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Friends seek clues in mysterious death of hitchhiker Bradley, found at Boars Tusk, was a worker, easygoing snowboarder.

By Lauren M. Whaley

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On a warm, clear June night in Rock Springs, with his snowboard strapped on his back, 6-foot-3 Ben Bradley called his Jackson friends to tell them he was almost there.

Bradley was returning to his winter playground to celebrate his birthday riding the reopened Aerial Tram and carving summer snow on Rendezvous Mountain.

That was June 2, a week before he was reported missing and four months before his body was recovered from the remote Red Desert in southwest Wyoming. It was two days before his 29th birthday.

What happened to the lanky, easygoing blue-eyed Jackson Hole snowmaker remains a mystery, as police and sheriff's deputies continue investigating.

The friends, who described Bradley as "a tall, big dude," with "nothing intimidating about his personality," say they heard "through the grapevine" he was stabbed. Bradley's mother, Mary, said she's praying for the person who did this to her son while law enforcement officers refuse to release any information on the investigation.

Planning to be gone for only the weekend, Benjamin William Bradley hitchhiked from Fraser, Colo., where he had lived and worked for about seven years as a snowmaker, resort night auditor and, most recently, tile setter for a couple of companies. Fraser is about five minutes south of Tabernash, Colo., and about 10 minutes north of the ski resort of Winter Park.

"I'm pretty sure he left Friday [June 2]," Tabernash, Colo., friend Rick Holden said Tuesday. "It was definitely a one-day thing."

Holden said the 485-mile drive from the Winter Park area to Jackson usually takes about eight hours.

Bradley hitchhiked as far as Rock Springs, where he called friends from his cell phone at 8:58 p.m., saying he was two hours away from Pinedale.

Law enforcement later traced the call to the intersection of Interstate 80 and U.S. Highway 191, also known as Elk Street, a busy intersection lined with motels, fast food joints, gas stations and car dealerships.

The sun had set about an hour before Bradley called his friends, and the quarter moon was high in the sky. On a still night in which temperatures dropped to only the low 60s by midnight, Bradley would have only felt the westerly wind through his shaggy hair if he stopped to notice.

Bradley called from an area in which the FBI reported 126 violent crimes and one murder in 2003, the most recent year for which statistics were available. That year in Jackson, the FBI reported 29 violent crimes and no murders.

When Bradley didn't show up to Jackson, his friends thought maybe he just bailed on the birthday plans. But when he didn't show up to work for Ryan Applebee setting tiles in Tabernash on June 6, people started worrying.

On June 9, Bradley's father, Ken, called the Grand County (Colo.) Sheriff's Office from California to report him missing. Bradley's haunts in Winter Park, Fraser and Tabernash are all located in Grand County.

"Talking to his friends who were very worried and talking to his boss that was very worried, we hoped for the best, but it hit us really hard," said Bradley's mother, Mary. "It really hurt."

Ken and Mary Bradley are cabinet makers in the Pacific beach town Cayucos, Calif., where they raised Bradley and his sister, Bridget Bradley-Scaife.

The Grand County Sheriff's Office contacted the Sweetwater County Sheriff's Office after tracing the cell phone call to Rock Springs.

"There was no organized search, because we had no idea where to search," said Capt. Mike Dayton of the Sweetwater County Sheriff's Office. "We had no idea the direction of travel. ... The National Guard was involved. They were out here for a training mission and one of the things that they were doing was looking along 191. ... Obviously that was wrong, too."

Dayton said following Bradley's intended travel direction was "the best guess."

"We knew where he came from and where he was reported to be headed," Dayton said. "At the time we were informed he was missing, he had been missing for seven days. In seven days, even a person on foot can go a long ways."

Sightseers discover body

Some time between his final cell phone call and Oct. 1, Bradley ended up near the 7,095-foot Boar's Tusk, a "neck" of an ancient volcano that sticks up from the bizarre landscape in the Red Desert. The geologic feature, 3 million years old and made of the same rock as Devil's Tower, is set against the Killpecker Sand Dunes and is accessible almost exclusively on dirt roads by four-wheel-drive vehicles. It's about 30 miles north of Rock Springs in an area known for its wild horses, raptors and aridity.

Sightseers found Bradley's partially decomposed remains there Oct. 1.

"Pretty much after a week and a half not showing up, we knew something was wrong," said Randy Shacket, Bradley's Jackson roommate. "We tried to come up with any possibility of what he might have done. ... He called one of us when he was near Rock Springs and said, 'I'm about to get a ride.' I think he gave us a call right before he hopped in the car."

This timing does not jibe with Capt. Dayton's report that law enforcement has "located a witness who believe she saw him around 11 p.m. on the second."

What exactly the witness reported, "That's one of those things I'm going to keep to myself for a little while," Dayton said.

Shacket said he heard from Bradley's family that he was stabbed eight times, but law enforcement would not confirm that.

"There's a few things that don't add up," Shacket said Monday. "How they found his body four months later and it was only half decomposed, I wonder about that."

Shacket speculated that maybe Bradley did not die in June, but later.

Bradley was going to reunite with the buddies he'd snowboarded with during his first winter in Jackson last season. He'd met them first in Colorado several years ago living his trademark, adventurous, low-maintenance "ski bum" life.

After spending the winter in Jackson, he had hitchhiked back to Colorado in late spring, leaving his truck in Jackson to pick up later.

"He hitchhiked out to Jackson a bunch of times," his friend Holden said. "He used to come back here [to Colorado] even in wintertime just to hang out for a few days. He hitched a lot. ... He went to California two years ago and hitchhiked back and did it a certain route so he could skateboard down the passes on his way back."

In all Bradley's adventures, Holden said, he lived by instinct rather than calculation.

"He knew how to read people," Holden said. "He would play poker with us, and you'd think when you met him he wouldn't be a poker player. But he would win. And just like with everything else, he always went on his gut. That's why he was so good. It seems kind of weird that he would get in a car with someone who would kill him."

Holden suspects Bradley was eager to get to Jackson the night he disappeared.

"In desperation, he probably let his guard down," he said.

Between the time he was reported missing and the time the sightseers found him, friends and family put up fliers, sheriff's deputies scanned the roadways and the National Guard flew a helicopter over U.S. Highway 191.

Holden and another friend spent a day driving from Winter Park to Rock Springs, posting fliers, talking to gas station attendants and generally keeping their "eyes peeled."

Holden said he knew almost immediately that something was wrong.

"People were telling me, 'Oh, he might have just wandered,'" Holden said. "I knew it wasn't true, I knew he wouldn't do anything like that. I pretty much suspected foul play from the get-go."

The Sweetwater County Sheriff's Office, Rock Springs Police Department, Green River Police Department and Colorado authorities continue to investigate Bradley's death.

"The investigation is proceeding," Capt. Dayton said Friday. "We are following a significant number of leads. ... The crime occurred some time ago and we're catching up, and we don't know where what evidence is going to take us at any given time."

Dayton would not call the death a murder. "I think some people have maybe said that, but they didn't hear it from me," Dayton said. "Words that become public could possibly hurt the case. When we have done everything we can, we will tell anybody who wants to know. ... In a case like this, there's always more to come."

Closure but also questions

Mary Bradley said she's just "focusing on the positives now."

"I believe I'll see him again," she said Monday. "And we're focusing on the fact that we'll have closure. We're going to be able to have a funeral. ... A lot of missing adults and children, some of their families never know [what happened]. We're some of the lucky ones, in a really weird way."

Mary Bradley said her son would have wanted people to stay positive.

"I'm going to see Benny again, and he was a good-hearted person," she said. "Good hearts last forever. I believe in forgiveness and I'm speaking for myself; I want whoever did this off the streets, but at the same time, I am praying for the person. I believe in divine mercy."

Mary Bradley said her son, who discovered Winter Park on his way back from helping a friend move to Kansas, loved the life he lived.

"He lived there for years and loved it and then he discovered Jackson," she said. "He loved Jackson. When my husband and I were out looking for him, we could see why he loved it. ... He eventually wanted to move there."

Bradley lived with Shacket and several others in a tan house on No Name Street in town for the 2005-06 winter season.

"He was living in our laundry room," Shacket said. "He built a bed in the laundry room and built a cool little table out of a speed-limit sign."

When not building things for his tiny living space in Jackson, Bradley spent November and December making snow with a crew at Jackson Hole Mountain Resort.

Bradley was an integral part of a tight-knit group that worked from noon until midnight five days a week for two months straight, said Austin Irby, Bradley's boss at the resort.

"He loved to snowboard and make snow," said Irby, snowmaking operations manager. "He got along with everybody just fine. He was one of the heart-and-soul guys actually doing it. It's definitely fair to say that Ben was a member of the family. It's just a bunch of boys. ... he was definitely one of us."

Irby said it was "definitely a shock" when he heard the news.

"I was down in Winter Park for a wedding this summer and the guy at the local liquor store goes 'Oh, do you know Ben?'" Irby said. "The regular folks around town were definitely worried about him for a long time when nobody knew where he was. We were really hoping he just found some sugar mamma and he was in Bahamas drinking drinks out of a coconut. We were hopin' for a long time, and it really sucked to find out."

Irby and the snowmakers found a coffee mug Bradley left in the office at the end of the season. "We're saving this coffee mug," Irby said. "We'll put it on the wall."

Irby said he may also bring it up to the Ship's Prow, a clifftop at the resort where Bradley's friends may build a memorial. "It is just an awesome place," Shacket said. "We would go there a lot. He first showed it to me."

By all counts, the man who hitchhiked, mountain biked and snowboarded around the West lived the good life. His friends and family report that he loved reading, spending time with friends, working with his hands and exploring.

"We had a lot of adventures together and that's what he was all about," Holden said. "Being adventurous and having fun, not really worrying too much about work or material. He was admired by a lot of people for his riding ability. When he played, he went with gusto."

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