stared off into space," she says. "It was scary. I slept on the couch and kept a fire poker next to me."

Police searched the house the next day. Curiously, a .22-caliber pistol that Cyndi said her mother normally kept hidden on top of a linen cabinet was missing. Though there were no signs of struggle in the room, detectives sprayed the bed with Luminol, a

luminescent chemical that reacts to the iron oxides left behind after bloodstains have been washed away. "When we shut off the lights, the entire bed and headboard lit up like a Christmas tree," says Maricopa County detective sergeant Richard Falls.

Even though police kept many of the details of their investigation secret from the Morris family, Dawna Kay kept thinking about the poisonous feud that had recently broken out between her parents, who were just a few months shy of their 30th wedding anniversary. Ruby suspected Morris was having an affair with her sister, Peggy Hinton, 48, a security guard in West Monroe, La. (Hinton denies the affair.) In April 1989, dragging her mother-in-law, Maxine, and Cyndi along as witnesses, Ruby had confronted Morris at Phoenix's Sky Harbor Airport, where he had arranged a rendezvous with Peggy. Poking her finger in his chest, Ruby had announced she wanted a divorce, telling

him a 50-50 split of their assets (totaling \$1.7 million) would not do. "I want three-quarters," she screamed at him. As a parting shot, Ruby hinted that if Morris didn't accept her terms, she might turn him in to the IRS for filing fraudulent tax returns.

Morris had since assured Dawna Kay that he and Ruby had patched things up. "He told me that maybe he had married the wrong sister 30 years ago," says Dawna Kay. "But he said, 'I'll always be with Mom.'"

In the weeks following her mother's disappearance, though, Dawna Kay became convinced her father knew more than he was letting on. "It was driving me crazy," she says. "I had to go out and satisfy myself about what had happened to Mom."

What Dawna Kay found most curious was that her parents' 22-foot cabin cruiser, normally docked in San Diego, had vanished. In August 1989 she distributed several hundred flyers in the San Diego area offering a \$1,000 reward for information about the boat. A few weeks later a local television producer told Dawna Kay that on the day after Ruby's disappearance, a burning boat had been sighted just before it sank in ocean

waters near San Diego. (The wreckage was never found.)

Unknown to Dawna Kay, police had already examined Coast Guard photos of the fire and were convinced the sunken boat was the Morrises'. They suspected Morris had set the fire to get rid of Ruby's body, and they speculated he may have rented a second boat to escape. Then in late September, Dawna Kay's investigative efforts led to a crucial discovery when the manager of a San Diego boat-rental business told her that Rusty Morris had rented a speedboat from him the day after Ruby disappeared. "In a case like this, you pray for that kind of evidence," says prosecutor Bill Clayton. The discovery also destroyed any lingering illusions Dawna Kay had that her father had nothing to do with her mother's disappearance. "For me, it was like getting a knife in the gut," she says.

Ruby's body was never recovered. But after making DNA comparisons with blood samples provided by several family members, forensics experts determined that traces of blood found in the Morrises' home and on the floor of Rusty's El Camino, found abandoned at the San Diego Airport, matched hers. In March 1990, Morris was indicted for murder.

Showing little emotion at his trial, Morris admitted Ruby had died as a result of a gunshot wound from her .22-caliber pistol, and he confessed that he had disposed of her body. He said he had propped the corpse in the front seat of his car for the 300-mile drive to San Diego. "I put a baseball cap on her head, cocked over so it covered her up," he testified. In San Diego he had used the rented speedboat to return ashore after incinerating Ruby's remains in the family cabin cruiser.

Morris insisted, though, that his wife was a victim of suicide, not murder. He claimed he had gone out to the garage following an argument with Ruby over her discovery of a \$2,600 check he had recently sent to her sister. "I was out in the shop [and] heard the echo of a gun going off," he said. "When I walked in the room, I saw Ruby laying on the bed with blood coming from her head." Assuming he would be blamed, Morris testified, he decided to dispose of the body.

According to Morris, Ruby had been driven to suicide because she could no longer live with some tormenting secrets—including the lies surrounding the birth of her son, Randy, a car-wash attendant. Morris testified that Randy had been conceived

when Ruby's father raped her at age 14 and had been passed off as her brother until she married three years later and then as Morris's own son. In addition, Morris's lawyer noted that the DNA testing done by police had proved that Cyndi had been sired by another man, not by him.

In the end, the jury took less than three hours to convict Morris. Family members had reconciled themselves to his guilt, but the impact of his revelations is still being felt. According to his sisters, Randy had never before been told he was a child of incest. Likewise, Cyndi is slowly coming to terms with the discovery that Morris is not her real father. "I hate him more than ever," she says.

Dawna Kay has dealt with her anger and grief in a different way. After Morris's arrest, she won Song of the Year and Video of the Year nominations from the California Country Music Association for a number titled "Burn One for Me." In the video a wooden bridge is set ablaze. "It's a song about a woman who is having trouble letting go of a guy," Dawna Kay says. "Sort of like how I had trouble letting go of my father."

■ DAVID GROGAN

■ LORENZO BENET in Los Angeles



A "Writing songs has helped me get through this," says Dawna Kay (in a San Diego motel). Her latest is "The Echo of Mama's Cry."